



The Last Run

By Todd Lewan
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Introduction

The Last Run begins when two boys stumble across the remains of a body in a bear den.

As the mystery surrounding the man's identity unravels, details of a remarkable search and rescue mission are revealed. Set in the dead of the Alaskan winter in January 1998, the book chronicles the events that forced five, down-on-their-luck fishermen to abandon their vessel in the Gulf of Alaska. A cataclysmic Arctic storm leads to a harrowing seven-hour fight for life in 38-degree water with no lifeboat.

The crew of the 78-year-old *La Conte* had earlier ignored warnings of approaching bad weather, hoping for a big payoff with a mother lode catch. And they got one: for 18 hours straight, nearly every hook they pulled in had a fish on it. Yellow eye, lingcod, calico, halibut, even the occasional sand shark -- it was an incredible haul, one that would bring huge profits -- and respect -- back in port. In the cruelest of ironies, however, the additional weight of the fish helped to sink the boat, leaving the survivors adrift in 70-foot seas. At the same time, their would-be rescuers -- three helicopter teams of the U.S. Coast Guard -- were detained 150 miles away at Air Station Sitka where they were being battered by hurricane-force winds, sleet and snow.

The Last Run is not only an account of one of the most heroic sea rescues ever attempted by the Coast Guard in Alaska, it is a tale of the resilience of the human spirit -- a true life example of how inner strength can triumph, even in the most horrific of circumstances.

Discussion Questions

1. Who was more responsible for the *La Conte* incident, Mark Morley or Scott Echols? Explain your opinion.
2. The author, Todd Lewan, includes a significant amount of background information on each of the members of the *La Conte* crew. Does this enhance or detract from the story for you in any way? Would you feel differently about the crew members if you had not known their histories? Why or why not?
3. Discuss overfishing and how it played into the crew's decision to search out more dangerous waters in the hope that they would bring home a more profitable catch. Does your knowledge of this practice affect your feelings toward the crew members?
4. It is quite ironic that because of the extra fish that the crew caught, the boat was too heavy, rode too low in the water, wasn't as maneuverable as it otherwise would have been, and sank. What do you think caused the crew's common sense to cloud over in such a way as to cause this to happen? How could the crew members' combined experiences with fishing have let their judgment become so skewed?
5. Once Ted LeFeuvre saw that Bob Doyle was one of the men he had risked his and his crew's life to save, his immediate reaction was to think, "I can't believe it ... We saved Bob Doyle? ... Throw him back." Do you think this was a justified reaction, based on Ted LeFeuvre's history with Bob Doyle?
6. Towards the end of the book, Bernice Honnold gets a visit from Bob Doyle and Mike DeCapua. In your opinion, why don't Bob and Mike tell her the reason for their visit and the gift of fish? Also, why don't they choose to stay to thank Lee Honnold in person?
7. After Bob and Mike leave the Honnold house, Bernice "watched them cross the lawn and turn on the sidewalk. She stood there in the doorway watching them. Then she felt a chill and closed the door softly." Why is it important to note that she "felt a chill"? What, if anything, does it signify?
8. When David Hanson realizes that he accidentally typed "Hanlon" instead of "Hanson," what does this signify? What do you think Hanson means when he remarks, "We're not all that far apart, are we, Mr. Hanlon?"
9. The story of David Hanlon serves as a "book-end" for this story. Do you feel that this was an appropriate way to both open and close the book? Can you think of an alternative way that all the pieces of the story could have been tied together?
10. In some ways, this story is not a new one. Fishermen go out, boats sink, some make it back, others don't. What about this book makes it original? How does the author tell this story in such a way as to set it apart from others in this genre?

About the Author

Todd Lewan joined the Associated Press as a foreign correspondent in Brazil in 1988, and is currently a national features writer. His original version of this story, entitled "Storm Gods and Heroes," was the first serial ever published in the AP's 150-year history. After it appeared, Lewan won the 1999 Associated Press Managing Editors Association Award for feature writing and the 1999 Rube Goldberg Award for feature reporting from the New York City chapter of the Society of Professional Journalist. He was also a finalist for the 1999 Scripps-Howard Journalism Award for feature writing and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

