

# **I Lived With The Eskimos**

**by  
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## **Chapter Eighteen - Orders From Headquarters**

The squadrons of eider ducks, the little auks, the terns, loons, crows, seagulls, hawks - all these and even the eagles set up a protesting clamor when the first airplane soared off the choppy water of our bay and disappeared into the distance. I lost sight of the Fokker behind a cloud, and I took time to look around at the natives who had clustered on the beach to see what they called a man-made bird that carried men in its insides.

Secretly I felt rebellious at first when I received the orders to attach myself to Air Base No. 1. A job like that, especially coming on top of two years' service already completed in a sub-Arctic detachment, is always one for a volunteer. I was disappointed at not getting home to Montreal at the time I expected to, but pretty soon I was proud of having been chosen, and thoroughly interested in watching the assembling of the planes. I became especially friendly with Norman Terry, who is now a big man in aviation in British Columbia. He was then on the mechanical end and did not pilot a plane, but since then, as a flyer, I guess Terry has bailed out, jumped out, cracked up and generally done everything with an airplane that a pilot can do, short of having a fatal accident. Terry always comes up or comes down, smiling.

The Air Base position gave me plenty to do. A hundred men had come in aboard the government vessel with all their supplies, and not one man knew a thing about life in the far north. More than half the personnel were to leave on the ship's return trip, after the planes had been assembled, the Base headquarters built and all the supplies housed.

We had electric light at the Base as soon as the generating station was constructed. You should have seen Tommy and Lukas gape as I told them to push a black knob in the wall. Scared at first, they put their hands behind them. Tommy was advancing slowly with an outstretched finger when Little Johnny, whom the aviators had adopted as a sort of mascot, wormed his way in and pushed his finger on the button. Immediately lights sprang up in the bulbs, and Tommy and Lukas nearly had a fit. When they found pushing the button would not harm them, they wanted to stay and play with it all day; at last I had to shoo them out, and back down to their settlement.

I wondered who would be daring enough to want a ride in an airplane. I really thought all of them would be scared. When one of the pilots offered a ride just for the fun of seeing what the natives would do, we had to hold the crowd back as they rushed the pilot's cockpit. Old and young, it seemed the whole one hundred and forty persons - including a few babies tucked in their mothers fur parkas - which was the native population of Burwell Island then, were keen to know what it was like to fly like a bird, or at least to know a different kind of travel from walking on their own two feet behind a sled, or sailing and paddling a boat. No native who went up in a plane was airsick, so far as I found out, and all on coming down again were so excited with happiness in the experience they could not talk fast enough to tell about it.

Because I knew the country, I went on several of the trial flights. When we were circling well out over the Strait, I persuaded the pilot to fly over Akpatok. Terry was the mechanic with us, and I told him of my bone discovery, but it was not until we had flown to the opposite side of the island from that on which I had landed before, that we found an inlet entirely free of ice pans and with the water smooth enough to land. The pilot was now in the spirit of the thing, the engine was turning over sweetly and we had enough gas for five flying hours. Our airplane was a Fokker six-passenger cabin, with pontoons for ice and water landing. We came down gently, and Terry blew up the air raft with which we were equipped. He paddled ashore with a tow rope to the sandy beach and pulled the plane into shallow water, well sheltered from any sudden squall. Terry and I went ashore while the pilot stayed with the plane. We explored but found nothing, so the human bones must be on only one side of the island. I have never been back to Akpatok since that day. Little Auks by the million, sea gulls, sea pigeons and terns shrieked and chattered at us.

"Gosh, what a chicken roost!" said Terry, and we hurried back to the airplane. We circled the island, scaring the wits out of those poor birds, but we could see nothing below us but a flat plateau of gray-brown rock.

Terry was keen on exploration and secured permission to come with me on a short land patrol. That was the time we found lumps of ore heavily streaked with gold. We loaded up with as much as we dared, filling an empty grub box, and believed our fortunes were made. We talked like millionaires as we followed the two komatiks, with Bobby driving one team of kingmik, and Solomon, who had come in to Burwell to see the airplanes, driving the other. Terry was keyed up with plans to run an airplane service that would fly the ore out from our mine, and fly the supplies in for modern gold-digging. We could see a whole city rising round us as we went along. Neither of us guessed that these very things had been started in another part of the country, notably round the Cochrane gold fields south of Hudson Bay, and at the Rouyn and Noranda mines, not to mention the

planes flying into the copper country around Sudbury, Ontario. We would have been surprised too, then, to know that evidence of copper had been found in Central Ungava, and iron ore in the islands of Hudson Bay. Neither did we know of the great radium find of LaBiche, which means that there are four hundred and fifty tons of pitchblende being flown out of that Slave Lake country to secure from it one single gram of radium.

But now as we struggled along behind Solomon and Bobby we dreamed dreams of finding mica and asbestos, gold, silver, copper and platinum, and we told each other of the importance of manganese to the hardening of steel. We talked of the outcroppings of coal which are easy to see in many places of the far north, among those queer formations of rock known as pre-Cambrian. Terry, who was only a few months away from civilization, had been explaining to me how oil and natural gas wells were being capped up and down the country by the Mackenzie River. Of course there was no evidence of oil or gas in the northeast where we were, but one never knew; and what could not be done if we were millionaires! Then we'd stop and laugh at each other and shake hands like a pair of crazy loons as we thought of those ore samples tucked in among the camp dunnage.

"O, how I wish I'd trained more as a research chemist," said Terry. And he wished it more than ever when we returned to the Base and one of the men there who knew more than we did, gave one look at our samples.

"Sorry, boys," he said, "that's fool's gold - ever hear of it?"

Of course we'd heard of it, and I wondered I had not thought of it right off. It is really iron pyrites, fool's gold that has fooled more learned men than Terry and myself. The real name, I suppose, is disulphide of iron, and it occurs commonly as a brassy mineral easily mistaken for gold. If it is heated in air it burns, yielding sulphur dioxide gas. Terry and I did not care a hoot for the sulphuric acid industry which is all mixed up with iron pyrites, so we took the lumps of stuff we had hauled so far and pitched them over the cliff into the bay. They made a fine splash.

"Pshaw!" said Terry. "It looks as if we'd have to work for our million."

But before we had our iron pyrites back at the Base, Terry had had a taste of land travel which made him exclaim:

"Man, man, give me a plane, even if it has a broken wing and no landing gear - anything but this foot slogging."

I tried to tell Terry the weather was not bad, for there's one worse spot than we were then. It's on Hudson Strait, where a record reads that it went to 51 degrees below zero when a seventy-mile wind blew and increased to one hundred miles an hour, while the whole storm lasted over eight hours. Of course, as California has it, that was unusual. Border states and western Canadian provinces know weather at 50 degrees below, but this does not have intense wind with it.

"Someone's got to do something about the weather up here!" was another of Terry's thoughts.

"You can do something," I said. "Cooperate with Nature, just as the Eskimos do with their sort of practical science - it's like shooting a polar bear."

"What's like shooting a bear?"

"Cooperating with Nature. If you try to do things up here, and wear the things you do when down south, you pay for it."

"But I still don't see what a bear...."

"Well, it's like this. You never shoot a polar bear when you are facing it. When a bear is wounded he runs in a straight line, and a polar bear has been known to run at terrific speed one hundred yards with a bullet in its heart - it fell on the hunter and killed him before it died itself."

"Nuts!" said Terry.

"It isn't nuts. You'll see that the natives sit in a snowhouse waiting until the blizzard blows itself out and the wind dies down."

Terry had no reply. We had been overtaken by a storm after we'd left Omanek, and we had bad luck with the sleds going over rough ice. The coal oil for the Primus stove carried on one sled had leaked and soaked the grub box. The food did not go so well with coal-oil flavor, and I had not been able to save much of the food anyway. I did not tell Terry; it seemed no use scaring a tenderfoot, and life was fine anyhow. The blizzard got worse during the day, and after twenty-four hours still showed no signs of letting up. A couple of the dogs seemed to be sick and I doctored them; one of my eyes was a bit frost-bitten and I doctored that. We played cards and talked, until the wind veered to the northwest and the worst of the storm seemed passed. We went out on the sea-ice, and another piece of hard luck happened when the second sled became soaked in a tide overflow. but we were lucky that it happened near a native fishing hole. I stopped the outfit, the

men built a snowhouse, and we were able to catch nine trout, which made good eating.

We crossed Lake Kataktok, and made camp at the mouth of Koakjuak River. Travel was good and rapid on the river ice, and I noted down in my diary a fairly high range of mountains to the right. Solomon said we should make camp where the natives, Johnny and Otto had a family settlement. They had deer meat here, and still I did not tell Terry that our biscuit was low, the sugar gone, and not many ounces of chocolate fit to eat were left. With the exception of about a pound of tea and some pounds of flour not caked with kerosene, there was nothing but dog feed.

I saw one caribou track and was inclined to follow it, but Solomon advised not. He said another blizzard was due any minute from the appearance of things, and we'd better get the white man, who was Terry, since he had elected me to be "native," back to the Air Base. I never went against a native's advice when I thought he knew much better than I, but it was another four days before I could be certain I was within striking distance of the Base. For two of those days we had been eating dog feed with dried flour. Terry certainly was a good sport and a grand traveling companion, but when we had sighted the Air Base radio antenna and the flag staff standing out against the sky, he told me he had suspected the food shortage and my anxiety all along.

"Next time," he said, "I'll travel by air." He did that, too, and that was the time the compass went off and he and his pilot came down somewhere on the Atlantic ocean, all of which makes me the more certain that for comparatively short distances the old komatik and kingmik make the most secure way of travel known yet for the Barren Lands. The native does not understand land or sea navigation by compass; he depends on the moon and stars, and on the sun when that planet shows, and it is rare indeed when a native does not reach the place he sets out to find. When the white man goes north he must go humbly and determined to learn from the native Inuit. The white man needs to be mentally alert and physically fit; he must have clean thoughts and good temper, and he must believe in a great Creator over all. The young man who plans on adventure would do well to read up on a bit of anthropology, geology, chemistry and mineralogy; in short, there is just one watchword for the new North - Get ready!

The Inuit will not move a step from camp until he has checked and rechecked everything. When he has that done, he starts out to meet anything that comes with his broad smile lighting up his yellow face, and a true courage in his soul which we white folk call faith.

Terry and I turned up at the Air Base to find a bit of fuss going on. Harold, one of the men, was missing. It seemed he had gone out for a stroll in the early morning and had not come back, and that was three hours ago. A plane had gone up and flown low but found no trace of him; then a bad squall came up and the airplane was brought to a quick and perilous landing. Harold was still missing. I sighed, for I would have much preferred bed and a good long sleep, but this missing man had to be brought in. I became really worried when Nick who had come up from the detachment for a pipe and chat on my return, had a story enough to make the bravest uneasy.