

# Walrus Hunt

Arthur C. Sandstrom © 2002

As many times as I'd seen them in films, I still wasn't prepared for my first personal encounter with a walrus. It's one thing to sit in a comfortable chair, drinking coffee or sucking down a beer, and watching movies of these strange creatures humping around on an ice floe, giving the approaching camera the big eye. It's always beautiful weather, too... the blue sky filled with puffy white clouds, the waves sparkling in the sunlight, and the ice looking like sugar-covered crystal. A perfect *National Geographic* documentary. Somehow, though, it doesn't qualify one for membership in the Explorer's Club.

It's quite another thing to hear their bellowing grunt, to smell their exhalation, to look straight into their weird, almost octopus-like, hour-glass shaped eyes, and know that one clumsy step in a wave-tossed boat or a careless slip on the ice can throw you into the water – their natural element.

My invitation to the walrus hunt came in early spring, the usual time for such activities in northern Alaska. The ice that had hugged both sides of the Bering Strait all winter was going rotten and relaxing its grip, and the center channel separating Siberia and Alaska widened daily. Through this dark current of water, filled with small ice brash and larger chunks of ice spinning southward, would soon come walrus – bunching, feeding, fighting, bellowing, and mating their way north toward the Arctic Ocean and beyond. For about three weeks their passage northward through the narrow strait, past Nome, past Sledge Island and Fairway Rock, past the Diomed Islands, and finally past Cape Prince of Wales to the wider Arctic Ocean, would offer the hunt to the Eskimo.

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I was in my customary evening location – the Nome, Alaska home of my Eskimo girlfriend, Jeannie Mogg – when her father, Sam, spoke up from his chair at the kitchen table.

“You remember those walrus movies we showed?”

“Yep.”

“They were pretty good, huh?”

“Yep.”

Sam lapsed into a period of coffee-drinking silence, then: “Mary and me, we been thinking maybe we might go up and take some more movies. Paul Iyapana, he’s going up to Diomed and take a boat out for two, three days and maybe hunt some walrus. He ask Mary and me to come and take pictures.” (Mary was Jeannie’s mother.) Sam, an avid photographer, owned a number of cameras including a professional Bolex 16mm, and over the years had sold some of his work to travel magazines.

I suddenly absorbed his last comment and started to make a suitable rejoinder about that being great, and that I’d be glad to watch their house (and Jeannie) while they were gone, when Jeannie leaned over, smiled, and whispered in my ear, “They asked me to come, too.”

My comment stuck in my throat as I frantically searched for some way to convey, without rudely indicating openly, my desire to accompany them. Mary laughed, blew cigarette smoke at me, and saved the day. “Maybe you could come with us.”

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After having ensured that the communications station, where I was the chief operator, would not fall apart during my absence, I took a ten-day leave. Early on a clear April morning, amidst the ceremonies and panoply of barking dogs, runny-nosed children, urgings to have one more cup of tea, and endless good-byes, the Moggs and I, along with six hunters and assorted members of their families, scrambled into a large, outboard-powered oomiak, or “many people” skin boat, at the water’s edge of Nome’s Norton Sound. With much grunting and laughing, we pushed out far enough for small oars to be used. Paul began slowly steering us with the stubby rudder through the shore ice toward open water. The low-lying hills back of town disappeared in the distant haze and the shoreline faded. Until the noise of the outboard drowned it out, I could hear the faint chorus of farewells and good wishes being shouted by those left behind.

A full day in an open boat filled with 14 men and women leaves little room for privacy, comfort, and the niceties of life. This was my first experience in open communal living and, with the brashness of youth, I dived eagerly in and shared. The women boiled water (carefully) over Sterno stoves to make the indispensable tea that Eskimos crave. We shared hardtack, biscuits dripping with jam, and pulled and twisted at the tough rind of last year's sun-dried salmon. The men continually watched to make sure we neither encountered ice nor strayed too far from the Alaskan coastline. We all told stories and shared experiences of the past, sang songs (I was not very helpful in that activity), and met personal needs.

It still amazes me how matter-of-factly those personal needs were attended to over the gunwale of an open boat, in full view of others, by both men and women, and still have modesty served. There is an Oriental practice which can only be described as "seeing what one wishes to see," wherein one's eyes not only skim over someone without consciously observing that person, but the person being "not seen" can tell it by the glaze, or dis-focus, of the other's eyes, and is able to treat these "not eyes" as a screen or wall. And, after all, is not the Eskimo of Asian origin?

The weather cooperated beautifully, the water was calm, and we rounded the southern end of Little Diomed Island around midnight. A few lights from the village stood out in the semi-dusk, and we soon scraped to a stop on the shingle of the narrow beach. The sudden stillness from some 18 hours of almost-constant outboard motor noise pressed in on me, and for a few minutes I seemed to hardly hear the happy greetings and laughter as almost the entire village surrounded us and hauled the boat onto the beach. I clumsily climbed out of the boat onto shore, almost fell from the absence of motion, and stood looking westward into tomorrow at Big Diomed Island, hulking only two and a half miles across the International Dateline. Fascinating! Although I had been here several times before by ski plane in the winter, I stood at the water's edge and gazed at the Soviet island and at the mountains of Siberia, just rising above the far horizon beyond. I remembered elderly Eskimos telling of the past freedom of unrestricted passage between the two continents, when family could visit family and hunters knew no international boundaries. I automatically searched for the Soviet military installation located in the saddle between the two hills on each end of Big Diomed but saw nothing.

My eyes suddenly blurred and watered, and I realized how tired I was. I turned to see everyone making their way up the steep hill and vanishing into respective friends' and relatives' houses. I abruptly swung toward the boat to grab my gear and crashed into Jeannie, who had been silently standing beside me. She crinkled her nose and smiled. "Ah-nee-kah! Why don't you watch where you're going?"

I barely remember being led up the hill toward the school building where I was to be the guest of Don and Erika Abbott, the two Bureau of Indian Affairs teachers.

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I was in the oomiak, and the sea had gotten up, and I was being tossed back and forth while trying to keep my gear from being pitched overboard, and I suddenly smelled that familiar tea smell... and my eyes were grittily open and peering about the room. Don Abbott removed his hand from my shoulder and placed a cup just out of reach on the floor.

"Well," he said. "I was beginning to think you'd never wake up. Here's a little eye-opener. Come on over to the quarters when you're dressed and we'll treat you to a little breakfast." Don rubbed his hand briskly over his burr haircut, straightened up, and headed for the door, then stopped. "It's almost eight o'clock, Art," he added. "If you hurry, I'll let you meet the 8:30 radio schedule with Nome. That is, if you think you can handle it..."

He retreated rapidly out the door as my mukluk bounced off the wall beside it. I stiffly crawled out of my sleeping bag, gulped tea, and marveled at how the contents of a small tea bag could cut through the accumulated sludge in my mouth. I pulled on my wrinkled black jeans and wool shirt over my long johns and laced my mukluks. I felt my whiskered chin, shrugged, and wadded and tied up my sleeping bag, threw it into a corner, and headed outside. Jeannie and her mother were just rounding the corner of the schoolhouse, and we walked toward the Abbotts' living quarters together. I looked at Jeannie and wonder again how young women could share the same experiences as men, undergo the same number of hours of inadequate sleep, and show up,

disgustingly pretty and cheerful, with not a hair out of place. Jeannie, of course, was someone special.