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The Enduring Spirit of the Arctic

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The Enduring Spirit of the Arctic

December 4, 2001

Our extraordinary journey to the Arctic is slowly starting to wind down. We will depart ten days from today. As we get closer to our return date many of our experiences are once again washing over our spirits. The episodes of our journey are deep and enduring.

This past Sunday we spent the afternoon with our neighbor, his wife, and one of their three young sons. They are the Alainga Family, Pitseolak, Kootoo, and boys. On my first visit to Iqaluit I had been told about Pitseolak and his incredible survival story. I only discovered a short while ago that he actually lived next door to our home. What follows is Pitseolak’s story, retold to the best of my capability. Because the human magnitude of the story is so profound I felt awkward asking Pitseolak if I could record our conversation. The personal connections that are possible through “lived” storytelling may have been less meaningful knowing that a recording was taking place. I am deeply grateful to Pitseolak for sharing such a heartbreaking event. Our time together was definitely one of the high points of our journey. I have supplemented what Pitseolak shared with information I obtained from the archives of local newspapers.

Simonic Alainga was a living Inuksuk in the town of Iqaluit. His wisdom about life guided many. Simonic’s superb experience and knowledge about the land and sea was only surpassed by his unending commitment to his family and community. Many have shared with me the efforts he put forward, especially during the Christmas Holidays, to bring festive happiness to the people of Iqaluit. Titus Aooloo, a long time friend said, “When you went into his (Simonic’s) house in Iqaluit, you always saw Baffin people staying there because they felt comfortable, and they were also fed and there was always tea on the stove for anyone who came into Simonic’s house.”

On Tuesday, October 25, 1994, Simonic Alainga, his son Pitseolak and eight others, including Pitseolak’s uncles, cousins and thirty-eight foot fish hunt. They had planned to delay by mechanical travel nearly two hours, the boat necessities, ammunition, be an outpost camp, of the boat. After unloading the team of ten would the hunting party had

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The team of ten vig October 25 to hunt Aivi tumbling seas, their long before they had worked as a well-others were retrieving some were retrieving, while others heading.

With the meat aboard the boat, they on Saturday, October the waters continued passengers. For whatever possibly a mechanical take on water. The gasoline generator pump hoping to pump at approximately 1 a nearby outpost camp was taking on water uncertain if anyone received a reply.
The water pump could not handle the volume of water so some of the men began a desperate attempt to get rid of the water with five gallon buckets. It was soon obvious that their efforts were not working so a decision was made to abandon the Qaqsauq and board the sixteen-foot canoe boat that they had brought along for the hunt. All ten men attempted to board the canoe. The icy water splattered the canoe, nearly capsizing the boat the moment they boarded. One large gush finally toppled the boat spilling all ten men into the rough and frigid waters of Frobisher Bay.

Wearing a green military winter parka with deep pockets, wind pants, kamiks (boots) tied below the knees, a baseball cap covered with a tuque (knitted winter hat), and seal skin mitts, Billy Kownirk, wearing a floater suit, a one-piece survival outfit, was made to abandon the boat. He was pulled himself up and you must do the same.” Pitseolak suddenly found himself under water looking up. His inner strength and pulling himself up onto a small section of the boat that was above water. It was soon obvious that their efforts were not working so a decision was made to abandon the Qaqsauq.

The team of ten vigorous Inuit males set out on October 28 to hunt Aiviq (Walrus). Despite the rough and tumbling seas, their hunt went extremely well. It was not long before they had taken twelve walrus. Together they worked as a well-organized team; some were shooting, some were retrieving, some were skinning and butchering, while others helped to pilot Qaqsauq.

With the meat of twelve walrus stacked neatly aboard the boat, they began their journey back to Iqaluit on Saturday, October 29. They made slow progress as the waters continued to tumble the boat and its passengers. For whatever reason, possibly the extra weight, possibly a mechanical malfunction, the boat began to take on water. The resourceful crew quickly fired up a gasoline generator and hooked it up to a small water pump hoping to pump the water out of the boat’s hold. The fact that there were ten men in the hunting party had notable significance.

Among Stone Age peoples, a core-hunting group comprised approximately ten adult males in their prime. Modern society still depends on the cooperation of approximately ten adults, male or female, to accomplish major undertakings. There are ten soldiers in a platoon, eleven players on a football team, nine on a baseball team, twelve members on a jury, ten to twelve on a board of directors, and nine Supreme Court justices. Ten vigorous adults usually assure inspiration, leadership, cooperation, and purpose (Shlain 32).

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they were both thinking of what they might have done differently to correct their terrible misfortune. Almost in unison they realized that if they were to survive they must look forward. At this point it would do them absolutely no good whatsoever to expend any energy on the past. All of their energy and much more would be needed for Pitseolak and Billy to survive.

For Pitseolak and Billy this was the beginning of a three-day passage. Their bodies, half-submerged in the icy waters of Frobisher Bay, clung desperately to the wreckage of the Qaqsauq. At the beginning of a three-day passage. Their bodies, half-submerged in the icy waters of Frobisher Bay, clung desperately to the wreckage of the Qaqsauq. They were both thinking of what they might have done differently to correct their terrible misfortune. Almost in unison they realized that if they were to survive they must look forward. At this point it would do them absolutely no good whatsoever to expend any energy on the past. All of their energy and much more would be needed for Pitseolak and Billy to survive.

For Pitseolak and Billy this was the beginning of a three-day passage. Their bodies, half-submerged in the icy waters of Frobisher Bay, clung desperately to the wreckage of the Qaqsauq. For several hours their floating abode did not move. At one point they noticed several walrus nearby staring at them. The walrus were so close they could actually look into their eyes. Both Pitseolak and Billy were concerned that one may try to ram their floating raft. This they feared would certainly mean the end as the weight of the walrus would quickly sink what remained of the boat. The walrus according to Pitseolak, looked as though they were hugging each other by clasping their flippers. With one eye on the walrus they also noticed a group of seals nearby that the walrus politely avoided. This behavior seemed very peculiar, considering that walrus eat seals. Suddenly Pitseolak and Billy felt their floating abode begin to move. It was as if the walrus had swum underneath and were helping to direct them towards land. I asked Pitseolak if he thought the actions of the walrus were somehow connected to Sedna?

Pitseolak continued to pray throughout his ordeal. It was through prayer that he found the will to live and the strength to endure. During Pitseolak's prayers his life from about the age of nine to the present flashed through his mind. He felt deep sorrow for all of the mistakes he had made and the anxiety he had caused others. He also felt deep love, deeper than ever before, for those near and dear to him, most especially his wife Kootoo. It was at this point in the story that the emotion of the account washed over Pitseolak and he began to cry. It was a moment in my life I will never forget. Pitseolak, an upright man, husband, father, accomplished hunter and provider to many, was cleansing the windows of his spirit with tears so that we may see our world anew. It was not long until tears began to flow from all of our eyes. At this point there was a long pause in the story to honor and celebrate our collective cleansing.

Pitseolak and Billy continued to cling to the remains of the Qaqsauq. Pitseolak kept dipping his lower legs and feet into the icy water to keep his blood circulating. His father had taught him that because salt water freezes at a lower temperature than fresh water, he needed to keep clashing seawater in his boots to keep his feet from freezing. Both he and Billy were cold, thirsty, and hungry. Somehow despite the hardships, they endured.

Some Inuit elders believe that Pitseolak and Billy's will to live is linked to their duty to pass their story onto others.

It's an age-old Inuit tradition that whenever there is a tragedy there are survivors who live on and tell the stories of what happened. People live to pass on the experience for future generations. Somebody had to live to tell the story. Sometimes miracles do happen...There were a lot of prayers, and they were answered (Nunatsiaq News, Nov. 4, 1994:1).

As word of the accident spread the search for the missing hunters intensified. There was a mass exodus of search teams. Two twin otters (airplanes), a Hercules jet, an Aurora aircraft, a Labrador helicopter, a Canadian helicopter, a department of Fisheries and Oceans boat, and a chartered fishing boat, all took off to look for their friends and fellow Canadian citizens.

On Monday it began to snow and a small amount began to accumulate on a section of the boat. The fresh snow provided a small survival cache and reminded Billy to...
to endure. During his time, he was not old but the age of nine years of age. He had a mind. He felt deep love for his family. He had made the relationship with his father dear and close to him, and it was at this point in the account the spirit washed over him. It was a moment in Pitseolak's life, an upright man, a hunter and provider to his family. His spirit with tears in his eyes. It was not long before the tears filled our eyes. At this point he decided to tell the story to honor and remember the eight men who perished in the avalanche.

Clinging to the remains of the Qaqsauq, Pitseolak saw his lower legs and the beginning of his blood circulation not because salt water and fresh water, he put on his boots to keep his feet warm. Pitseolak and Billy were cold, but despite the hardships, Pitseolak remembered his father's words, "Whenever there is a time to live on and tell the story, it is the story to pass on the story to your children. Somebody else may have the same story, and they were years (Petseolak and Betty, 1994)."

The search for the survivors was a mass exodus of aircraft (a Hercules jet, a helicopter, a Canadian coast guard boat, and a boat, the Qaqsauq's cabin door, engine cover, and a piece of the wheelhouse were recovered. When night fell and none of the hunters had been found, the search efforts were called off until first light Tuesday morning.

After nearly sixty hours, half submerged in icy waters and clinging to the remains of the Qaqsauq, Pitseolak remembered another lesson his father had taught him. He broke a small piece from the boat's glass windshield and placed it over the dark section of one of his sealskin mitts. His hope was that during a break in the cloud cover he could create a reflection from the sun that the plane's crew might spot. His plan worked. On Tuesday afternoon at 1:30 p.m. the crew of the Hercules aircraft spotted Pitseolak and Billy floating about sixteen kilometers from shore. A helicopter dropped a raft from overhead and guided it towards the two men. Once aboard the raft they were picked up by a fisheries and oceans vessel and taken to a nearby outpost camp. Both Pitseolak and Billy were conscious and talking when their rescuers arrived. They had continued to talk to each other during their entire three-day ordeal. Because of the extreme wet and cold their clothes were soaked clear through to the skin and their limbs were swollen. So swollen were their limbs that their clothing had to be cut off. From the outpost camp they were taken by helicopter to Baffin Regional Hospital in Iqaluit. Miraculously both Pitseolak and Billy somehow survived.

The outpouring of family and friends that gathered to honor the eight fallen comrades and the two survivors was unlike anything Iqaluit had ever witnessed. Hundreds of folks from throughout the north and from all
walks of life gathered at St. Judes Anglican Cathedral, the nearby Parish Hall, and on the land outside.

Before the service began, the crowd inside the church remained silent. Some cast their eyes down in respect. Others stared blankly at the front of the church, where eight white, wooden crosses leaned against the altar. Minutes before the service began, the crowd in the church reception area parted and a young man in a wheelchair was escorted to the front of the congregation (Nunatsiaq News, Nov. 11, 1994, 19).

The young man was Pitseolak Alainga.
The bodies of the eight other Inuit hunters have never been found, Iola Nooshoota (21 years), Ooletoa Pishukte (24 years), Joepee Panipak (28 years), Kellyp- alik Pishukte (45 years), Sammujualie Kootoo (52 years), Ecpeebee Peterloosie (56 years), Simonie Alainga (57 years), and Johnny Shoo (59 years).

As Pitseolak brought his heartbreaking retelling of the tragedy to a close he said that each time he tells the story he feels a little bit stronger. I then shared with him the deep appreciation we have for him telling the story. In memory of his father Simonie and the other seven men, I presented Pitseolak and Kootoo an anonymous poem that had been given to me when my father died:

Do not stand at my grave and weep,
I am not there I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunshine on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush,
I am the swift uplifting rush of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there, I did not die.

Reference

Caribbean Tectonics and Adventonics
Tectonics is the study of the plate boundaries, as well as the activity of the world's ranges, and faults that allow for the movement of the continents. The Caribbean and the West Indies are a tropical archipelago of islands that were formed in the summer of 1996 during the late Cretaceous. As a petrologist, I was introduced to the Caribbean and the West Indies (U.S. Virgin Islands) while working on the structural geology project that began at the Seismic Research Center at the University of the West Indies (UWI) in Mona, Jamaica.

Augustine is a well-known village that sits at the foot of the El Pilar Range. Some geologists believe that the El Pilar strike-slip fault in Trinidad; Alexander documented large strike-slip faults, including the El Pilar fault in Venezuela, and not had a single large earthquake in some years. The primary objective of the field work and testing alternated between the study of the Caribbean and the West Indies (U.S. Virgin Islands) and the study of the Caribbean and the West Indies (U.S. Virgin Islands).

The staff at Seismic immediately made a trip to the Caribbean and the West Indies (U.S. Virgin Islands) to study the earthquake. Their names sound like the names of the people they served in the Caribbean and the West Indies (U.S. Virgin Islands) with genes from Trinidadian, whose roots are partly of Venezuelan descent.