Introduction to The Arctic Islands, 1958 to 1963

(Archie Asbridge)

Preface.

The story I offer has been taken from a personal memoir written for the benefit of my son and my grandchildren. The memoir I refer to starts with my life as a landed immigrant from England in 1951 at Pier 21 in Halifax, Nova Scotia and it continues to be compiled. This excerpt is a small portion of my story and reflects upon what the title suggests. It will be noted that, out of respect, I have refrained from identifying names of individuals whenever and wherever there are any personal detrimental implications to what my story has said. But I will not hesitate to offer names whenever there is a meaningful and respectful reason to give a person or an organization the recognition I think they are worthy of.

The article has been deposited on a Web Site that deals exclusively with stories from people like myself who have lived and worked on the Arctic Islands. Unfortunately, access to the site is restricted only to those who did tours of duty at the various weather stations.

Early 1958

In 1958 the Canadian Meteorological Service (CMS) operated about thirty-four aerological weather stations nationwide, spread east to west and north to south. Nine of these stations were situated on the islands of the Canadian archipelago and five of these were operated jointly by CMS and the United States Weather Bureau. It was CMS policy that each graduate of the aerological school spend some time working at the isolated stations, especially in the far reaches of the North West Territories, (NWT). This was straight up my alley and from January 1958 until March 1963 most of my working life was spent on the Arctic islands. I speak of Isachsen on Ellef Ringnes Island (78 N), Resolute Bay on Cornwallis Island (74 N) and Coral Harbour on Southampton Island (64 N). In later years I spent a short period at Alert, which is the most northerly settlement in the world at 82.5 N. situated on the north tip of Ellesmere Island.

My Arctic and sub-Arctic experiences during the period from 1958 to 1963 are worthy of extensive description and could easily contribute to the contents of a small book but I would most likely run out of appropriate adjectives and expressions. The old saying that one must experience it to believe it is surely true when reflecting upon life in the polar regions of Canada. The rigors of living

in the extremely harsh Arctic climate are perhaps understood if you have lived a couple of harsh winters on the central prairies of northern USA and southern Canada. But I speak about the total scenario of Arctic life in the late 50's and try to combine the harsh climate with the stark reality of being isolated from civilization in that particular era. It is a reality that is not easy to understand unless you have been there and done that. Perhaps the equivalent experience would be that of total prison isolation but I haven't been down that route. Anyway, a few anecdotes may add to the description of life in the Arctic regions during the 50's and 60's.

I flew from Edmonton to Resolute Bay in mid-March 1958, a journey of about 1,400 miles. We departed the Namao military base near Edmonton in the early morning aboard a Royal Canadian Air Force transport plane. I forget the classification of this aircraft but it was a four engine propeller job, very noisy and with limited range by today's standards. Those who flew on that craft would have known it as the "North Star'. Our first stop was at Yellowknife, NWT for re-fuelling and a brief leg-stretch then onwards to Cambridge Bay, NWT which was one of the jumping off points from the mainland when proceeding further north to

the Arctic islands. I recall that we had a box lunch on this leg of the journey.

We had a longer stop of about an hour at Cambridge Bay where the landing runway was laid out on the sea ice of the Arctic Ocean. I was properly clad in heavy-duty Arctic clothing comprising multi-layered wind-pants and hooded parka over top of regular clothing, complemented by fleece-lined boots that fit on top of normal footwear and special mitts that appeared to be the size of tennis rackets. I stepped off the plane onto the sea ice with a camera on my chest tucked beneath my parka and breathed in air at -30 C. It was exhilarating to say the least but it was a temperature environment I had experienced at Fort Nelson on the Alaskan highway a few years prior.

I learned a lesson of humility and respect on that day at Cambridge Bay, not because of the harsh temperature but because of a human interaction with one of the natives who was operating a caterpillar tractor. I noticed that this man was an 'Eskimo' as they were known in the 1950's, so I pulled out my camera and quickly clicked off a few snaps of this person using my very inexpensive Kodak. Whereupon, said person unzipped his parka and pulled out a Leica and took photos of me. The message came over loud and clear and I learned a lesson that was never

forgotten in later years during my travels around the world.

Anyway, we re-boarded the 'North Star' at Cambridge Bay for the final 2.5-hour leg to Resolute Bay. The onboard announcement was that it was a beautiful sunny day at Resolute and that we'd be landing late suppertime with a ground temperature of -40 F but no wind to speak of. It was a bit scary for me on that day in March 1958 but in later times when I lived at Resolute for two years, it was a normal March situation to experience such temperatures. On one occasion I recorded a low value of -52 F.

The Canadian Department of Transport (DOT) and the United States Weather Bureau (USWB) established the weather station at Resolute Bay in late 1948 as a combined project. When I landed there in March 1958 there were all sorts of thoughts running through my mind as to what to expect in the way of facilities and living conditions, but I need not have been concerned since Resolute had become the 'hub' of the Arctic Archipelago in the late 1940's when the DOT and the USWB were establishing other weather stations at Isachsen, Mould Bay, Eureka and Alert. Consequently, Resolute became a complex community sometimes comprising 100 or more individuals during periods of heavy activity in the spring and fall

months. The station was administered by RCAF personnel but there were perhaps as many as 25 others comprising meteorological technicians from the Canadian DOT and the United States Weather Bureau and several DOT Radio Operators. There was a large mess hall capable of seating two hundred men (in those days women were unheard of in the north), numerous living quarters with shower facilities, recreational facilities including an open beer bar, a movie theatre, a curling rink and an exercise room with some gymnastic equipment.

On the day I arrived in late March 1958 there was no room available in the main housing quarters at Resolute. The population had more or less doubled overnight brought on by the major activity of re-supplying the weather stations further north. I spent the next three weeks at Resolute living in an establishment known as **"The Barn"** which was a huge warehouse building, inadequately heated, containing military double bunk beds to accommodate the overflow of transient workers passing through Resolute. There were two distinguishing features of this building for those who had to live there. First, being a warehouse at that latitude, it had a dirt floor so undressing for bed was an unusual experience. Second, the toilet facilities were not existent in the barn so, it was obligatory to dress up in a parka and heavy boots to

walk a hundred yards to the nearest barracks to satisfy shower needs and bodily functions.

My first two weeks at Resolute were spent helping load the RCAF transport aircraft that were re-supplying the weather stations further north. One particular lousy job was to dig out empty 50-gallon fuel barrels from the snow banks. These barrels had been returned to Resolute from the other stations the previous fall and were now piled high and dry covered in hard crusty snow. Retrieving the fuel barrels from the snow bank was not that difficult but we then had to clean the inside of each barrel with a '**Steam Jenny**' after which we re-filled the barrels with diesel fuel and loaded them onto a sled ready for transport to the tarmac area where they were loaded onto the transport plane using a front-end loader. There were some days when total fatigue caused me to fall asleep on top of the blankets without undressing.

In addition to preparing the fuel barrels we dug out loads of lumber from the snow banks. The lumber had been transported to Resolute by ship in the summer of 1957 in readiness for shipment to Mould Bay and Isachsen during the spring airlift of 1958. There was to be a major rebuilding of the station facilities at those weather stations during the short summer months when construction could

be achieved. One day in mid-April I helped to load a batch of lumber onto the RCAF C119 transport plane (known as the Flying Boxcar) then I was told to grab my personal gear from the barracks and board the plane to Isachsen where I was to begin a tour of duty.

My first job at Isachsen was to help unload the lumber I had helped to load three hours previous at Resolute but I had already learned that a meteorological technician in the Arctic in the 1950's did many other things other than recording weather information. My early farm life in the north of England had taught me a certain discipline that someone had to tackle a job regardless that they had never done it before. Life in the Arctic was an ongoing apprenticeship in many disciplines. I recall it was a bright sunny day with a temperature of −32 Celsius.

Living & Working at Isachsen in 1958

It was an adventure to land at Isachsen in 1958. The runway wasn't very long, especially for a loaded C119 transport aircraft. Also, the strip was sort of hump-backed and according to claims by the RCAF pilots, it wasn't possible to see one end of the strip when you landed at the other end. Hmmmph. A few tall tales recited by adventurous crewmen sipping a pint of beer in the Arctic

Circle Bar at Resolute tend to be slightly taller than the desired line of sight at the end of the Isachsen runway. We landed safely on the frozen surface and I distinctly remember the roaring sound of the engines when the pilot switched the propellers to reverse thrust to use as a braking mechanism. I helped unload the lumber and other cargo before ever setting foot on the ground. It was a bright sunny day with no wind and actually comfortable at -35 degrees Fahrenheit.

The Isachsen airstrip was about 1 KM from the weather station and the mode of transportation was either a Bombardier built track-vehicle (luxury class) or a big sled carrying the off-loaded cargo pulled by a D-7 Caterpillar tractor (one class lower than economy). I chose the sled travelling at 5 kph since I wanted to witness the environment that was going to be my home and workplace for the best part of 1958. I wasn't impressed.

How does one describe the landscape around Isachsen dictated by nothing but frozen gumbo. The word 'gumbo' is defined in a dictionary as a texture of earth predominantly composed of clay. However, there are other questionable and less flattering definitions accredited to those who lived and worked during the summer months at

this remote weather station. More will be said about gumbo in later text.

The population at Isachsen was eight when I arrived in April 1958 comprising four weather technicians, two radio operators, a cook and a station mechanic, four each from Canada and the United States. That number was short lived when a construction crew of ten bodies arrived a few weeks later to re-build parts of the existing buildings and erect new ones. This activity put a strain on the day-to-day operations since the living quarters and messing facilities were barely acceptable for the normal eight bodies let alone an extra ten from the construction crew who would be living there until late August or early September.

My daily living experiences during the spring, summer and fall months of 1958 are easily remembered even after nearly half of a century. One way to remember certain experiences is to compare my present day lifestyle in 2008 with the uncertainty encountered at a very remote weather station in 1958. For example, I compare how I enjoy the use of water in 2008 **(just plain old water)** with the availability and use of water at Isachsen in the spring of 1958. The water supply consisted of a large pyramid of sea ice blocks piled up outside the front door of the cook shack. The blocks had been cut from the sea ice on Dyer

Bay in the fall of 1957. The station staff had the responsibility of cutting the blocks with ice saws then piling them onto a sled that was pulled by the D-7 tractor from the bay to the confines of the weather station outside the cook-shack door. The station cook had to carry the ice blocks into his kitchen and place them in extra-large pots on the stove where the blocks were melted. Unfortunately, the water contained a goodly amount of salt from the sea and this was a problem that every cook had to contend with when trying to prepare meals. Theoretically, the salt in sea ice blocks is supposed to leach out when the blocks are piled up for a length of time as was done in front of the cook shack. But I question this belief.

Brushing my teeth with salt water was not a problem except for the taste. However, a simple description of taking a daily shower at my home in 2008 pales miserably with the unbelievable method that all of us endured at Isachsen in 1958. To begin with we were afforded one shower every ten days and this took place at the far end of the cook shack where the shower stall was located. This could only be done after the evening meal had been eaten and after the cook shack had been vacated. The process began by carrying ice blocks from outside and melting them on the cook stove and bringing the water to an acceptable

temperature level. So far so good! The next process was to carry the heated water by pail up a ship's ladder and pour it into a cut-off fifty-gallon drum that contained a spigot on the underside. The process became like a **Charlie Chaplin** movie routine since it was necessary to get enough water in the barrel then quickly get undressed and step beneath the spigot before the water cooled off. The idea of having an Arctic shower was sort of intoxicating until the realization that salt water does not allow the luxury of making a soapy lather but, more importantly, that trying to rinse one's body with salt water is an undesirable experience before the water supply is ended. Oh well, C'est la vie!

In spite of what we may think, one of the most important persons at the high arctic weather stations in those days was the cook who easily became the catalyst for creating a harmonious crew in isolated living conditions provided that he presented appetizing meals. Preparing meals for a dozen or so people sounds easy but it wasn't like that when considering the availability and the variety of provisions the cook had access to. The closest "supermarket" at Isachsen was an old military-type Quonset hut located a few yards from the cook shack. The shelves were stacked with nothing but a lot of non-perishable food items that had been airlifted to the station from Resolute

the previous September. There were numerous cartons of macaroni, spaghetti, breakfast cereals, flour, powdered eggs, powdered milk etc, etc, and cases of canned meats like spam, corned beef, ham and bacon.

However, a unique feature of the arctic weather stations was the “meat reefer” which, today, would be described as the “freezer section” of the modern day refrigerator. Essentially, the meat reefer was an underground cavity built into the permafrost accessed by a set of sloping steps, similar to the method used by the early pioneers to preserve vegetables over the winter except that the pioneers wanted to protect their produce from frost. In this case, the reefers were stocked with frozen meats airlifted from Resolute the previous September. The meat had been brought to Resolute by cargo ships, accompanied by icebreaker ships, during the summer of 1957.

It isn’t easy to prepare a truly inviting breakfast without a dozen fresh eggs, some fresh orange juice, some fresh milk and a couple of loaves of fresh bread with which to make toast. Instead, how about having to prepare a breakfast for months on end using powdered milk, powdered eggs, powdered juice and fatty bacon. At least our cook at Isachsen knew how to bake bread. My favourite

breakfast became an order of flapjacks with maple syrup and a decent cup of coffee. Forget about the rest except for toast and marmalade and sometimes a bowl of cereal in spite of the lack of fresh milk.

On one particular day when leaving the cook shack after breakfast we noticed a batch of frozen filet mignon steaks laying on the counter, presumably thawing out for the supper meal or so we thought. We assembled at the supper table with great anticipation only to be told that the cook had decided to make a Ukranian type stew using the filet steaks. We jokingly threatened 'Pete' (an alias) that further similar blunders would bring about his extradition to the Ukraine.

I tend to remember the extremes that life has presented, for example, the good or the bad weather conditions or maybe the decent or the lousy living conditions. However, there was an awful lot happened in between the extremes that should not be forgotten since most of life experiences fall in that domain. On the more sublime edge of life at Isachsen I remember sitting on top of a high rocky slope overlooking Dyer Bay a couple of miles from the weather station at N78 deg. On that particular day in mid July '58 I was totally alone except for a Husky dog named 'Boots'. The dog had followed me on

my walk from the weather station. I was sitting upon a large rock that most likely had never been sat upon before. There is essentially no vegetation in that region of the arctic except for lichens and moss and if luck happens one might see a bird during the short summer, but not on that particular day. The sky was cloudless with a deep blue colour influenced by a high-pressure weather system that produced little or no wind to speak of. I sat in total silence for about ten minutes except for the sound of my own breathing and the lapping of the dog's tongue. There was a feeling of complete and unforgettable serenity. The silence was deafening.

All personnel assigned to the high-arctic weather stations were issued a comprehensive set of special outdoor clothing and footwear. We called it 'Arctic Gear' but it was good stuff and really served the purpose. The hooded parka and wind pants were vital requirements as were the fleece lined flight boots and heavy-duty lined mitts that extended midway between the wrist and the elbow. For summer wear we were given a pair of Wellingtons (knee length rubber boots) and some coveralls. But the rest of our clothing and footwear was our own personal choice that we had to purchase out of our own pockets before heading north. Not having any real idea of what I might need in the

Arctic, I played safe so to speak, and purchased heavy-duty flannel shirts, some lined blue jeans and lots of socks and underwear. I was unsure of extra footwear I might need but decided upon a pair of high-top engineer boots purchased in Edmonton at the cost of one month's wage.

In late May of '58 the Isachsen temperature had risen sufficiently to allow shedding of some of the heavy-duty clothing and footwear. So I decided to try out my new engineer boots, as yet unused. One rule at that time required us to doff our footwear in the porch of the sleeping quarters. I was pleased to display my new boots in the porch amongst the decrepit pairs of all types of boots belonging to other personnel. But alas, I suffered greatly when, one morning, the left boot of my pair was missing from the porch. What to do? There was a chuckle at the breakfast table when I explained my predicament only to be told that the porch door of the sleeping quarters was always open and that the only predator (thief) at Isachsen was the male Husky Dog by the name of 'Boots' that always roamed around when the station staff was in bed. I eventually found my missing boot behind the living quarters but it was chewed up beyond usefulness. I spent the rest of the summer and early fall wearing Wellingtons during

work hours and slippers when off duty. I cursed a little but I'm still a dog lover in spite of the hardship.

There was nothing totally unusual or different about the meteorological work of an upper air technician at Isachsen in 1958. However, there were a couple of other related jobs assigned to everyone on a rotation basis. The 'ugliest' and 'smelliest' of these jobs was replacing the 'honey bucket' in the outside toilet. I had done similar related activities on a daily basis working in the cow barns of my father's farm in England but those past endeavours had not really prepared me to carry out similar humanistic requirements at Isachsen.

One unforgettable job at Isachsen was the monthly ice thickness measurement that I was introduced to in late April 1958. The "Bombardier' track vehicle driven by the station mechanic 'Big Tiny Furman' transported us a short distance to a spot on Dyer Bay a couple of hundred yards off shore. With the aid of two or three full extension bits on the ice auger we determined that we were standing on 96 inches of sea ice. I sweated a little bit as the three of us spelled each other off in the non-stop process of drilling through that amount of ice.

Any veteran who spent the summer months at the Isachsen weather station will never forget the word 'Gumbo"

and most likely will have a few choice unfavourable and unprintable adjectives to describe the substance. The Oxford Dictionary describes gumbo as **a fine clayey soil that becomes sticky and impervious when wet.** The dictionary definition is an apt description of the earth on which the weather station was built. A personal experience in July '58 will perhaps further define the 'finer' qualities of gumbo when Larry (a U.S Weather Bureau airstrip mechanic) and myself decided to hike to the area where a USAF supply plane had made an unorthodox landing in the early 1950's. The location was known as the Delta strip since it was where a small creek flowed into Dyer Bay and had been the early landing area for re-supply flights from the inception of the weather station. The new airstrip where I landed in 1958 had negated the use of old Delta strip. Larry and I were wearing the knee-length Wellingtons. After reaching the Delta and inspecting the remains at the crash scene we decided to walk upstream along the bank of the small creek. For some unknown reason we crossed over to the other side of the creek and walked back down to where we had started from but on the other side of where we wanted to be. Guess what? We foolishly decided to try to walk across the Delta in our knee-length boots. I set off first and with great effort reached the far side in about ten minutes, some fifteen yards away. Larry set off next and

got stuck in the gumbo that was almost reaching the top of his boots just below his knees. The more he pressed on one foot to try to extricate the other foot the more he sank deeper. He became totally stuck and literally had to walk out of his boots in his stocking feet. We shared my boots on the way back to the station, Larry wore the left foot and I wore the right foot and our respective other feet had woolly socks. I suppose Larry's Wellingtons remain embedded in the Delta gumbo nearly a half century later.

In mid-July of '58, one of the station staff complained of stomach pains. The condition persisted for a day or two and this obligated the Canadian Officer-In-Charge to make radio contact with the medic at Resolute asking for advice. The response from Resolute was a possible appendicitis and that efforts were being made to find a suitable aircraft capable of making an emergency landing on the gumbo strip at Isachsen. At that time of year the airstrip was full of 'frost boils', which are small gooey areas of unfrozen gumbo a couple of yards wide caused by melting of the permafrost just below the surface of the runway. We explored the whole length of the strip to find a possible landing area. As luck would have it, the Resolute rescue centre advised that an RCAF Canso aircraft was touring the Arctic archipelago involved in Ground Defence Corps

activities and needed 200 yards of landing strip free of any obstacles or obstructions and properly identified with markers. That request was easily satisfied. The suitable landing area was marked with smudge pots fabricated from empty coffee cans each containing a roll of toilet paper soaked in diesel fuel. When lit, the diesel-soaked toilet rolls create a black smoke visible from miles away. The old Canso aircraft landed safely in the very short area available, but that was only half of the overall mission since any aircraft take-off usually requires a much longer strip than that required for landing. The length of the strip that we had picked out for landing was not long enough to allow a safe take-off, or so we thought. However, the Canso crew had set off fully prepared for such a situation. They quickly produced two JATO bottles and anchored one on each side of the fuselage about mid way between the cockpit and the tail. For the uninitiated, an activated JATO bottle produces a tremendous lifting effect allowing the aircraft to become airborne in a short distance. We assisted the patient onto the Canso (he actually walked on himself) and watched in awe as the old Gooney Bird literally blasted off the gumbo surface in less than 200 yards with the aid of the JATO system. How could anyone forget such an event, except when the patient was delivered to the USAF hospital in Thule, Greenland, it was learned that he might

have been faking the illness when an operation failed to find the need for an appendectomy. Ironically, within twenty-four hours of the successful medical evacuation, a complete radio blackout set in at Isachsen and lasted for ten days during which time we had absolutely no contact with the rest of the world.

Any form of contact with the outside world was welcomed with great anticipation at an isolated weather station. We were able make frequent radio contact with an amateur radio operator (known as a 'Ham Operator) in Edmonton. His name was Charlie Harris, a retired railroad engineer who would willingly accept messages by Morse Code and relay them by hand-written letters to family and friends in Canada and the USA. He would then wait for return messages, sometimes weeks later, and relay them by voice radio to the northern stations.

But the best contact was always brought with the arrival of an aircraft from Resolute carrying mail that had accumulated there for a few months and hopefully some fresh provisions like a few heads of lettuce and some tomatoes. It was mid August 1958 when we were informed of an unscheduled aircraft visit from Resolute but not on the landing strip since the gumbo was still too soft for the RCAF C-119 Boxcar. Instead, an airdrop was planned and

would be carried out along the length of the strip at an altitude of about 500 feet. The principal reason was to deliver the crankshaft for a D-7 Caterpillar tractor which was badly needed to do some late-summer work on the airstrip. We put out smudge pots along the runway showing wind directions to help the aircrew pick the best track to use. The Boxcar made one pass along the strip and launched three wicker panniers attached to parachutes. But, but, but (one 'but' for each pannier).... the parachutes failed to open and the panniers did a free fall from about 500 feet. The crankshaft was dug out of the permafrost in a twisted unusable condition. The pannier containing the few provisions and the mailbags did a softer landing but the contents were scattered over the runway. The mailbags survived the free fall and I vividly recall retrieving an unbroken bottle of Epsom Salts that had been requested by one of the airstrip mechanics.

The construction crew that had been living and working at Isachsen since the spring months had put a huge dent in the station food supply. The shelves in the large Quonset hut containing the non-perishable items were becoming quite bare. At the end of August there was nothing left in the underground meat storage reefer. So we decided to explore a small Quonset hut on the shore of

Dyer Bay where, supposedly, some emergency rations were to be found. That was a laugh. We found some US Army emergency rations, all in cans containing a date of 1942. We carefully opened a couple of the cans to discover some dried up inedible chocolate cake and some very dried up inedible corned beef. But we were alarmed to find a heavy metal box labelled as TNT that we left unopened.

Fortunately, the fall re-supply flights began in early September 1958 using the RCAF C-119 Boxcar aircraft bringing some much needed supplies that had been transported by cargo ships from Montreal to Resolute aided by icebreakers during the short arctic summer. The first re-supply flight brought some fresh provisions specially flown to Resolute from Edmonton, comprising some lettuce, tomatoes, eggs and fresh milk. The return leg back to Resolute departed with the construction crew that had lived and worked there since the spring, also a load of empty fifty-gallon fuel drums. The fall re-supply in September was a busy period with two or three daily flights from Resolute bringing a multitude of items, mostly non-perishable food, frozen meats to re-stock the meat reefer and anything to help the day to day operation of a completely isolated weather station during the next six months. It was a great feeling of 'renewal' to be able to eat a few mouthfuls of

lettuce and slices of tomato only to realize that this delicacy would shortly become a dream for the next six months. The old 'C-119 Boxcar' aircraft was a real workhorse during the late 50's and early 60's when the job of re-supplying the weather stations at Mould Bay and Isachsen was needed.

In the early years when the arctic weather stations were being built and organized, there was an unwritten rule that alcoholic beverages were not to be readily available. Perhaps a couple of bottles of whiskey might be supplied for medicinal purposes and to provide a brief celebration at Christmas or New Year. But that was it, except that ingenuity sometimes comes to the fore in such situations. I remember one such event at Isachsen in the summer of 1958 when the Officer-In-Charge, Merlin MacAulay brewed up a batch of beer. He had ordered the ingredients from down south in the spring. There were enough empty bottles carefully preserved from previous occasions and there was a keg large enough to brew the equivalent of a few dozen beers. The brew was identified as 'Sable Island Tea' since Merlin had first encountered this concoction while working at the Sable Island upper air station. Anyway, the big event happened on a Saturday evening when everyone assembled in the cook shack to have a couple of beers. The secret was to carefully pour the beer without disturbing

the yeasty sediment at the bottom of each bottle. Some of us achieved this and the beer tasted great with little after effect, but one USWB met tech wasn't so careful to the extent that he became slightly ill and he disappeared, only to be found 18 hours later wrapped up in a sleeping bag, but still alive.

I had expected to work at Isachsen over the winter of 1958/59, but the powers that be at HQ's in Toronto had decided otherwise and that I would be transferred to Resolute. So in mid-October of 1958 I packed my bags and prepared myself to fly to Resolute on the 'clean-up' flight that was to be the final physical connection between Resolute and Isachsen until the following spring. The only problem at that time of year was the fast-approaching period of twenty-four hour darkness at Isachsen and the lack of runway lighting to define the boundaries of the airstrip. As normal, we were advised to define the sides of the runway using illuminated flares made with coffee cans and rolls of toilet paper soaked in diesel fuel. But the definition at the ends of the runway was of special importance for a pilot making a near darkness landing. The solution was to use fifty-gallon fuel drums cut in half and filled with oily rags or anything that would create a flame. Two of each were placed at both ends of the strip and

were lit along with coffee can flares on the sides when we heard the approaching Box Car C-119 aircraft. The landing went off perfectly followed by a quick offloading of mailbags and some fresh provisions and a very quick loading of about fifteen empty fuels drums. I was the only passenger when I boarded for the return flight to Resolute. A distinct memory of that day was watching the smouldering flare pots as we raced down the runway on take-off in near darkness. A less favourable and unexpected experience on that flight was listening to the popping of the sealed empty fuel drums. The reduced air pressure at flight level caused the sealed drums to rapidly expand causing a banging sound. I landed at Resolute Bay two hours later in time for the dinner meal followed by getting lodged in the main barracks and then enjoying the privilege of an extended hot shower in unsalted water.

Before leaving the memories and experiences of the Isachsen weather station behind me I'd like to describe a unique feeling and sentiment after living seven months in a remote and isolated situation. I refer to the expression **Submarine Syndrome** that attempts to identify how people feel when working in a controlled and isolated situation. I've talked with people who worked on a submarine and it was easy for me to identify some of their strong sentiments

although my own feelings about the isolated and controlled living conditions experienced at Isachsen were much less critical. Nevertheless, the so-called 'submarine syndrome' effect did exist to some extent for me.

LIFE AT RESOLUTE

Living and working at the Resolute Bay weather station in the late 1950's was a breeze by comparison with a tour of duty at one of the very isolated stations such as Mould Bay, Alert, Eureka and Isachsen. To begin with there was frequent contact with the outside world, namely the weekly military flights from southern Canada carrying fresh provisions and mail. After working at the isolated Isachsen station for seven months I'll never forget the absolute pleasure at being able to walk into the Resolute military cook shack and order a breakfast of '**three eggs over easy with bacon and hash-brown spuds**' knowing that the eggs were really fresh and the bacon had not been living in an underground reefer at an isolated station for several months. The hash-brown spuds were a real bonus and, in retrospect, brought back the memory of my early life on the family farm in Cumbria, UK where the supper table was almost always adorned with a huge bowl of hash-brown spuds prepared on a skillet heated by an open coal fire.

Mail delivery and good food were the significant morale boosters in my years at Isachsen and Resolute but the most significant was mail delivery. The prolonged lack of contact with family or sweethearts and friends created some very emotional situations whenever the weekly mailbags were opened and sorted at Resolute. The situation was very apparent to me since the Canada Post operation in the late 50's and early 60's was under the control of the weather office staff. We sorted and distributed the weekly mail deliveries as part of our duty, but we didn't get paid for this work.

The Resolute station complex was under the jurisdiction of the Royal Canadian Air Force and it was a very favourable situation from my viewpoint as an employee of the Canadian Department of Transport. Regular population at Resolute comprised about seventy men mostly RCAF personnel except for the contingent of about twenty DOT men working at the weather office and the air traffic control radio station.

The feeling of the 'submarine syndrome' that existed at the isolated Isachsen station didn't exist at Resolute, at least not for me anyway. We could enjoy a beer in the Arctic Circle Club while watching two or three different movies each week. There was a good selection of

recreational facilities such as a pool table, a table tennis facility, a library of questionable quality with dog-eared paper backs, a small gym facility and to top it off we had the world's most northerly curling rink in 1959 (one sheet of ice). Besides, there was always the opportunity to participate in a game of contract bridge or maybe a game of chess.

The more adventurous and daring would instigate a weekly game of poker or black jack. I recall sitting in on a black jack game that lasted from after supper on Friday evening until Sunday morning pre-breakfast. The few who survived would now be identified as 'Zombies' but I walked away with most of the dollar bills that existed on the station plus numerous fives and tens to the tune of $750. Incidentally, Jack Falkenburg (USWB Electronics Tech) loaned me twenty bucks to get into the game and I repaid him handsomely.

The Resolute weather station site was one of the worst places to launch a balloon in inclement weather. There were numerous overhead wires that limited the selection of balloon release areas. Believe me, I knew all of them in spite of the fact that we used helium as a filler and could use a shroud to cover the balloon and take it to a supposedly good launch area. The weather office guys

were the brunt of many admonitions and foul language after we had torn down the complex fire alarm wires inter-connecting the station buildings, especially during the 11 GMT release causing the RCAF station personnel to get out of bed at 5 am.

On transfer from Isachsen to Resolute in October 1958 I was given the dubious honour of being the Senior Met technician at Resolute. At that time we were doing radiosonde balloon launches every six hours as part of the International Geophysical Year (IGY) program plus a full daily complement of hourly Aviation Weather Reports and eight Synoptic observations. The biggest problem for me was not the daily weather work but trying to arrange personnel shift schedules was a bit of a nightmare with a staff of eight or nine or ten technicians. The number of available techs varied according to who was arriving from the south or who was time expired and was heading south. But I was very fortunate to have full support from the Canadian OIC Bob McDonald and the USWB Exec Officer Ed Edstrom. The intense IGY observation program ended in 1959 and we were able to breathe a sigh of relief.

I can faithfully say that I may have been slightly lucky during my tour of duty at Resolute and I can tell of two reasons for my belief. The first instance concerns a balloon

release that required me to run a good distance during an overhead launch using the road towards south camp. I hadn't realized how cold it had been until next day when I felt some discomfort. I could feel soreness in my lungs when breathing and the medic told me that I had some damaged lung tissue from gulping the extreme cold air. The soreness persisted for about a month. The second instance concerns another balloon release but with markedly different results. I was the down-wind guy on a two-man release in heavy winds and total darkness. We got the balloon launched successfully but the result of my efforts to throw the instrument out of my hands created a mix-up with the still slackened twine. I ended up with jute twine that raked me beneath my chin, tearing off the skin from ear to ear just before the instrument package socked me in the jaw. It could have been a more serious circumstance.

The IGY program initiated a couple of physical research activities at Resolute. Those who remember the station at that time will recall the Ozone Monitoring program located in the little shack near the west end of the curling rink. Also at that location was the 100' Micro Met tower containing an array of thermopiles and wind vanes at various elevations that were connected to a bank of chart recorders inside the little shack. In addition, there was an

array of ground based Eppley solar radiation instruments duly monitored and recorded inside the shack. Two physicists operated these programs, namely, Harry Sullivan (ozone) and Anatol Rutenburg (micro met). I have special reason to mention these activities since the powers that be at HQ's had decided to maintain most of the IGY program using technician support after the departure of the physicists in 1959. I volunteered to do the ozone observing and was trained by Sullivan to operate the Dobson ozone spectrophotometer. Most of the micro-met program also became my responsibility but was slowly phased out. However, there were some unusual requirements imposed on me during the phasing out process. One task was to calibrate the thermopiles on the 100' tower. The process was done by immersing the thermopiles in a pail of water containing copious chunks of ice. This wasn't too difficult at the 10' level but became an onerous and somewhat risky business at the 100' level. Fortunately, the tower dimensions were such that it was possible to climb to the top inside the framework and Rutenburg had rigged up a rope and pulley system anchored on the top. So it was possible to hoist up the ice bucket from ground level before starting the climb. The major problem was that the thermopile was on the end of a boom that extended six feet from the top of the tower. To get around this dilemma,

Rutenburg's solution had been to anchor a very sturdy plank about 10 inches wide and 3 inches thick on which I very gingerly inched myself along with the ice bucket towards the thermopile. The plank was previously used by Rutenburg and he was at least as heavy as I was so I felt confident wearing a safety belt but I refused to look down to the ground.

In the 50's and 60's Resolute was the focal point and staging location for any ventures, commercial or otherwise, in the Canadian Arctic. Almost any activity on the Arctic Archipelago in those years used Resolute as a base of operations. Consequently, it was not unusual to meet people from all walks of life such as geologists, seismologists, astronomers, and astrophysicists. At that time in the 20th century there was a growing interest to explore for crude oil and natural gas and the Canadian Arctic was high on the list of unexplored territory. It was impossible to keep up with all of the activity and the number of people arriving at Resolute but it was very interesting during the summer months when most exploration work took place. All new venture exploration activities relied upon the weather office staff to provide essential information regarding the flying conditions to the various islands.

I finished my tour of duty at Resolute in June 1960 and took a job at the Winnipeg weather office for one year followed by a year at Coral Harbour on Southampton Island at the north end of Hudson's Bay.

Fifty years after first landing at Resolute my most lasting memory of the station is the horizon view towards the southwest and the outline of the small range of hills known as Cape Martyr with the Arctic Ocean beyond.

LIFE AT CORAL HARBOUR

Journeying to Coral Harbour from the south in February 1962 was not much different from other ventures into the Canadian Arctic except that the method of getting from Winnipeg to Churchill was by train. There is an old song from the 40's and 50's about a 'Slow Boat to China' and I'm sure there is someone who could write some lyrics to the same music and give it a title such as 'A Slow Train to Churchill'. I did it once each way from the 'Peg' and back. The story goes that a lady who boarded the train at Winnipeg en route to Churchill became quite frustrated and asked the conductor to get off at Le Pas (about half way). She explained that she was going to give birth pronto and the conductor advised that she shouldn't have boarded the train in that condition. Her response was that she wasn't pregnant when she boarded at Winnipeg.

An overnight bunk in a military barrack at Churchill was a welcome relief after nearly three slow days on the rails from Winnipeg. But next morning was another departure day via a local weekly commuter flight from Churchill to Coral Harbour on board a DC3. It was my first ever flight on a Dakota. The captain's name slips my memory but he was a 'renowned' red headed bush pilot and the airline's name was Transair. He and I were the only ones on board that particular flight in February 1962 but he assured me he knew where he was going.

The weather station is located about a mile inland and about mid-way along the south shore of Southampton Island where there is an excellent deep-water bay suitable for the summertime re-supply boats. In 1962 there was a small Inuit community of less than one hundred located about three miles away on the shore towards the east. The weather station personnel were able to interact with the settlement since there was a Hudson's Bay Store plus both an Anglican and a Catholic Mission.

The station complement was about fifteen guys comprising the airport manager, six meteorological technicians, three radio operators, a cook and a kitchen lackey, an electrician and two vehicle operators. One of the vehicle operators at that time was a native from the local

community who we knew as 'Eskimo Pete'. He lived at the weather station in a small warehouse building that had been converted to a comfortable dwelling for he and his wife and young children. Pete was a versatile worker capable of handling any vehicle especially the snow blower to clear the runway and the 'main street' of the station. He had inherited the ways of his ancestors with his hunting capabilities and his craft making dexterity of which I will relate later.

Although the Coral Harbour station is much further south than Resolute or Isachsen it still experiences the very harsh climate associated with the Arctic regions. Indeed, the severe conditions at Coral Harbour are usually accompanied by loads of snow when a low-pressure weather system becomes established in Hudson's Bay producing a howling north easterly causing whiteouts for days on end. The success rate of wintertime balloon releases at Coral Harbour would become a challenge to the odds makers in Las Vegas.

Sometimes foolish decisions are determined by a bit of bravado and stupid egotism and I vividly recall one of my least memorable decisions. The occasion involved measurement of the sea ice thickness on the bay. It was established practice to have two people available for this

job but one day in December '62 I decided to do it solo. The drive in the Bombardier from the station to the shoreline should have told me to turn around since it was a blustery day with difficult vision caused by northeast winds and the near polar darkness. But I forged across the sandbar and headed for the oil drum that was frozen into the sea ice about 400 yards off shore. The drum was used as the marker where the measurement was always made. So far so good until I completed the measurement in 15 minutes using the head lights of the track vehicle to help me. But I hadn't reckoned on the fickle nature of the increasing winds that caused all of my outbound vehicle tracks to be obliterated. When I eventually got the vehicle turned around I had no idea in which direction to steer towards since the conditions were now a total whiteout. Basic instinct told me to use the wind direction as a guide so I slowly headed in a supposed north direction hoping to reach the shoreline. I eventually found my entry point across the sandbar and proceeded back to the weather station. I was extremely lucky.

Another worthy and relatable incident of harsh difficulties involved a violent storm. Those who spent time at Coral Harbour will recall that the Upper Air Station is about three hundred yards north of the main living quarters

and kitchen complex. (I'm speaking of 1962). Anyway, the evening's balloon flight had been completed and the objective was to get back to the station complex where a movie was to be shown. I shouldn't have attempted to leave the station but foolishly I headed in a south direction guided by a lamp standard a few yards away. About halfway I became disoriented in the blowing snow and had no references to guide me except that I stumbled into a shallow ditch on the edge of the station complex. I stayed on my hands and knees and knew that I could reach the barracks by crawling southwards in the ditch with the wind behind me. My foolish decision to leave the upper air station building taught me a lesson.

Summer at Coral Harbour was relatively serene but it was slightly more interesting than Resolute or Isachsen from a naturalist's point of view (my opinion anyway). There was some sparse vegetation and in particular I remember a willowy type shrub that grew low to the ground. Bird and animal life was more plentiful with a few sea birds, some fox and perhaps a polar bear. In addition, it was possible to see beluga whales or an occasional seal surfacing in the bay.

On one occasion in July '62 I had the privilege, with two other station staff, of being invited by Eskimo Pete to

do some Beluga and seal hunting in the bay aboard a small aluminium freighter canoe. To say it was exciting was correct but to say it was a bit hazardous was a complete understatement. There were four of us in a fifteen-foot craft. Pete was dashing from stem to stern with a rifle in hand whenever he spotted the head of a seal or a beluga. Arnie and Ed, their last names long forgotten, were either handling the 5 horsepower outboard motor or helping Pete spot the whales and seals. I was crouched in the bowels of the canoe with an 8mm movie camera in my hand. I succeeded in getting scenes of the harpooning of two belugas and one seal but I'm afraid my movie footage would not win any film awards. The more interesting part of this event was watching Pete and a couple of his brethren from the settlement proceed to carve up and distribute these mammals amongst many of the villagers. This was a traditional way of life and I was convinced that nothing much was left to waste after watching the raw intestines of these creatures being fed to the husky dogs. I watched an unforgettable process carried out by Pete skinning the seal with an adeptness and skill to match that of my father or my older brothers shearing a sheep. The seal pelt was a valuable commodity and I became to understand this in a more personal manner of which I will speak later.

Laugh and the world will laugh with you! I don't know where those words came from but I do know that they were very appropriate on the occasion I asked 'Eskimo Pete' to make me a pair of seal skin slippers. The station personnel were assembled in the lounge prior to a movie showing. Pete asked me to put down one of my feet on a piece of paper so that he could trace the outline and determine the size. I duly placed my size 13 left foot on the paper and, after some head scratching, Pete was heard to say out loud "Holy Sh...t, I need two seal pelts for this guy". The lounge laughter was deafening but I eventually got my slippers a few weeks later.

Anyone who ever did a tour of duty at a northern weather station would have been remiss not to take part in a local activity that might not be found in too many places. In this instance, I knew very little about ice fishing let alone participate in it. So it was late fall when the annual trek took place to a small lake about two miles inland. Six of us, led by Pete the driver, piled into the Bombardier track vehicle. We had some hooks and cord and a supply of raw bacon and liver to use as bait. We chopped holes in about eight inches of ice and dropped our hooks in the water with some fantastic results. We had brought along a 24 pack of beer and agreed that when the beer was finished we would

end the fishing. We eventually ran out of bait so we dangled the bare shiny hooks and kept on catching an array of small trout anywhere from 8 to 12 inches long and when the last beer was gone we counted 123 fish. Pete was allocated a couple of dozen for his family and the rest we took to the station kitchen where the cook said he would cook them for supper if we gutted and cleaned them which we did.

My tour at Coral Harbour ended in March 1963 and essentially ended any further lengthy stays in the Arctic. My work experience in the IGY program at Resolute in 1959 and 1960 helped me obtain a job at Meteorological Headquarters in Toronto, specifically ozone monitoring in the Experimental Studies Division. My connection with the Arctic was not totally severed in 1963 since I paid short visits to Resolute and Churchill where ozone-measuring instruments were located. My last visit to Resolute occurred in 1991.