

## Early Refuge Manager John Hakala loved the Kenai Peninsula and Alaska

*by Ted Bailey*

I was saddened to learn that one of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's earliest refuge managers John Hakala died on January 3 in Fairbanks. Although I never worked on the refuge when John was its manager, he and his wife Mae were our neighbours and friends for over twenty years. And their black Labrador retriever "Musta" was always happy to see us. We celebrated and shared meals together with them on many holidays during those years until his wife Mae passed away in 1996. We then continued our friendship with John until he moved to Fairbanks in 2000 to be closer to his relatives. During this period I had many conversations with John about his experiences flying B-25s in the then U. S. Army Air Force during World War II, his later adventures working in Alaska and as manager of the Kenai National Moose Range before it was re-designated the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in 1980.

John was one of several unique World War II veterans who after serving their country in the military in Alaska eventually returned to serve it again as a civilian in the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, later to become the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. After World War II ended some veterans sought contemplative lives. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and one of the great spiritual writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century wrote that after the war ended, his monastery was flooded beyond its capacity with World War II veterans seeking solitude and peace as they searched to begin a new life.

Other veterans sought meaningful lives by returning to a beautiful and wild land they had once experienced, a land that was far from the hustle and bustle of their native homes. With that yearning for beautiful places and a sense of adventure they eventually returned to Alaska. They came not with a desire to become wealthy or politically powerful but to help maintain wild and beautiful places they had seen, where ducks and geese nested by the thousands, where caribou migrated far beyond the distant horizon and where moose, bears, wolves and other wildlife still lived in near pristine environments. John Hakala

was one among those unique veterans that returned to Alaska.

John was born in the mining town of Ironwood in upper Michigan on September 12, 1919, the second oldest in a Finnish family of five brothers and three sisters. After graduating from high school in 1940, he sought adventure by joining the U.S. Army Air Corp with the intention of becoming a pilot like one of his friends. Although frustrated by his initial attempts to be accepted for pilot training, he eventually succeeded and, despite wanting to fly fighters, was trained to fly medium-range B-25 bombers, an aircraft suddenly made famous by then Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle who with fifteen other B-25s took off from the carrier Hornet on April 18, 1942 and made a surprise aerial attack on Tokyo, Japan.

Later that same year on December 7, 1942, exactly one year after the attack on Pearl Harbor, John was in Anchorage waiting to fly a new B-25 that had been flown up over the Alaskan Highway and then down from Fairbanks to Anchorage. It was during his brief time in Anchorage that he first flew over the Kenai Peninsula in his B-25, already aware from a hometown newspaper clipping sent to him that President Franklin Roosevelt had established Kenai National Moose Range there on December 16, 1941 only nine days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He said that after seeing the beauty, wildness and numbers of moose on the Kenai Peninsula during that flight that he would someday like to return to the Kenai Peninsula if he survived the war.

After his brief stay in Anchorage he flew to the Alaska Peninsula and flew missions out of bases on Umnak, Adak and Amchitka Islands, first repeatedly bombing the then Japanese-held base at Kiska and later flying on extremely long missions to the Kurile Islands which were a part of Japan in the western Pacific. After returning from one long mission his home base was fogged in, his aircraft was running low on fuel and he had no place to land. But luckily his May-Day messages were picked up, relayed to the Navy and they directed him to a then secret base being con-

structed on Attu Island. Flying on instruments and leading other B-25's, he descended through the fog, homing in on a radio signal just turned on and being sent out by a Navy destroyer. His lagging and unadjusted altimeter indicated he was already flying below sea level! Fearing he would crash into the sea or a mountain at any moment he finally saw white-caps on the ocean ahead of him and then spotted the almost completed steel-matted runway being built beneath him. Making a timed 270 degree turn in the fog—he had no visual reference—his crew frantically hand-pumped down the landing gear because his aircraft's primary hydraulic system had been destroyed by enemy gunfire. Without flaps to slow the aircraft down he landed just as both engines stopped from the lack of fuel. He then veered off the runway into the mud to allow the other B-25s he was leading behind him to safely land.

Later in the war John was assigned to the South Pacific. He flew a B-25 across the Pacific from California to Hawaii, Christmas Island, Tarawa, Guadalcanal, and New Guinea and eventually on to the Philippine Islands where he was assigned to a base on the Palawan Islands. Then in August 1945 while on a bombing mission with the plane's bomb bay doors already open on a bombing run, his radio operator said they had just received a message that the war was over. Elated, John ordered the bomb bay doors closed and headed back to his base. Five years later after he had married the girl from a farm across from that of his parents in Michigan and, after receiving a degree in forestry from Michigan Technological University, John and Mae on July 4, 1950 crossed the Alaskan border pulling a small house trailer behind their truck.

They were on their way to the University of Alaska in Fairbanks where John's research on beavers would two years later earn him the first Masters degree in Wildlife Management given to a student at the university. That same year, 1950, to earn money for college to supplement his GI Bill he accepted a summer job on the Kenai National Moose Range establishing research study plots in the 1947 burn—research plots that are still being periodically surveyed over fifty years later to learn how forests on the Kenai Peninsula responded to the biggest wildfire ever recorded on the peninsula. Biologists working on the refuge today refer to these vegetation study plots as the "Hakala Plots."

After graduating from the University of Alaska John accepted a position in Kotzebue to be in charge of the reindeer herds then being established under the

Alaska Reindeer Service of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Between 1952 and 1958 John and Mae had many Alaskan adventures living mainly in and working out of Kotzebue. But after leaving Kotzebue to take a trip they discovered on their return journey that their house had burned down, killing a friend inside who was watching over it. They also lost their dog in the fire. They never returned to Kotzebue.

John was offered a new position at the Kenai National Moose Range; Assistant Manager in charge of oil activities, but soon thereafter he became refuge manager. Oil had just been discovered on the "Moose Range" the previous year and the search for additional oil and the development of an oil field on the refuge was well underway with apparent minimal regard about the refuge's environment. Because there were few environmental laws and explicit guidelines to address oil development on the refuge in those early days, this was one of, if not the most, difficult period in the management of the refuge. Bulldozers pushed straight lines through the forest to make hundreds of miles of seismic trails as they explored for oil. Drill pads, pipelines and gravel pits were being constructed to support oil development. John was under incredible national, state, and local pressure to allow, as he perceived it, exploration and development on the refuge with a minimum of refuge "interference" or concern for refuge wildlife and its habitat. But John was reluctant to abdicate his responsibility as refuge manager for "protecting the natural breeding and feeding range of the giant Kenai moose on the Kenai Peninsula, Alaska..." as written in the executive order signed by President Roosevelt. Then the Secretary of the Interior paid John a "special" visit in attempt to resolve the controversies. Frustrated with the lack of support to protect the refuge and with his father seriously ill in Michigan, he was offered the manager's position at the Seney National Wildlife Refuge in Michigan which he accepted and where he and Mae remained from 1963 to 1967.

John could not, however, resist the yearning to again return to Alaska. He accepted a position with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to supervise construction activities at the Atomic Energy Commission's bomb testing range on Amchitka Island in the Aleutian Islands chain. The base he once flew out of during World War II was also part of the then Aleutian Islands Refuge where three underground nuclear bombs were to be tested. After a brief stay in the Aleutians, he was again under pressure and as John

put it, he was “reshuffled” back to the Kenai National Moose Range where he remained as refuge manager from 1968 to 1972. But again, under constant stress coping with development on the refuge, John finally retired.

The John Hakala that I came to know had a firm and unbending conviction to try to protect the refuge the best he could. Refuge managers have difficult jobs. They must constantly balance opposing demands and uses on refuge lands, balancing national mandates against local demands. Some user or special interest group always seem upset over decisions of the refuge manager. Some interest groups gain the favour of powerful politicians who then put pressure on managers or their supervisors.

John was caught up in many of these refuge management controversies. Although he apparently could be stubborn and uncompromising, I believe that many of his decisions were based on his memory of how pristine the Kenai National Moose Range appeared to him during his first flight over it in 1942 only a year after it was established. It bothered him greatly to

see that pristine environment suddenly assaulted and as refuge manager he tried to protect the refuge the best he could. To allow environmentally damaging development, to compromise merely to reduce political controversy were against his principles. But despite those difficult years he never gave up loving the Kenai Peninsula and Alaska. Those who knew John will always remember his loud booming voice, his unique sense of humour and his deep belly laughs. While living in Soldotna he never forgot his Finnish background or his close Finnish friends and he seldom missed the Lutheran church’s annual lutefisk dinner. His ashes will be mingled with those of his wife Mae and be spread at a special place they both loved. May he finally rest in peace.

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