Icewalk

Diary of a Long Polar Day

By Angus Cockney

The mountain ranges of Ellesmere Island have dwindled as I look south towards Cape Columbia, Canada's northernmost point of land. But the land is no longer my concern: we are walking on the frozen Arctic ocean, and we are surrounded only by snow and ice.

The chill of the north wind, the drifting of ice-pack, and thoughts of polar bears occupy my mind as I prepare for another gruelling day. Icewalk '89, our international North Pole expedition, has now survived ten nightless days.

The sun does nothing except give us a sense of direction. I long for its radiant heat and my thoughts go back to my vacation in Hawaii: the heat, the sand, the surf, the comfort. I seem to recall complaining about the heat. Now look where I am!

My complaints are kept inward, and I am careful to maintain my quiet disposition. After all, I am Inuvialuit. I'm not supposed to feel cold or suffer frostbite. I'm expected to enjoy this icy, beautiful landscape.

The air is crisp- almost too cold to breathe. The sun is brilliant. The sky is deep blue, yet my eyes detect discolouration- "Arctic Haze." Where does all this pollution come from? The thoughts remind me why we are here, an eight man international expedition hoping to draw attention to man's ignorance of waste management. To succeed, we have to press on to the Pole. It's an enormous task, one that does not really seem possible.

But no one in his right mind would want to be here without a sense of purpose. At the moment my focus is survival. I must keep moving.

It's -58^{O}C this morning. My gear is all packed and I realize I am the first one ready, as usual. After briefly warming my numb fingers, I unload my camera and

take this moment to snap some pictures. Thus far, I am surprised and grateful the camera hasn't frozen. As I look through the viewfinder I am careful not to touch my nose to the metal camera-back. I ease the shutter advance lever forward ever so slowly: I do not want to break the brittle film, which is almost finished. I dread the thought of changing roll sometime today. My fingers are not looking forward to it.

Although the guys are saying I am in my element, my body is still trying to acclimatize to the cold.

Yesterday, I noticed blood-streaks under my fingernails. The others say this is due to my Inuit physiology, but I try to convince them that I, too, am feeling the big chill. Last night, as I looked around the tent, I noticed that I'm the only one lucky enough to have escaped frostbite. I'll see how it goes today.

I make a final check of my gear and realize the only thing missing is my lunch. I survey the campsite for my lunch bag. There it is, full of frozen *muk-tuk* (whale blubber), frozen salami, frozen biscuits and frozen candy bars. In an effort to thaw this bundle of oily energy I shove it into the inner layer of my three jackets. By lunchtime, I hope, my teeth will be able to sink into these delicacies, which will be my diet for the next fifty days.

After a few quick jogs on the spot, I proceed to shoulder my fifty kilogram pack. After ten hours of travelling on skis, my shoulders will feel as if they are being ripped away from my back.

I take a compass bearing due north and scan the frigid, moon-like landscape. My idea is to pick the best route, but it's not easy among all the pressure ridges that lie ahead. We will climb enough of those to equal the height of Mount Everest!

I can almost feel the awesome power of the wind and sea currents that created these massive jumble of ice-blocks. It's as if a giant sea-storm had frozen instantly.

The rough ice, combined with unusually deep snow, has made the Icewalk conditions very tough. Even my skis are starting to feel the burden. I examine a delaminating tip and manage to suppress a curse.

As I am in charge of fixing failed equipment, I have already had to change a binding. At least I don't have to wax these skis. The snow is like sandpaper, so anything grips. I am glad of our sealskin *kamiks* (boots), which are both lightweight and waterproof. For centuries they have been in use in our Inuit culture. It stirs pride within me to see tradition included among all this high-tech equipment and clothing.

My Burwin binding straps have become unadjustable, since they have frozen stiff. Luckily, they conform to the shape of my *kamiks* and now act as a step in binding. The Arctic plays havoc with our equipment. It will do the same to my mind if I do not continue to adjust accordingly.

Although my twenty kilogram sled has seen better days, it is in better shape than the sleds of the other expedition members. I have to take good care of it, not only for carrying things, but so I can win a friendly wager with our Australian member. I bet that I would end up with my original sled at the Pole: only seven hundred kilometres to go!

I make final adjustments to my pack and skis. After a few strides, barely enough for my muscles to warm up, I begin to side-step a ten-metre pressure ridge. All my strength, agility, and balance is required for the struggle upwards. But going down the other side, a sense of humour is even more important.

Even though I am happy about my skill and balance in manoeuvring over this maze of ice-blocks, I can count on at least one good wipe-out a day to keep me honest. Fighting these obstacles has helped me develop my vocabulary, but I have to learn to accept these conditions, for this is *nunatsiaq*- the beautiful land.

As I turn to gauge the progress of the others, I'm compelled to savour the moment. Seven stark figures silhouetted by the backlight of the brilliant sun are enveloped in a mist cause by their heavy breathing. The stillness of the air cracks

with each stride and pole plant, and the occasional cough indicates the exertion that's needed to expel the painfully cold air. I wonder what they are thinking.

Another day has begun. Ahead lies the promise of unforeseen hardship. Behind are unforgettable days- some as vivid as the way it all began.

After a long flight from Edmonton to Ottawa, I lay back watching television in my hotel room and thinking that I would long for such comfort this winter. I had been informed that the others would arrive that night: the West German, the Australian, the Japanese, the Soviet, the British, and the American members of the Icewalk expedition. Anxious thoughts ran through my skull as I kept saying to myself, "What am I doing here?"

After a restless night, I made my way to the restaurant: a few shots of caffeine would settle my nerves. There they were and here I was- last, as I should be. The instructions were short. These men looked too awesome, too experienced. Their small talk was all about where they'd been, what they'd seen, what they'd done.

I said nothing. I kept nodding approval, trying to fit in. I didn't realize that my silence would later speak of experience in a land where the weather keeps you real.

And now, here on the ice, reality has set in. The training camps were just a formality. The struggle begins, not only with the elements but with one another. I still choose to say nothing, and to draw strength from my silent, inner self.

I was not given enough credit, sometimes even by my own people. But I have proven myself worthy, especially since I am the rookie of the team. I did not expect to be a leader among these seasoned veterans.

My years of skiing in the North have proven valuable, especially my knowledge of how to dress. To each of us, clothing has become a personal science. Each day I gauge what to wear by the wind and the temperature. The freezing temperatures are tolerable as long as the wind is relatively still. Keeping in mind that I want to limit my perspiration, I wear just enough to keep from

freezing. I am lucky: I do not perspire much compared to the rest of the team. Mostly, I sweat on my face. As a result, there's heavy frost build-up that occasionally freezes my eyelashes together! I will cut them off tonight. I have sacrificed my fur hat. Everyone thought I was crazy, but the North in me told me otherwise. An ordinary tuque and small earmuffs have been adequate when I am moving.

No one is saying very much.

Misha, our Soviet member, greets me in simple English, his fur hat already displaying a thick layer of frost. "Terrible," he says.

He refers, I assume, to the ice. But he could be talking about the cold, the wind, the weight of his pack, or maybe our comrades. His agility equals or surpasses mine, and I get the feeling that he enjoys this ordeal. After all, he did trek last with the Polar Bridge team. For me, once will be enough!

Yesterday, Misha smiled as he told me he had said the same thing himself, last year. He is a stern man, full of commitment and focussed on reaching the Pole as soon as possible. I feel the same way, and maybe that is why he is becoming a good friend.

We take another compass bearing and soon we are joined by the Australian team member, Graeme Joy.

Graeme is a brash and at times irritating man. He has had problems with his feet freezing, but he is handling the elements very well. Graeme takes care of the radio communication, our link to the outside world. His sense of humour is becoming quite predictable in its own profane way. This morning he described how his stomach rebelled against our oily-rich diet last night. He didn't have to remind me. I was there, trying not to listen to the gagging.

We agree on a route and decide to press on. The others will have to catch up. Holding back our pace is not easy. I just want to get it over with.

My left shoulder is already beginning to feel the effects of the heavy pack, the pain is always gradual; as my muscles become weaker the cramp becomes

unbearable. Although my jackets provide some padding, my shoulder straps will begin to impact the inside of my arms, causing further torment. But I am careful not to show outward signs of physical pain.

I always like a physical challenge, but this seems a little too much. I must be getting old.

Our schedule follows the rigid Soviet style of marching: fifty minutes' travel with a ten-minute break. Our goal today is eight "marches." The ice indicates our pace and it doesn't look good today. Misha takes the lead and I begin to follow. My competitive instinct matches every stride he takes. I begin to try to anticipate his every move. To make it interesting, I allow only a few centimetres between my skis and his sled. Usually I anticipate his every move, but occasionally he stops without warning, almost causing me to fall flat on my face. This, of course, annoys me and I swear at him. He looks at me, pondering whether I am still sound in mind. On occasion I distract myself from this game and scan the ever-changing, drifting ice.

I must stay alert. Lurking in the ice could be our worst enemy, the polar bear. Seeing as I am the only native person on this expedition, the team thought it appropriate that I carry the rifle! The thought of some form of life existing here, year-round, is astounding. But two days ago I came across my first polar bear tracks- tracks that seemed to indicate a casual, contended gait.

At times I wonder why I accepted this challenge. Some might just call it the "lure" of the North. It would have been easy to back out and enjoy the comforts of home. Now that I am here, acceptance is the name of the game: the bear is the only one who is at home in this unforgiving environment. But I have learned that I would not really feel content to have turned down this experience.

I wonder is the American, Darrell Roberts, will survive what must seem to him a real ordeal. This is certainly not a place for me, let alone a black man from Harlem. His face, toes, and hands have seen better days. The Japanese, Hiroshi Onishi, I nicknamed the "bulldog" at the training camps. It seemed to me he spent too much of his energy at the wrong time. The West German, Arved Fuchs, is

content just to drift to the North Pole. I would, too, but I don't have that much time. The Englishman, Rupert Summerson, a living paradox, seems too rigid and polite to be in such a harsh environment. My practical expectations of the other Englishman, Robert Swain, in light of his expedition to the South Pole, were too high. But his leadership qualities make him unique.

The Arctic is no place for frailty. Any weakness in personality becomes grossly magnified. On a journey of such magnitude, disregard for fitness and preparation quickly becomes evident as fatigue, frostbite, and mental weakness.

I cannot boast and put myself above these men. For what will I succumb to? If not to the elements, I think, then to my worst enemy- myself. I still think I am less than the least of these men. Inuit, too, have been known to freeze to death.

The desperate struggle continues in this harsh land where there is no room for independence.

Misha checks his watch. I know it is lunchtime. Graeme and I join him, then look back. The others are locked in slow stubborn progress.

Lunch, although welcome, is both a blessing and a curse. My pack, the enemy, becomes my friend as I slouch on it, aching and groaning like an old man. I face the sun in an effort to feel some form of heat. The *muk-tuk* chunks are like jaw-breakers. Luckily, I am able to swallow them whole, like unchewed grapes slowly slithering down.

But my chest tightens, fighting the choking feeling. I'm not the only one wishing for some simple bread and butter. The hot chocolate has gone sour. Still, the warmth allows us a few seconds of satisfaction.

I cannot keep still, for the condensation within my clothing causes discomfort. It is not easy but I find energy to snap pictures, trying to compose something to prove that I was here- to say I did it. I scamper up high, looking farther north, anticipating open water. But not today. The dark clouds indicate open water (and sometimes polar bears) cannot be seen.

I look down at the team. Their body language tells me I'm not the only one who is weary and cold. The severe cold amplifies noises foreign to the usual vacuum quietness of this icy expanse. Besides the chewing, sniffing, and burping, I can almost hear them thinking that we're not here to live, but just to stay alive.

The sun is directly behind us as we face an afternoon of much the same hardship. In a few hours there is a promise of a much needed rest and a hot meal. The mixture of buckwheat, oil, butter, pemmican and milk gives us each an amazing time-clock regularity. For obvious reasons, relieving yourself is a necessity everyone wishes he could avoid. It gives literal meaning to the phrase "freezing your butt off." Speed is the order of the day, and haste produces comical incidents fit to be recounted only in the confines of an uncivilized tent.

My hands and feet tell me I'm cold, but the fatty-rich diet is able to sustain my inner core. While in motion, I stretch my shoulders, fighting to retain my balance under my seemingly heavier pack. Graeme wonders how my short legs can carry such a burden. My stature has always been deceptive, but I sweat that my mental strength surpasses any physical strength I have left at the end of the day.

Our ingenious Soviet-style dome tent offers us what little comfort is possible in the ever-deepening cold. I use the heat generated by the stoves to dry my upper clothing. At first, when I stood there half-naked, the others joked that I was trying to show off, but now they follow my example. I sit in silent confidence, thankful that I respect the North.

The effects of the cold, the wind, the weight we all carry, and the lack of hygiene are taking their toll. I do not have a mirror, but I'm sure I display the weariness that's evident in everyone else's face.

The closeness inside the tent is too much for me. In an effort to away from the others (and all the snoring) I choose to isolate myself and sleep outside. It is not simple, but at least I am alone. The rifle is carefully set beside me, cocked and ready for fast revival.

The polar bear is only one of my concerns as I begin to wiggle my way into my sleeping bag. I could be wearing my coffin: the sea-ice has been known to break up underneath a sleep camp. That thought is even more ominous as I listen to the distant avalanche-sound of shifting ice. I cover up, totally mummified, careful not to leave my nose exposed.

My thoughts are always edged with the knowledge that one day this will all be over. One day I will be able to be with my pregnant with at home. One day I will be able to enjoy a slice of bread and butter. One day I will be able to actually relax amid the surf and the sand.

People tell you the first and the last steps of a journey like they are the best. I've been counting down the days, longing for the last step. I doze off, knowing I will be awakened by the penetrating cold when it gets inside my bones. How can I move my body when rigor mortis has set in? If I do, then I'll disturb the frost build-up caused by my own breathing and cause a mini shower melting on my face. Why do I have to make a choice in an already uncomfortable state? Nothing is simple.

In a few hours I have to stir life into my cocoon-like body to make my way in a land that knows no partiality. I take solace in the fact that we are one more day closer to the Pole. Despite all the obstacles- the wind, the cold, the ice, the food, and each other- I know we will make it.