

"DID YOU BOMB THAT?"

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF THE 'DIRTY BOMBER'

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I had the large salmon's serious attention as I stood still on the cliff on this bright mid-morning. The sun had peaked over the hill as the fish, in a crazy turbulent, sidelong rise, had missed my dreadful looking bomber when the fly floated through the choppy flow of the section of Pinware River I was fishing. It was quite a large salmon that I could vividly see on the side of the big rock from my angle above. I had her interest and she certainly had mine.

After giving the fish a minute to rest and settle down, I made a couple of false casts to dry off the "dirty bomber" (which will be called 'dirty bomb' henceforth) and let my heart rate calm. I wanted the fly to land perfectly in the current so that it floated right into her wheelhouse. On the second false cast as the fly slowly drifted through the air, I could see the salmon's tail flicker in agitation... and in anticipation! Yes, I know - watch the fly and not the fish, some may be thinking - but it was hard not to see the movement below in the pool. The third false cast meant touch-down time.

With my hands and body shaking, I threw the dirty bomb upriver, and as it was sailing through the air, the aggressive salmon shot from the side of that rock 10 feet upstream and hit the bomber just as it landed! Not only did it hit the dirty bomb, it inhaled the fly in one vicious gulp. It was now game on with one crazy-wild and powerful fish! This 15-pounder was landed and safely released after eight-to-ten minutes, and the forceps were used to recover the dirty bomb from well inside her gizzard.

Standing on the cliff in full witness of this whole spectacle, I now know that veteran angler Dave Collins from Gander is right. He once told me at his cabin: "The friggers see it (the bomber) in the air."

With my monstrosity of a fly about the size of a chickadee, how could that fish not see it? The false casts had to travel through the air slowly, with the Number 2 green ass, wide webby hackled dry fly, and I am sure her vision was quite in tune. When the dirty bomb is presented smoothly, the salmon certainly see it in the air before it hits the water. This mid-air dirty bomb visual theory has been proven by a few of my

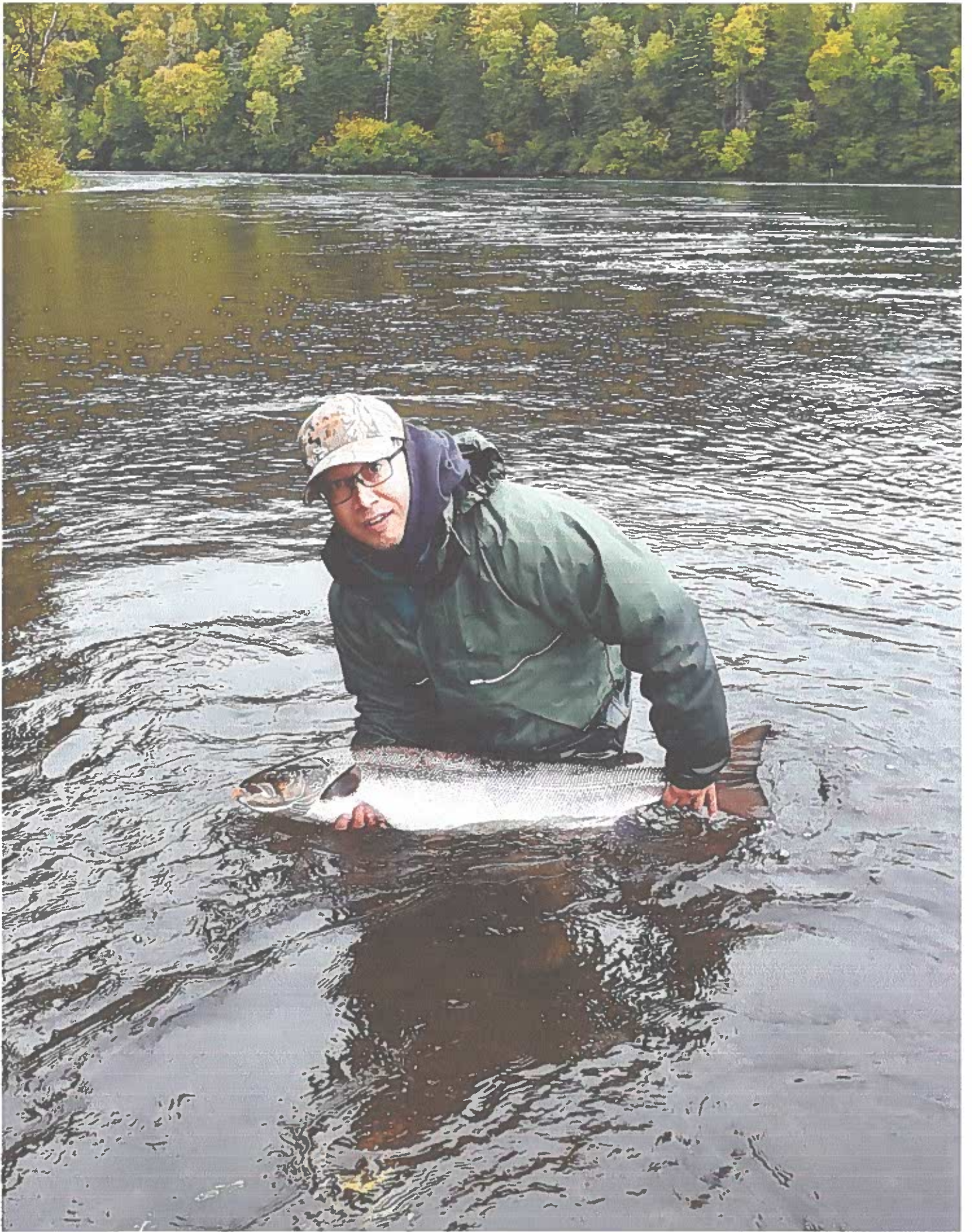
fishing buddies on several occasions.

If there's one fly that totally revolutionized Atlantic salmon angling and trout fishing, it is the clipped hair, double tailed bomber. Elmer Smith of New Brunswick is credited with developing the bomber. He created it with clipped deer hair and a palmered hackle that is wound through the deer, caribou or other hollow hair. The bomber has taken more Atlantic salmon than any other dry fly worldwide. Further, it is also the one fly that catches very large salmon, as revealed by the late legendary angler Mike Crosby. Mike caught one of the world's largest Atlantic salmon ever angled on a fly rod and a big bomber on the Restigouche River in 1988. In recent years, one of Newfoundland and Labrador's outdoors ladies, Jessica Duffney, has landed several monster salmon on the bomber, one of which was caught on a dirty bomb and weighed over 30 pounds!

An expert angler and guide from Pinware told me the story about the first time a non-resident angler tossed a bomber into the Chute Pool in Labrador. The guide said every salmon in the pool came up and had a look at it simultaneously; several even shook their heads! This fly was something new, it was something different and it was something that would change recreational Atlantic salmon fishing forever. The story goes that Mr. Smith got his idea for the bomber after watching a salmon rise to the cigar butt that he had flicked in the river.

The dirty bomber also started "by fluke" many years ago. Picture a kid in his/her element with a newfound passion, tying flies for Atlantic salmon.

Sitting cheerfully as a beginner in front of your Sunrise AA vice with your creative juices flowing, you whip up trout flies, wet salmon flies, original creations and anything you think just might grab the attention of a fish. It is tedious work as a beginner with clumsy fingers, shaky hands and a lack of skill in working with thread. You press onward though, knowing that the fly tier is in a completely different league because the tier has the creative element of experimentation in their vest. The fly tier certainly does not save money by tying their own flies, but neither





does the music lover who passionately invests in a fleet of instruments. Finally, when brave enough, you commence the advanced procedure of attempting to spin deer hair on hooks for Muddler minnow heads, bugs and bombers.

And there I was, in the mid-1980s, practising my new-found passion of fly tying. It was shown to me by Dave Green from Placentia, who worked with my father in Argentina at the US Naval Base. Dave sold me a Sunrise vice for \$5, gave me a few items from his kit and provided a list of supplies on a photocopied catalogue to buy from W.W. Doak in Doaktown, New Brunswick. Dave also loaned me a fly-tying book (*Universal Fly-Tying Guide*, first edition, by Dick Stewart) and told me to call him with any questions. Wondering what to tie, not realizing that these first hideous creations of mine actually worked when I worked them, I was all set. In hindsight, what looks disgusting to the human eye is often deadly in the eyes of the salmon. Your game will change when you realize that the fish dictate what works, not the fly tier, nor the angler. Making it about the fish is paramount for angling success; it must never be about humans, anyway.

Results is the name of the game, and if it isn't broke, don't try to fix it. This is great philosophy to live by. I took this advice and heeded it myself, since

day one from behind the vice. First, I did this because I had to as a kid unable to afford "proper" bomber feather saddles. Second, in hindsight, I did this because I wanted to when I revised the dirty bomb to a new level. Those early attempts at tying a wet fly were quite challenging for a new student of the angling world. When it came time to spin deer hair, those first few flies looked like something a cat had hacked up after eating a pound of rotten carpet!

Initially, I started tying deer hair bugs containing tails of brown squirrel. After a few weeks of "buggly" flies, I attempted a bomber with white two calf tail wings. As a kid who had to "save up" his money for fly-tying materials, I could not afford expensive saddles and dry fly capes. Instead, I substituted Chinese rooster capes and select Indian Dry Fly capes from WW Doak, and from Sports Experts stores in Mount Pearl Square and Corner Brook. The colours were dyed orange and natural brown. These hackles were not your perfect genetically grown Whiting, or even Metz, bomber feathers. They were shorter in length, thicker in width and fluffier in depth. When wrapped unevenly around my spun clipped fir ball, they worked and eventually worked like nothing I have ever tossed upon the water.

In those early days of angling, out of sheer embar-



rassment I hid the rotten looking bombers in a secret blue case that I made from a Becton Dickinson insulin delivering PreciJet device. It was the perfect size for my vest pocket, and the perfect place to hide them on the inserted foam pads. Every now and then, while I was learning to dead drift and fish the dry fly, I would sneak one on my line. Confidence in my flies was absent in those early days, unlike today. Most anglers in Placentia did not fish the dry fly in the 1980s, but my angling buddy Morris did. I paid attention. He was hooking a lot of salmon, and also Brown trout in the fall on his dry flies. Sure enough, those early rotten bomber creations started to work and hook fish when I used them.

In looking back, what really separates the dirty bomb from the regular neatly tied bomber is this: the rise to the dirty bomb is viciously aggressive and they take it in their mouths fast in the process.

Fast forward to the year 2000. The dirty bomb was revised after I realized that the salmon matter more

than anyone else's opinion. When I let go of caring about what anyone else thinks, the dirty bomb really took on a life of its own. When others zig, you zag. Be a leader, not a follower, as my grandfather would say.

On this one particular night, it was time to really put the dirty bomb revisions to the test. Our camp table had caribou hair, used calf tail stalks, clipped hackles, pieces of thread and tinsel, plus beverage containers, piled everywhere. I had scratched the tying itch and whipped up over 100 flies on this day. Sometimes on a trip, I can tie flies for a few days and not even wet a line. Fly-tying truly is therapeutic. Now it was time to whack together a few bombers based on my original rotten prototype. My fishing buddy and I had our fly boxes chewed to pieces on this trip and the old scraggly looking flies with teeth marks on the black Mustad hooks were the top producers. So why not take it a step further and tie a bomber that looked like something a cat would cough up while it's set on



fire? The dirty bombs that we did have were either hauled apart or busted off in large salmon.

Lo and behold, I whipped one together fast. The front end of the fly had the calf tail tips; the back end was sawed off straight. I only tied in one round of calf tail and used both ends, just as I did as a kid to save on materials. Whatever was in front of me in the clipped piled caribou mound was spun on the hook; different coloured hair, Krystal flash pieces, loose hairs and underfur, old cut threads and any material that I had swiped together on the table. Unlike my original tying days, now all fear was gone and I knew the nasty scraggly creation would get attention fast from the salmon. The fly was clipped in the shape of a pencil - slim, straight and flat on the bottom. The body was natural brown with a dark green butt. A fat, wide webby hackle from the under feathers of the dyed orange saddle was wound on and tied off. Thread protruded through the body in various angles. It was so ugly that my buddy and I laughed for about 15 minutes while staring at the rotten looking creature. The fish, however, didn't get the memo that this bomber would never work. We have kept this fly a secret, until the last few years. It has now taken on a life of its own. No one argues with the salmon, nor should they.

Some tips and pointers from the different people and philosophies that I have studied, adapted and refined to create this dirty offering:

- One Northern Peninsula tier talked about the

green ass bug, and bomber. He said about one out of 100 would float perfectly. I produced a fly where each one had no choice but to float differently.

- Another guide also said for big salmon, you want your bombers "as big as you got 'em - and bigger." (Note: Two main bomber tips not in this article relating to size and colour will be revealed in another book by Gord Follett in the years to come. Stay tuned. Both tips have been over 35 years under the salmon's dirty bomber microscope, in the realm of subjective angling science, as it were.)

- Hans van Klinken said the key to any dry fly is to show the fish something different. Thus, the dirty bomb is different, every single one.

- A tier from St. Mary's Bay used the wide webby hackle, but only with three wraps of hackle and with regular bodies. When I figured out that salmon can't count, my game changed. It doesn't matter how many turns of hackle as long as the body is grubby and dirty looking, while the hackle sticks off profusely, whether it is long/wide or not.

- The ultimate piece of the dirty bomb puzzle is this: the "shadow" on top of the water, which the salmon see looking overhead. Salmon love the big dirty bomb shadow!

There was one memorable fish that flat out refused every wet fly I had thrown at her for forty-five minutes. She came for a hard look at my white wing Blue Charm, but she only showed herself once. I basi-

cally "emptied the tin" after this one rise, but nothing worked. Coaching myself, I said, "why not," and attached the roughest of dirty bomb that I had in the fly box. It landed softly with a nice splat, due to its webby "dirty" shape. Sure enough, I could see the large salmon push away heavy water as it shot forward and swallowed the fly between the two rocks in the turbulent run. She inhaled the fly in a savage take and made off for the saltwater. I landed this 16-pound hen in 10 minutes of heavy strain; there was no chance of this hook coming out as my forceps removed it from under her tongue before release.

The old skipper obviously noticed something when he had asked me a few days earlier, "Did you bomb that," as I waded down through the heavy current. He said the salmon will take the bomber between the two submerged rocks where the currents come together, but they do not lie there. They lie several feet back in the run. Often where the large salmon take the fly is not where they lie. The skipper also said that bombing will get the pool going when no other fly will. He knew to fish everything, even dry flies in choppy water, and I was amazed at how well this worked with the dirty bomb and its unique floatability.

THE SUPREME PREDATOR-PREY RELATIONSHIP IS WITH AN INJURED VICTIM

We are all usually conditioned to tie - and fish - a perfect looking fly... to the human eye. Results, however, is the name of the game. The dirty bomb is a great change-up fly which undoubtedly works, judging by the feedback that has been provided since we released this fly to the angling community. These days I just accept reality; if it works and is not broke, don't fix it. Looks can also be deceiving in the fish's world. Pretty and perfect flies are great to look at. They are often immaculate works of art. One person, however, said it best when he stated, "Perfect flies catch the fisher, but not the fish."

So why then will an Atlantic salmon take a dirty bomb, or other such dirty creation? The answer, I believe, lies somewhere in what I call "Whitey's Injured Fly Theory (WIFT™)." After professionally helping victims in sociopathic relationships, this animal behaviour makes sense. This is a topic for another day and another professional magazine. In the animal kingdom (and humans are animals), the supreme predator-prey relationship is with an injured victim.

Read that last sentence again. In watching documentaries on lions, eagles, polar bears and other predators, when the prey is injured, the hunters seem to attack it much more violently. It is almost like the predators want to put the prey out of its misery, while showing the world who is boss. Injured victims are easier to catch and often easier to destroy. A nice gesture to end suffering, perhaps, but a paradoxical phenomenon. Maybe our paradoxical *Salmo salar* has the same instinct. Thus, the injured fly theory; hit the roughest looking imperfect fly viciously to ensure that it is killed instantly. Whatever the reason that the salmon takes a dirty fly, especially a dirty bomb, we will never know. But it sure is fun to speculate and think.

I did know, however, that fish were in the river when I went to this secluded pool on the Great Northern Peninsula a few years ago. Fishing friends from the area told me that fish were in the pool, but nobody had any action. I put on my white wing Blue Charm and went down through the pool. Nothing showed. Then I put on the dark wing Blue Charm and went down through the pool again, taking my time with each cast and presentation. Once again, nothing. Not wanting to leave this hot spot and go further below, I decided to put on the weapon. In early season with cold water temperatures, the salmon often prefer the wet fly in these areas. Not on this morning though, as I was in for quite a fright.

After attaching the Number 2 green ass, orange dirty bomb, I made one cast close to shore and the water pummelled as two large salmon came for the fly at the same time! After an hour of fishing, I had released two large salmon and lost three more. If anyone told me that story, I would find it hard to believe, but it certainly did happen. On the next evening, there were witnesses as I hooked another two large fish on the dirty bomb, one of which came ferociously for the fly like she wanted to eat the reel!

On another fishing excursion, I tied on a puffy looking dirty bomb. As I applied the Gink, my buddy jokingly asked me, "What have you got on there, a pigeon?" His laughter turned to shock after my first cast was into a 15-pound slab of chrome. The large fish emptied the reel and made one springing leap over the rock at the tail end of the pool. The action was on and I was sprinting downriver to ensure I didn't lose another fly line on this trip. We landed and released that fish about ten minutes later and I am sure my

buddy is still laughing at the whole experience. His final comment after he took the hook out of that fish for me was, "Have you got any more pigeons in your fly box?" It was then that I let him in on the dirty bomb secret as well.

It was July 1997 and I was awaiting my new Sage rod from W. W. Doak. It was being shipped to a friend's house in Corner Brook, and when it arrived I went straight to the Upper Humber River. I hooked and released two fish at Island Pool on this morning, both on the dirty bomb with a purple ass. Then I proceeded to Mistaken Point. There were 11 fishers below me and no one had hooked a fish all day. With my same dirty bomb on - Boom! Three casts in, a fish was hooked, landed and tagged, then later given to my friend in Corner Brook where my Sage rod was sent. No other anglers hooked or landed any fish that morning. A local angler quipped sarcastically, "You hooked him hard enough," with my rigid hook set. I simply replied, "sure did, solid as a church." His tone of voice was bitter, but had he come up and chatted, I would have given him a dirty bomb to try, which I regularly do while fishing.

One note to make for the movers and shakers in our fishing society: When you create something new/different/unique, be prepared for the arrows and slings of jealous wannabes. At least one fella out there claims to have created the dirty bomb, while another "rookie-veteran" says the Carter bug was the original dirty bomber, apparently not realizing that a bug and a bomber are two different things; a bomber has two tails and a bug has one. The Carter's bug is the "soft bug," with a completely different fishing philosophy. The legendary, late Bryant Freeman (whom I bought my last dirty bomb saddle from) and I had a wonderful conversation about the Carter bug and the dirty bomb. Bryant stated it better than I ever could have: "Obviously, this guy doesn't do any research on fly tying whatsoever because he doesn't know squat." Thanks Bryant, one more time, for your words of wisdom.

Another angler said he "saw those long hackle bomber flies years and years ago with schlappen as the hackle." He's been fishing for 10 years, maximum. My buddy chuckled, shook his head and then told me, "I think you have studied and created possibly the most controversial salmon fly of all time. Everyone thinks they created it!"



I guess as a kid, I didn't realize what I had done with those early days of spinning fine deer hair that wouldn't spin. The name is catchy, it catches fish and here we are, pressing onward.

The word "dirty" is my creative name for this fly and it evolved from other beat up wet flies that are often top producers. "Dirty" stuck with me when my buddy said "it looks like someone shot your fly box," after he saw that I didn't throw away any beat-up patterns unless the hook shank was cracked off. We adopted the word dirty on the bomber and it stuck like glue. It was quite catchy, simple and descriptive. The fly became the dirty bomber. Dirty means as it suggests - rotten and unclean, appalling looking. Dirty flies often create themselves in the process of hooking and releasing fish, especially trout and salmon parr which chew up the fly.

I wrote an article in the 2014 annual *Spawner* magazine that referenced "dirties," in case any reader wishes to read about some more imperfect ideas. The dirty bomber is my creation from over 35 years of trial, error, experimentation and change evolution.

Here are some tying tips for the dirty bomb for those who may be interested:

- Caribou hair is better than deer because it has more air pockets. All northern animals have better flotation hairs; arctic hare, seal, polar bear, moose and of course, caribou.

- The body hair is packed as tight as you want it to be on the dirty bomber. The body of hollow hair floats the fly, while the hackle helps it sit uniquely on the water.

- The front wing is usually natural tips from the tail, while the back wing is squared off. Either way, the salmon do not care, but a real dirty bomb has the back tail sawed off straight.

- It must be tied with no intention of perfection; I tie them fast, pack the hair to finger strength and always tie with my thread tight.

- The dirty bomb is not trimmed to perfection like on regular bombers. Trim the dirty bomb with blunt scissors to get the extra uneven shadow effect in the water.

- Trim the bottom flat, not round, so it floats better. The thin pencil shaped body of bigger flies allows you to cast them through the air easier. You don't want to be throwing a five-pound fly.

- Use wide, webby, dirty rotten, scraggly looking hackles from a hen cape or rooster saddle. A wide hackle is recommended but it is not mandatory, nor necessary.

- Tie in the hackle by the head. Wrap the hackle back through the body. Then wrap the thread back through the hackle to the tail, pinch off the hackle tip and then wrap the thread forward through the hackle again. This double thread solidly secures the fly. Further, having a few wraps of thread showing in the body is also unorthodox for my purposes, yet it works extremely well.

- A normal bomber should have five wraps of hackle (just like a regular wet fly normally has five wraps of body tinsel); the dirty bomb though, can have as many wraps of hackle as you want. Experiment and try different things.

- A long, wide, webby hackle tied on a regular normal clipped bomber is NOT a dirty bomber. Period.

- With much debate, orange is still the best colour hackle. White wing bombers with natural caribou or deer hair are the salmon's preferred meal of choice. A green butt seems to work well and it adds a little contrast to the fly. Brown is another great natural colour

for hackle.

- Colours don't matter as much as the shadow on the water. When the sun shines at a certain angle on the water, the salmon do not see colours as vividly as they see the protuberant shadow.

- For a variety, also try lime green, dark green, black, and any colour combo you wish... as long as you show the fish something different and dirty looking.

- The dirtier the better, because salmon see enough perfect patterns. It is a catchy name and a catchy fly.

- The dirty bomb is what you want it to be. Experiment and be creative. You never know what may work until you try.

Some songs barely make it on music albums but climb the charts fast, unexpectedly. Such is the case with the dirty bomb. Many anglers have written and told me about their massive success with this fly. The stories are plentiful where fellow anglers laughed at their buddy's choice of a fly, only to get skunked while the dirty bomb was a force to be reckoned with. Some people twitch, hitch, flitch, snitch and glitch their bombers. The best presentation, however, is still the basic dead drift with the high float.

Sometimes, our greatest discoveries for success come when we least expect it and are in those magical moments of chance. Your angling results will no doubt improve with a creative, open mindset. Who knows, maybe salmon can count, but they surely do not care about perfection. Keep your childhood curiosity; it will serve you well. You never know when a creation that you concoct out of a vice - even if it starts to turn heads or create eye rolls and screwed-up faces - is the fly that does the damage. Dirty is now a salmon fishing movement, despite the naysayers, and WIFT™ is a real concept.

Tight lines and bombs away!

Page 29: Jonathan Tsang of Corner Brook hooked this Humber River beauty on a dirty bomber (Photo by Andrea Bursey).

Page 30-31: Dirty bombers may not be the neatest or best looking salmon flies, but they definitely attract fish (Photo by Paul White).

Page 32: Another dirty bomber victim, hooked by Steve Downey on the Kenamu River in Labrador (Photo by Matthew Pardy).

Page 34: The author, Paul White, releases a Pinware River Atlantic salmon (Photo by Eric Gollop).