DANGEROUS MONEY

FOR ALASKA'S CRAB FISHERMEN, FINANCIAL REWARD OUTWEIGHS OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

TEXT BY DAVE CARTY

Here's how you can die on a crab boat: You can be knocked senseless by 1,500 pounds of live crabs in a swinging pot. You can be swept overboard into the raging Bering Sea, where you will freeze to death of hypothermia. Or a rogue wave can roll your boat, and you'll drown along with all your orange-suited buddies.

For that kind of light entertainment on the high seas, you'll be paid a pretty penny. But is it worth it?

Probably not, but that doesn't stop crews from returning year after year for the same abuse, misery and endless drudgery. The lure of big money—as it has since the Alaskan gold rush a century ago—is just too much to resist for some folks.

"The money is really good," Corey Arnold says. Arnold, a professional photographer during the rest of the year, has a website that is more or less devoted to discouraging the hordes of thrill seekers who migrate to Alaska every fall looking for jobs on crab boats. "Kids think they're going to make tons of money on their first trip," he says. "But it's so hard to get the crabbing jobs that usually you're going to have to get in first on boats fishing for something other than crab, where you're probably going to make less money."

Arnold, 32, spent five years working summers as a salmon fisherman before he landed a crabbing job. There were some reality checks along the way.

"I got a job on the Ocean Challenger, a halibut fishing boat," he recalls. "They weren't going to leave for another month, so I was just hanging around, working on the boat.

"People get taken advantage of quite a lot when you're new," he says. "I just had a feeling that this guy was going to stiff me, so I quit. That same boat ended up sinking five years later."

Crab traps, or pots, are the focal point for fisherman. Bait, set, retrieve is a non-stop process.

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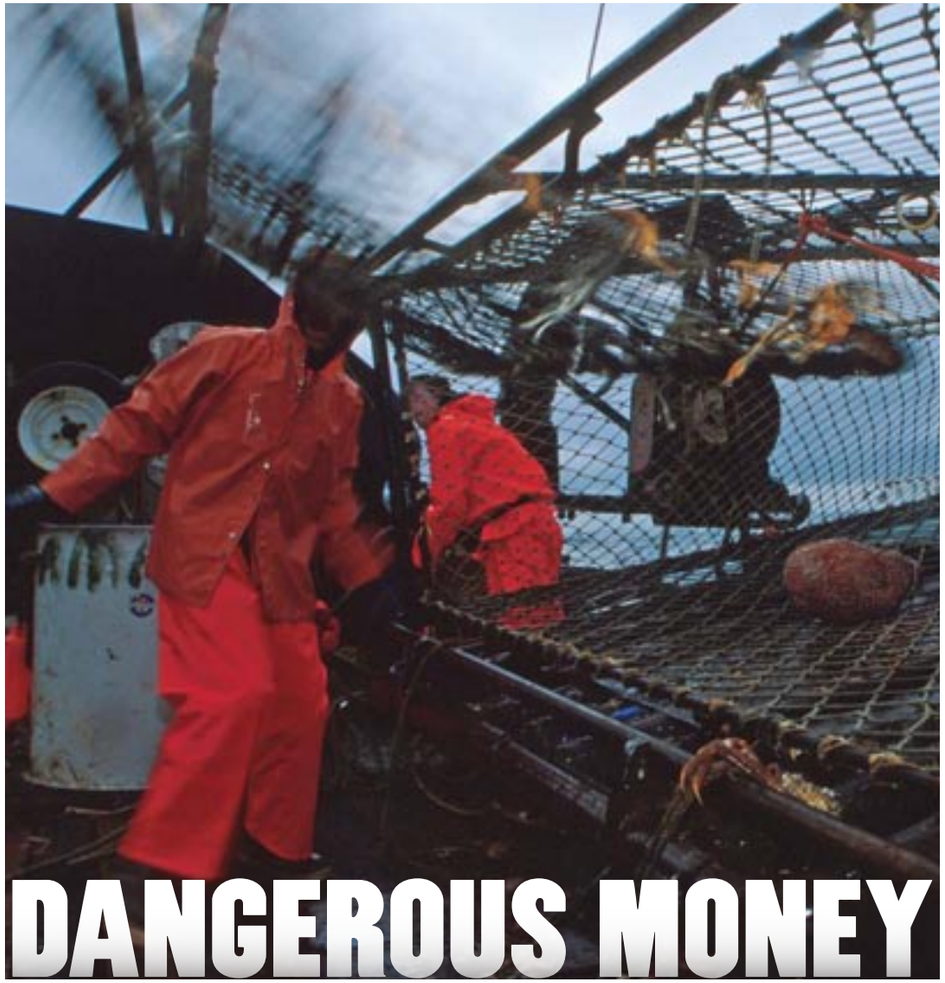

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There wasn't much chance Arnold would have been on that boat, but, he says, "you never know."

He eventually got a job on a crab boat called the *Rollo*, and he's been there ever since. He makes enough money in three months on the job to underwrite his living expenses for the rest of the year. But he earns every penny of it.

"It's really kind of scary and frightening in the beginning," he says about storms on the Bering Sea. "The boat will tilt at angles that you just don't feel like you can recover from. There's one defining moment when everything goes past the point where everything feels comfortable, one degree past the point where everything is still on the shelves, and then all of a sudden everything does fall off all the shelves and you hear…just…dishes crashing everywhere, and everything you thought was secure and tied down is jarred loose and flying around the deck."

Thirty-foot waves—not an uncommon occurrence on the Bering Sea—take some getting used to.

"With 50 mile per hour winds and 70 mile per hour gusts…it just rips the tops of the waves off," Arnold says. "Everything looks white because there is so much saltwater in the air." Of course, that's when everything else goes wrong, too.

"There was a time when we lost our steering, and suddenly we were kinda doing circles in big seas," Arnold recalls. "We ended up sideways to the waves, so there was a sense of panic to resolve the situation. We weren't in immediate peril, but if a big wave had hit…" It didn't, and after the captain and engineer frantically tore into the boat's electronics, they found the problem.

Yet Arnold and his crewmates come back, season after season. Fellow *Rollo* crabber Christian Kirk has been crabbing on and off for 20 years. Connections got him his first job way back during the Christmas season of 1984. He had an in; the owner of the boat was his girlfriend's father.

"I made it through the Christmas season and made some money, and decided I'd do it for maybe a year or two, but then I just kept doin' it," he says.

Shows like the *Deadliest Catch* hype the danger involved in the business, most of which is true, Kirk says. What it doesn't always play up is the long hours of brutal labor.

"We used to go 20 hours a day, basically," Kirk recalls. "About 2:00 we'd set our deck load and he'd send the cook in. We'd eat and then we'd do the dishes and take a 45-minute, maybe an hour, watch. That's when you'd have your three or four hours off. And we'd keep that pace. It was real regimented, which was real important for me. We knew we had a schedule, and we could look forward to having a little break. I've been on other boats where, you know, it was all haywire—you didn't know what was going on from one minute to the next. That can wear on you."

Kirk is amazed at just how much abuse the human body can take. "It's weird how your body adapts, you know?" he says. "You get used to three and a half, four hours of sleep. You get more than that, you wake up, you go, 'What's goin' on?'

"But I can't believe how much I was moving around," he says. "Jeez, I mean, it is just intense how much those guys are moving their limbs. After sitting on the beach, so to speak, not working, when I went back out, I couldn't believe how much I was moving around."

For having spent 20 years as a crabber, Kirk is remarkably injury free. But he's had his share of train wrecks.

"We chain down a stack with chains, five high. So we get those chain binders real tight. Well, I didn't get one quite tight enough and it flew open

Work on a crab boat continues around the clock.

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and the chain binder hit my leg pretty hard in the shin bone. It didn't break it, but that was the beginning of the season, and it was a long haul through that one."

Smashed body parts are par for the course in the crabbing business.

"Lots of guys get hurt," Kirk says. "Their fingers get smashed up on the rail, guys get pinched by pots on deck… But if you do this for a while, you start seeing this stuff before it even happens."

Still, everyone's nightmare is going overboard.

"This guy was working on the pot in the launcher once and he slid off and went right into the water," Kirk recalls. "But he was a young kid who had been fishing for a while, so he just kicked himself off to the side and we just went and picked him up. He went inside, took a shower, and came back out on deck.

"But we've had guys go in where it didn't work out so well," he says. "Nobody died, but they didn't really want to fish anymore. And if the tide's running out it can take you under, so it can be dicey. You don't want to go over."

Working on a crab boat isn't rocket science. Mostly it involves dropping and retrieving endless numbers of crab pots, day in and day out.

"We do it (unload the pots) at such a rapid pace that it's like you're almost running around the deck," Arnold says. "So you're completely drenched in sweat no matter how cold it is. The pots weigh 800 pounds empty, so if they're full they can weigh 1,500 pounds. You have to manhandle them and slam them down into the launcher, which is what holds the pot. There's a lot of timing with the waves, and that's the most dangerous part. A big wave can come over and slam into the pot and slam it into you. And every once in a while, if the guy running the hydraulics pulls the pot over at the wrong time, it just turns into a wrecking ball and flies across the deck, and everyone runs for cover. It's pretty scary."

Boats typically are at sea for about a week, and the crews work around the clock. Free time is minimal to non-existent.

"During the opilio (snow crab) season, which is in January through March, we get into these ice storms," Arnold says. "With the wind and wave action, the spray starts freezing on the boat, and the pots start turning into giant ice cubes. We have to get out—it's another terrible part of the job—and chip ice at the end of the day. So that cuts into our sleep time."

But there is, finally, a camaraderie among the crew, who help each other through everything nature can throw at them.

"You're out there with four other guys and you're all going to do the best you can, because it's a team effort," Kirk says. "If you've got that type of crew, you get through it. You all lean on each other."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Long-time Heartland USA *contributor Dave Carty's high-risk occupations include beer drinking.*

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(Above) Pots awaiting the season opener. **(Below)** The end result of a season's labor.