

KEEP CALM. SHOVEL ON.

Words Devon O'Neil

I SPOTTED THE STICKER on the second day of the storm. Physically spent from chucking an endless deluge of snow off my tent 10 miles inland from Cordova, AK, I had been reduced to delirium, laughing at nothing in particular while sprawled on my back like an overturned beetle. The sticker spoke to me: "Keep Calm. Shovel On."

Some prescient Cordovans had the stickers printed during the so-called "Snowpocalypse" that buried their town in January 2012, when Cordova got so much snow in so little time that the town ran out of shovels—you literally couldn't buy one anywhere. Roofs caved in. Avalanche paths ran larger than they had in decades. Cordova, already a town accessible only by plane or boat, became a virtual island. National news media reported on the situation with disbelief. Some residents began securing their personal shovels with padlocks.

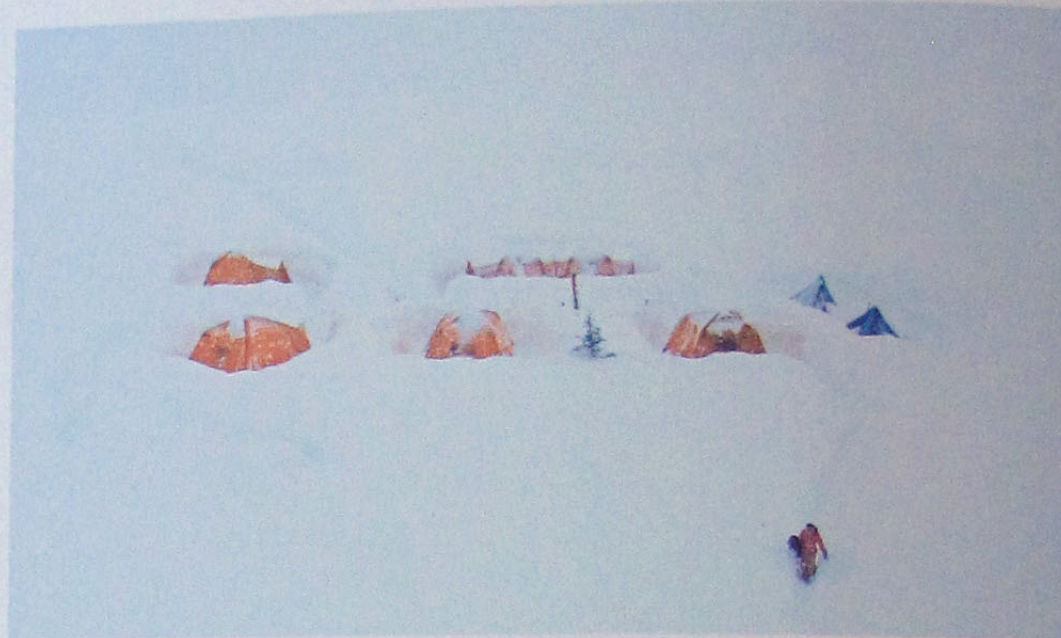
The sticker was attached to a snowboard peeking out from the depths. A week that started with five bluebird days had become a jar of milk over the past two. We measured 40 inches in the first 24 hours, and it stopped snowing twice, for 15 minutes each time, over the next 72 hours. We gave the storm a cautious estimated total of 120 inches. It avalanched most paths around our camp, confining our descents to a 300-vertical-foot knoll.

The snowboard belonged to Wesley Thompson, a 22-year-old, unassuming redhead whose family moved to Cordova when he was eight months old. At age seven, Thompson met Points North Heli-Adventures founder Kevin Quinn through his mom, who was Quinn's banker at the First National branch in town. Thompson started washing dishes at PNH when he was 12; two years later, he moved on to a fuel assistance gig. When Quinn, an Alaska native, and his wife, Jessica Sobolowski-Quinn, decided to put a first-of-its-kind backcountry touring camp in the heart of the Chugach two years ago, Thompson was assigned to support the camp's two guides, Jeff Dostie and Brennan Lagasse, as camp maintenance manager—a dream gig for someone who wants to be a guide himself. That is how we ended up shoveling next to each other last March, 3,000 feet above the Rude River.

You can really get to know someone in a snow trench. Thompson, for instance, brings a rare pedigree to the imported-worker model that prevails across the heli-ski industry. Which is to say, he is a real Alaskan. His dad worked on the cleanup of the Exxon-Valdez oil spill in 1989. Wes crews a commercial salmon boat in the summer, often staying awake for 36-hour shifts in 20-foot seas. When he was 18, he made \$90,000 in a season and immediately flew to Colorado to snowboard. He had ridden his first 45-degree backcountry line four years earlier, at age 14.

Thompson also hunts big game and lives off the meat year round. He owns 25 guns. He keeps the 12-gauge in the backseat of his GMC pickup and the rest under his bed, including the 30.06 long-range rifle he used to kill his first moose when he was 13. The bull was 275 yards away; he dropped it with one shot. At 1,200 pounds and carrying a 55-inch rack, the animal remains the biggest game he's ever taken down.

BELOW Camp, mid-storm—let the wallowing commence. Photo: Brennan Lagasse.



Thompson has no plans to leave Cordova. "I can drive 30 minutes up the road and kill something that'll last me the whole year," he says. "It's pretty sweet being surrounded by just mountains and water."

The week I was there, conditions were good if not epic. We descended a couple of lines that almost certainly had never seen tracks, ate halibut and blueberry cobbler at night, drank single-malt Scotch out of Dixie cups, and rode the deepest snow we'd ever experienced. In all, Dostie, Lagasse and Thompson measured 240 inches of snow in their four weeks at "tour camp," which is nestled on a wilderness boundary and operates by the blessed grace of an exclusive nonmotorized permit. Were it not for their burly, Alaska-made Arctic Oven tents, gas generators, cots and propane heaters, the weather surely would have been tougher to endure. "The most valuable thing here is you never leave the mountains and you don't have to be uncomfortable," fellow guest/snowboard guide Julian Hanna observed one evening.

On our last day before the storm, we rode for nearly 11 hours, got home in the dark, then stayed up until 3 a.m. sipping Early Times whiskey in the social tent. The snow moved in before dawn and the pummeling commenced.

After we'd gotten about 50 inches, a few guys put in a bootpack on the knoll behind camp. The snow was up to their necks. The lone woman, a snowboarder and child psychologist from Reno, got stuck on her way down the run, unable to move despite pointing it straight downhill. Dostie threw her a rope and pulled her to the bottom.

Due to the storm, we ended up spending an extra four days at camp. "At least we aren't totally grounded like the [heli-ski] clients back at the lodge," someone reasoned. It was true. We ended up running out of food, squeezing mustard packets into bowls of turnip noodle soup during our last night. But at least we were able to ride powder. Every time a hint of despair wafted through camp, I remembered the sticker.

"I think I saw some ski bags buried under that pile of snow," Thompson said as we shoveled on day nine.

"Which one?" I asked.

"The white one." ▲