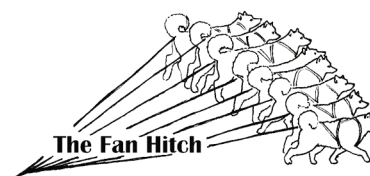


Selected reading from....

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The Fan Hitch is pleased to present Part 4, the final installment of The Qitdlarssuaq Chronicles, by Renee Wissink. This work first appeared in the November/December 1987 issue of the now extinct Canadian magazine *Equinox*. We are grateful to Renee for granting permission to reproduce the text in *The Fan Hitch*. Thanks also to Nunavut Tourism for providing and granting permission to use some of the photographs that accompany this story. While not a part of what appeared in *Equinox*, they were taken while on this expedition. And although Nunavut Tourism could not specifically identify the photographer, it is likely that he is Mike Beedell, who deserves to be credited. Ed.



The Qitdlarssuaq Chronicles, Part 4

by Renee Wissink

On May 16, we began our crossing of Smith Sound. We headed in a northeasterly direction into Kane Basin, stopping frequently to stock seals or to climb icebergs to recon-noitre the rough ice ahead. On one such climb, Apak, scanning the ice with binoculars, shouted "Qimmuksiit! Qimmuksiit!" Dog teams! Dog teams! Turning, he lifted me off the ice in an enormous hug, and I knew would make Greenland. The teams gained on us rapidly, and as they approached, I was reminded of Qitdlarssuaq's first contact,

which took place at Etah, an old settlement site not far distant. The Greenlander the Baffin Islanders met was Arrulak, a man who had lost his leg in a rock fall and had replaced it with a wooden substitute. On seeing his approach, Qitdlarssuaq's clan believed they had arrived in a land where all people walked with a wooden leg.

The two Greenlanders we met were brothers, Angu and Allu Tuneq, and fittingly, they were descendants of Qitdlarssuaq. Through our radio calls, they had learned of our proximity to Greenland and had set out to greet us. The meeting was joyous. We drank tea and traded foods and talked about the trip. They were impressed by what we had accomplished, but no more so than we were by the smooth, harmonious way they handled their dogs and by how lightly they travelled. Indeed, their loads looked minuscule compared with ours, and they insisted on adding part of ours to their sleds. Suddenly, our expedition had grown to seven people on five sleds pulled by 63 dogs.

And it grew again shortly thereafter when we crossed paths with two other Greenlanders. Qaordluktoq Miunge and his wife Inaluk, also of the Qitdlarssuaq family tree. They had been out for 15 days, unsuccessfully hunting for polar bears, and they were more than happy to stop for a long tea break and conversation. Beedell and I were now definitely a cultural minority, and we became the unwary butts of several practical jokes, one of which involved my stalking an already dead seal. Miunge was an immensely warm, fun-loving person, and he and Beedell struck up a close relationship almost immediately. Beedell had him up on skis within the hour, an experience the Greenlander appeared to find both novel and thrilling. He decided to abandon his own plans for ours.

Shortly after our meeting, however, Miunge began to complain of abdominal pains. We gave him some Graval from our first aid kit and travelled on, but within a few hours, it became obvious that the pains were becoming worse. We stopped when he could no longer drive his team, gave him some strong pain killers and made him as comfortable as possible on top of his sled, and then, as the Tuneq brothers helped Inaluk raise a small tent around and over his sled in the Greenland fashion, we radioed Jan MacLennan, the nurse in Grise Fiord, for advice. She quickly ruled out appendicitis and several other possible ailments, and we decided there was little to do but monitor his condition. If it worsened, we could call for a medivac.

In fact his condition deteriorated rapidly. The pain became unbearable, and he began to moan, then scream. When he started to vomit violently and repeatedly, I radioed Grise Fiord and asked that a medivac helicopter be flown in

from Qaanaaq. That would take a long time, though, and there was little for us to do but assist Inaluk in comforting her husband. Beedell spent hours in the small half-collapsed tent where Miunge clutched his Bible to his chest and made sweeping motions with his hand that he would soon be flying to heaven. At one point, in a spasm of intense pain, he tried to take his own life. We hid all the guns and listened for the helicopter, which refused to appear. None of us could believe what was happening. Only hours before, we had been exultant, rocketing over the floe ice with dozens of narwhals cruising the open waters nearby and the ice littered with basking seal. Now, we were helplessly listening to a man die in what had suddenly become the bleak frozen centre of absolutely nowhere.



Traveling in the glow of a sun dog.

Corel photo

At some point in the nightmare, I realized that we had been up for close to 24 hours, and Beedell and I crawled into our tent to try to rest. It seemed only minutes, though, before Immaroitok tore open the tent door and said that Miunge had stopped breathing. I leapt up and out, only to find the drawn face of Angu Tuneq and hear him say, "Tugujuq". I do not know much Inuktitut, but I knew what that meant. Beedell was close behind me, and I told him Miunge was dead. He simply said, "Oh, no," and ran toward the Greenlander's tent.

My call to Grise Fiord was mainly a formality. "Grise Fiord, Grise Fiord," I said, "we've lost him." MacLennan asked if we had tried artificial respiration and cardiopulmonary resuscitation. I told her that Beedell was trying both but that it did not look good. Four hours later, long after we had agreed that our efforts at resuscitation were in vain, the helicopter from Qaanaaq arrived.

We broke camp immediately after the helicopter departed, taking time only to grant Miunge's last wish by piling most of his hunting equipment on the ice and setting it on fire. Although his possessions were few, he left Beedell his beautifully crafted driving whip, a great honour. Standing by the fire, stunned and distraught, I was struck by the similarities between Miunge's and Qitdlarssuaq's deaths. Both had died of abdominal pain, and Cape Herschel - where Qitdlarssuaq had died - still loomed close by. We later learned that an autopsy performed on Miunge shortly after his body reached Qaanaaq revealed nothing out of the ordinary.

Four hours after leaving the fire on the ice, we set foot for the first time on Greenland's mainland at Hatherton Bay. For 74 days we had looked forward to the occasion, but now that it had arrived, we could think of little but the death. We sombrely congratulated each other, ate and tried to sleep.

Once on Greenland, we turned south and caught up with Qitdlarssuaq again at Etah. In 1862, when the emigrants arrived, they found the estimated 120 Polar Eskimos populating the area in a precarious state. For a variety of reasons, including climatic fluctuations and an epidemic that's believed to have carried off all the adults, the Eskimos had lost certain important technologies. They lacked bows, without which they were unable to obtain caribou for food or skins; kayaks were unknown, which left them as hunters of the ice with no means to pursue sea mammals into open water; and they were unfamiliar with the traditional leister or three-pronged hunting spear, with which they could have hunted the char that teemed in their rivers.

The Baffin Islanders reintroduced all three, and they also showed the Polar Eskimos how to make igloos with a long sunken entrance, a warm alternative to their stone-and-sod huts. Equally important, they revitalized the local gene pool. Today, one-third of the area's 800 inhabitants can trace their ancestry to the Baffin Island emigrants.

From Etah, we turned inland, working our way up onto the Greenland icecap via the Foulke Fiord and the Brother John Glacier. After weeks of travelling through landscapes of white, blue and grey, we found the brilliant orange north face of Foulke Fiord almost startling. The orange was lichen, heavily fertilized by millions of dovebies, birds that return each spring to nest along the coast. The dovebies were the key to the Polar Eskimos survival in the face of all their losses. Using rock blinds and long-handled nets, the Greenlanders caught - and still catch - thousands of the plump little birds. They can be eaten raw or cooked, and for a delicacy, they can be packed a hundred at a time in a sealskin and left to ripen for several months. The result, a fermented combination resembling a mixture of vinegar and the strongest imaginable blue cheese, is called kiviaq. Beedell and I, given a chance to sample some, labelled it "kiviyuck." The smell lingered in our moustaches and beards for days.



Corel photo

High winds greeted our arrival on the icecap, and we were enveloped in a driving ground blizzard, the worst of the trip. Beedell, Angu Tuneq and I became separated from the others and began to wander aimlessly through the storm. Despite endless tinkering, our radio direction finder refused to work, and given the severity of the storm, it was soon apparent that we had lost not only our sense of direction but all spatial perception. It was like being turned loose in a cup of milk; the ground became indiscernible from the sky, and the only way to tell uphill from down was by the speed of the sled, which was tested by putting a hand or a foot on the snow. Even walking was made difficult by the conflicting messages that the eyes and inner ear sent to the brain. Although I was greatly reassured by the presence of Tuneq, who had spent much of his life traveling the icecap, I did not relish wandering into a crevasse field. We made camp.

By the next day, conditions had improved, but they still left much to be desired. We broke camp and headed off in the direction Tuneq believed to be correct. It was not until some time later, however, after some convoluted, circular travel, that the sun broke through and Tuneq was able to pinpoint our location. We quickly began a long downhill journey to the sea, finally leaving the ice at Neqe, where the others joined us the next day.

It was only a few hours travel from Neqe to Siorapaluk, a tiny community of about 70 people, a dozen brightly painted houses and one small store stocked with basic goods. The comparison with Canadian communities was inevitable and, for all of us, eye opening. The Polar Eskimos, immensely proud of their culture, remain very much attached to the traditional way of life. Most are subsistence hunters who live close to the land. A Polar Eskimo, once asked for a definition of happiness, replied, "Being out bear hunting, spotting a bear and being the team out front." Dogs and kayaks remain a part of everyday life: restrictive legislation and high gasoline prices make snowmobiles and motorboats impractical, but it is doubtful that the Greenlanders would use them even if they could. When I asked why no one carried radios like the one we used during Miunge's crisis, I was told simply that nobody wanted to. Not only were they expensive and heavy, they were in a very real sense, unnecessary. The Greenlanders realized and accepted the risks inherent in their lives. They did not expect anyone to come and get them. Miunge was a hunter of the ice. It was natural that he should die on the ice. Why should it be any other way?

From Siorapaluk, we started for Qaanaaq, the regional capital with a population of 400. Word of our progress had spread quickly (there was a telephone in the Siorapaluk store), and before we had travelled halfway, we were met by a convoy of 20 dog teams. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to join what was now becoming a travelling celebration. During the giant tea break that ensued, I was surprised by the feeling of sadness that welled within me. Qaanaaq was at hand, and from there, it was an easy, well-travelled 75 miles (120 km) to Thule and an airlift home. Why had I come here? What had I hoped to gain? For all my travelling, Qitdlarssuaq remained as elusive as ever. We were from different time and different cultures, and we appeared to have little in common.

It was then, looking out around me at the ice and the mountains and the people with whom I had come so far, that I remembered something from the old Qitdlarssuaq stories. "Do you know the desire to see new lands?" Qitdlarssuaq had once asked. "Do you know the desire to see new people?" For the time being, it was enough.



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