

My Arctic tour made me feel glad to be Canadian

by Brenda O'Connor



ADMA Howard Ferguson (left) and Dr. Neil Trivett look on as the head of the DND construction unit hands over the High Arctic Research Laboratory, Alert, N.W.T. to AES. Brenda O'Connor, far left, contemplates the scene.

I was not prepared to like the Arctic but I most certainly did. The Canadian Arctic is truly beautiful and what was most surprising was the realization that my tour of the High Arctic Weather Stations made me feel even more glad about being Canadian.

A routine produce flight to Resolute Bay, Mould Bay, and Eureka with a stop at Alert gave me my first taste of this far-away land to the north.

The Official Opening of the new High Arctic Research Laboratory on August 29, 1986 was the main focus of the Arctic visit, accompanying Howard Ferguson, the Assistant Deputy Minister of AES, Mike Balshaw, Regional Director of Central Region, Dennis Stossel, Superintendent of Arctic Operations, Jens Lyberth, Northern Careers Program Manager, Public Service Commission, and Ludy Pudluk, M.L.A. for the High Arctic.

There was snow and cold. There were also musk-oxen, purple wildflowers, mountains that folded one into the other and clear, blue water. One never really loses the sense of how remote this place is, I suppose because many basic tasks require so much planning and discipline to actually get completed — from meal preparation to getting there. But without this first-hand view of life in the Arctic, most other experiences of day-to-



Mike Balshaw, director AES Central Region, walks on icy plank at Mould Bay, High Arctic Weather Station.

day life in Canada do not provide pictures of what really to expect.

At Mould Bay, the steep climb to the GMD dome of the Upper Air Station in -4°C wind, although bracing, reminded me that AES personnel at these Arctic stations must be a hardy and resourceful breed to survive. We witnessed Bill Baker testing the Beukers system for its application to the Arctic for upper air soundings. And generosity seems to come in handy as we discovered when our flight back to Resolute was delayed overnight. Joyce Thiessen as weather station cook, appreciated the presence of another woman and her extra nightgown, slippers and towels were in my hands before I had a chance to find out where I went next.



Brenda O'Connor assists at the High Arctic Research Laboratory at Alert.

At Eureka, the Garden Spot of the Arctic, we stayed up past midnight exploring the spongy tundra where Arctic Hare danced right around us to show how agile they were on their hind legs and how unimpressed they were at our being there. The next morning after breakfast, at 8:00 am, Howard Ferguson officially opened the new recreation facility off the main dining room. The Officer-In-Charge, Dennis Bitton, invited Jens Lyberth to perform a Drum Dance — the Inuit blessing of the new quarters.

Alert is absolutely unique. The presence of the National Defence installation gives one an immediate sensation of having landed at the space station of the movie 2001. Large heavy refrigerators doors close tightly shut on all the buildings to keep out the cold. In the cafeteria and halls, the khaki coloured fatigues and heavy parkas are almost the only clothing in evidence. Despite the regimentation, the warmth of everyone's welcome dispelled any impression of austerity or severity I may have had.

Everybody volunteered information — from where my room was (Shack 52 —

Penthouse Suite 4) to where were located the best quartz crystal stones on Crystal Mountain for my rock collection.

The High Arctic Research Laboratory Canada's first permanent research station for the continuous monitoring of background air pollution is about a 20-minute (5 km) drive from the main site — over a bumpy, rutted mud-road. I must admit to being a bit surprised by this efficient-looking mustard-coloured trailer surrounded by three tall towers, a small set of steps and porch, perched off the ground amid the hills and vast land. After the arrival of the AES contingent, several more trucks of DND personnel pulled alongside the small red shelter that had housed the first instruments and now served as the supply garage. Dr. Neil Trivett's welcome to all participants was followed by the Assistant Deputy Minister's official cutting of the ribbon. We crowded into the two-roomed structure (the outer room for supplies and power) and stepped into a very clean, organized laboratory where the painstaking details of the construction and assembling of this unit were now apparent.

For reasons of safety it was necessary to report on 2-way hand-held portable radios to the DND "Ops" (Operations) Centre every time one left for the laboratory site and returned. The one time I reported I forgot the full response and had to redeem myself by repeating slowly and deliberately "OPS-DOE FOUR DOE PERSONNEL RETURNING TO CAMP FROM BAPMON SITE."

Maurice Goethels, at the Alert weather and upper air station, probably best described working in the Arctic — "Without the visual distractions of southern Canada, one really has a chance to see the outdoors and to appreciate nature and silence". It seemed like a fitting description of the Arctic.

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DC-3 produce flight lands beside scenic mountain back-drop at Eureka, on Ellesmere Island.