

## Gang mentality

### PART 2 OF 3

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100 kilometres from the North Pole

The Russian cargo plane bounced and buzzed high over the Arctic Ocean en route to the Barneo ice camp. On board were the seven men from the Hamilton North Pole expedition, and a few other teams of adventurers, including one from New Zealand. It was stifling hot. Everyone removed layers of their ski clothing, their boots. One of the passengers was a veteran Russian North Pole adventurer named Victor Boyarski, an icon to travellers to the Arctic.

The stink of gasoline permeated the cabin from drums of jet fuel stored in the hold. Steve Stipsits glanced toward the front and noticed a Russian guy lighting up a cigarette. Great, thought Stipsits, the plane is going to burst into flames before they even attempt the landing.

After a six-hour flight, the plane began its descent. Camp Barneo staff maintain a bulldozer-plowed ice-and-snow runway but, a couple of days earlier, the ice had shifted, cracking and folding the runway, so a new one had to be plowed. It was not as smooth.

BEFORE LANDING, Boyarski stood up and called to the others in his Russian-accented English. "Everyone put on seatbelt -- is best pilot in the world, but is not like landing on real runway, you know."

The plane's wheels hit the ice, the pilot wrestled to keep the aircraft from sliding into the jagged walls of ice and snow lining each side of the runway. With all the jet fuel on board, smashing into the ice could blow the whole thing to pieces. They bounced, slid, swerved, snow and ice spitting up outside the windows, and finally stopped.

"See? Smooth!" said Boyarski. "Is best pilot in the world."

Barneo sits amid a desert of ice and snow, just a small collection of large, heated tents, with a permanent staff including a doctor and cooks.

They organized their sleds, stepped into their bindings and started the ski, towing their gear north, staring into the great white nothingness of the polar ice cap. It was windy and cold, -21 C wind chill, and very damp. The Arctic is a frozen ocean, and therefore the most humid place on Earth, wetter than even the Amazon rainforest.

A rifle was now part of their gear, which they had purchased in Norway in case of a polar bear attack.

Their guide, Doug Stoup, offered suggestions on strategy and encouraged the others, but had the team to do the work. Stoup, 43, whose nickname is Iceman, was a native of Germany, a former pro soccer player with a big reputation as an extreme adventurer.

As the group skied on, Stoup was relentlessly positive, carrying himself with his natural easygoing swagger. He kept repeating his mantra to the others: "There's always a way."

But, after camping the first night, the group was feeling demoralized. They woke on Wednesday, Day 2 of the ski, to learn they had skied and dragged their sleds holding their tents and supplies about 20 kilometres on the first day -- but only gained 11 kilometres on the GPS. The ice cap was gradually melting, and shifting, moving on the water, pushing them away from their goal.

How could they possibly ski the approximately 90 kilometres that remained, when they kept losing ground? They were like hamsters on a treadmill, and would run out of food before reaching the Pole. What had they gotten themselves into? Back in Hamilton, everyone was following their progress, the charitable drive was in full swing. And they might not even make it?

"We have to be patient," Stoup said.

They skied hard the rest of the afternoon Wednesday, covering 11 more kilometres. They woke at 6 a.m. the next morning, Thursday, Day 3, continuing with the routine they followed daily, boiling snow for their supply of water for drinking and cooking dehydrated food. They checked the GPS. They lost seven kilometres overnight in their sleep.



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"Very frustrating," Turkstra wrote in his diary.

They bore on that day. Not only was the shifting ice playing against them, but so too were long gaps of open water. They were never skiing on top of more than about two metres of ice, and repeatedly they encountered gaps where the ice was coming apart, called "leads," which look like young creeks meandering in the snow and ice. Skiing laterally, snaking around the leads to find the narrowest crossing point, was a guessing game. When there was a slight gap, with a thin layer of ice over top, they cautiously skied across, careful not to put too much weight on one ski, or else fall in freezing water.

For larger gaps, those metres wide, the only way to cross was using their sleds as makeshift canoes. One man held the sled atop the water, another stepped across the sled on skis, moving sideways, then the next man went, then the gear, all while trying not to fall in.

ONE LEAD WAS at least 30 metres wide, covered in a thin sheen of ice. Stoup put on a dry suit and gingerly skied across to test its stability, the ice undulating like the top of a giant waterbed.

There were a few other expeditions attempting the trip at the same time as the Hamilton group. One of them was led by Prince Albert of Monaco, who budgeted four days to reach the Pole by dogsled team, to commemorate a trip made by a great grandfather a century ago. The prince travelled in style: led by extreme traveller Annabelle Bond, the dashing blond Brit who had once reached the summit of Mount Everest. Meanwhile, a helicopter scouted the best path ahead for the prince to take around leads, and he had a crew including a cook, doctor and advance camps with large tents set up for him.

Minus choppers, dogsleds and Bond, after three days, the Hamilton group had moved a mere four kilometres toward the Pole, even as they burned more than 10,000 calories a day skiing.

On Friday, Day 4, the group woke, boiled snow and did a GPS check.

"We lost another seven kilometres when we were sleeping," Turkstra wrote. "We are actually further away than at the end of day two. Not great news."

Shifting ice also created pressure ridges of ice over which to ski and tow the sleds, at times several metres high.

At one point, they scaled a ridge, up-up, huge effort, up and over, a feeling of accomplishment, only to see -- another ridge. And another beyond it.

"A field of ridges," lamented Stipsits. "In the next hour, we'll be lucky to move 100 metres."

Stipsits felt his heart sink. Their glacial progress was devastating for all of them. There was one option that would ensure they made it: calling in a chopper from Barneo on the satellite phone to leapfrog to the end. Other groups had done so.

But that would mean they had failed in the goal to ski the last degree. Young students in classrooms back home followed their progress daily in The Hamilton Spectator. Would the group return and make presentations to students about how the chopper helped them to the Pole, about how they almost accomplished their goal?

Fred Losani was the most vocal about it. "Anyone reaches for that phone," he sneered, "and I'm getting the rifle."

Individually, they felt twinges of doubt. But, as a group, a kind of gang mentality took root. Each man was ready to quit but, collectively, they were not. They kept Stoup's slogan in mind: There's always a way.

"I'm not going back and tell my four-year-old kid we didn't make it -- not going to happen," Losani said. "They are going to have to drag me off the ice. Are you all in?"

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