



## North Pole 2018 - Blog No 7: Yes, I did it again!

**Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> of April**  
Set to go!

This last update about my North Pole adventure will be a combination of my own story and some paragraphs that I copied from Eric's blog because he gives some nice details about our adventure.

It's not my best thing, to wait, but the good thing is that we are ready to go, but do we go? After checking out I move all my remaining stuff to Maryann's hotel, where the others are staying and try to do it easy for the rest of the day. The reason is we are scheduled to fly out around 7pm, the flight takes around 3 hours and after that we might need to jump straight away into the helicopter to our dropping destination and putting up tents or start walking. So taking this in mind you can imagine that it can be a long day even without a delay of flights. The most surprising thing overall is that everything is scheduled to go ahead and that they managed to build a complete camp for 30 staff members and approximately 50 North Pole Explorers, a 900 meter air strip and a landing zone for 2 huge helicopters, all on the ice. Around 4pm we receive the news that we need to be at the airport in one hour, so from a relax modus I am changing my mind now really to expedition modus. It's getting serious. It's a small airport and the plane is already there by the time we arrive. They start to put all the sledges and other cargo into this huge plane and the first thought is how is it possible that this can land on ice without falling through it? With around 30 passengers and a few crew members we take off at 5.30pm which is pretty on time. In the plane I am treated like a hero. Not because of the great seats (I am sitting sideways and Eric is even lying on the cargo at the back), but because of my 7 summits history. To be honest I don't mind telling people about my adventures because this is part of my work, but I don't feel special about it as many people have accomplished difficult things. But anyway, after some talking, hand shaking and picture taking I open my can of Coke, knowing that the next one will taste even better in probably 10 days from now.



A quarter past eight in the evening the plane hits the ice and more importantly, the breaks. I have the feeling that the cargo including Eric will be in no time at the same place as the pilot, but amazingly the runway is long enough. Later in the week Eric tells me that last year one wheel went through the ice during one of the landings so it's not always funny. We are now at 89.3 Nautical miles and only half a degree away from the pole. To explain this a bit: every degree has 60 nautical miles and each nautical mile is 1.8km long. The reason that Barneo camp is at 89.3 is related to the fact that it will drift away, so 10 days from now it will be around 89.0.

We quickly take our stuff and make our way with the sledge to one of the Russian MI-8 helicopters. I am surprised that they manage to bring on board 16 passengers, 4 crew members and everybody's gear and that it still manages to take off. 20 minutes later I am again in the air on our way to our dropping destination which in the end is going to be 140 East longitude and 89 North latitude. The flight is amazing with my first view on the ice. From the air it doesn't look too bad on the ground, meaning the amount of open water we might need to cross and the pressured ice ridges, but Eric reminds me that small cracks and challenges from the air are often hard to take on the ground.

After 45 minutes the moment is there; we unload the helicopter and 3 minutes later we are alone on a piece of ice the size of Europe ... Because it's already 10pm we make the call to put up tents, to eat a quick snack and to go to bed. For your information: it's minus 32c and feels like ... sleep well.

### **Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> of April**

Slowly making progress

We had a somewhat slow start this morning, meaning waking up at 7:30 after a very poor night. It is 24-hour daylight here so when the sun is out (not cloudy or whiteout) it is actually tolerable in the tent. After our first breakfast on the ice and heating Eric's favorite recipe, snow, we are packing up our tents and are ready to go, but we already moved 300 meters during the night because of positive ice drift. During the day, we had to cross six or so medium-sized pressure ridges in which we had to take our skis off to traverse. Most of us like these small challenges because they break up the day. Each ridge requires a different plan of attack but Eric is guiding us through it during the first days. I have to say that I feel very comfortable with all my clothes and layers that I am wearing but most importantly with the environment. During the day Eric is guiding us with his compass over the ice, which I think is amazing. Roughly a 150km snow and ice journey ahead of us, knowing that a small direction change can have a huge impact. I am really amazed by this quality and have the feeling I went for the right organization. The less positive factor of the day is that we only make 5.65 nautical miles. I am probably the only one concerned about this, but 60 divided by 5.65 is 11 days and we only have 10 before Barneo is closing.

Around 6pm the stoves are running again (1 for melting/heating water and 1 for making it comfortable in the tent and drying our clothes) and is it time to relax a bit. The days on the ice are long because we wake up around 6am, prepare everything for a departure around 9am, then we are on the ice for 9 hours and at 6pm in the evening you put up tents, sort out your stuff, eat a lot and around 9pm it's time to bring in the

sleeping bags for another night on the ice which is mostly not that comfortable with only one-inch foam under your body.

### **Monday 16th of April**

Time to cross a river

Eric has set a goal of making at least eight nautical miles today which we were not aware of. But like everything on the Arctic Ocean, things don't always go as planned. It felt 'warmer' today so I made sure that I had thinner layers which I could easily take off to avoid sweating. At breaks or setting up camp, we are wearing warm down jackets. Right away, we got into a fairly large pressure ridge. We took our skis off and put them on sleds, then Eric punched a winding route through: down a short three-foot drop (off the edge of a big ice block) then a dog leg to the left and up through a series of wide cracks and slabs. A while later, he managed to find our way to a long lead that was frozen solid enough for us to ski down for nearly 500 meters. The difference in the effort it takes to pull out sleds over this type of ice versus the snow covered pans is substantial. Having said that it felt really strange to walk over such thin ice and some part which we luckily did not cross was like a piece of frozen rubber. It was so thin that when Eric tried to stand on it, the ice was actually moving up and down like waves of water. Next to that, whilst walking over this thin ice I was consistently surrounded by the noise of breaking ice around me and observed that a few meters away from me cubes of 2 meters' ice are just pressured against each other in such an easy way that it looked like Tom was playing with Lego, only these cubes are as heavy as a car.

As with most things out here Eric reminds us that there is a yin and yang that seems to moderate any optimism (or pessimism for that matter). Where there is good ice, bad ice will follow. And where there is bad... A thin ice lead blocked our path an hour later. It was a wide zigzagging crack roughly 5 meters wide. In the middle a black serpentine line - open water. We would have to go around. Eric is consistently making these choices about what to do as a team. Any veering east or west takes us away from our goal. However, going around obstacles out here is sometimes more efficient than going through. Every moment Eric is making a choice about where to go. And that choice impacts the next choice and so on and so on...



A little later in the day, we came across a fairly wide lead about 20 meters across that was open in the middle. On either side, big blocks hemmed the edge. At one point, this was a pressure ridge but now it had split apart (the worst). Eric was tempted to go across but, after some scouting, he found an ice-choked neck to cross. We relayed the sleds with 'long lines' as the semi frozen ice boulder can easily break free. David found this out the hard way as he plunged his boot through into water.

We are making slow but steady progress dealing with the usual expedition-related maladies. Neil has a quick-on set flu and even threw up on the trail. David broke his ski pole when falling on a pressure ridge. Because of Neil's flu we had to cut our day short making roughly 7 nautical miles of Northward progress (89.12), which is more than yesterday but I am not comfortable yet..

### **Tuesday 17th of April**

I feel strong but Neil is really sick.

The air mass, moving in from the south, pushed our tent one and a half nautical miles from where we had set it up - one mile of which was northward progress. I still cannot believe this is really happening. Like mentioned before imagine a very thick pancake of ice the size of Europe which is moving 2.7km in 12 hours' time!!! Like a piece of polystyrene foam on a lake. Besides moving in the right direction we are still very happy that we have not had any polar bear encounters during the day or night. Every evening we put our sledges, ski poles and ski's around our tents and have our small protection set next to us (a small metal pen with on top some sort of firework) which you hope will scare of the bear. I have to say that some nights you really think with every sound outside, is it a bear or just the wind playing with our tent?

Eric was worried that the fresh snow would slow us down. Today, however, the snow had the opposite effect actually making our sleds glide significantly easier over the undulating surface. Visibility however was very poor and close to a white-out (this is like walking in a pin-pong ball and almost not being able to see the person in front of you). Within an hour, we hit our first pressure ridge which turned out to be a knee-deep slog through soft snow and blocks that we had to wade through for about 35 meters. After that, we skied across a newly formed thin ice lead, side-stepping one-by-one then pulling our sleds across when we were safely on the other side. Still another obstacle was a slabbed pressure ridge where we set up a relay, shuttling each sled from one person to the next.

Around Lunch, Neil began vomiting. Any injury is a scary situation out here but physically not being able to pull a sled can be insurmountable. Luckily, we were able to divide up Neil's food, fuel and MSR stove kit between myself and David and Eric hooked up the rest behind his sled, now towing two sleds. Luckily, the improved surface conditions made pulling the extra weight (and drag) tolerable.

In the end the system worked as we skied nearly 10 miles! And even better, Neil recovered enough to pull his lightened sled for the last 20 minutes of the day. Two big successes! We finished the day with the news that we now reached 89.2425 degrees.

### **Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> of April**

At some point it needed to happen

Morning came way too soon and we had to unzip from our warm sleeping bags. To be honest besides all the challenges we are facing, two things are really tough. One is going out of your sleeping bag in the morning knowing that everything around you is beyond cold and secondly is going into your sleeping bag in the evening. The reason for this is that you put the somewhat wet sleeping bag (because of frost on it during the night) away in your sledge and so 12 hours later when you start using it again it is slightly (read almost complete) frozen, which takes a while to feel warm in it again.

Looking back at today the ice gods were kind to us today giving us fairly open pans and distinct pressure ridges that were easy to traverse. We took our skis off a few times but only for short distances. There was no open water or thin ice to speak of either. In the morning I had been thinking about the fact that I was already 3 full days on my feet, but hardly one hour later it's my turn and without any damage I stupidly slip over a piece of ice and making face to face contact with the polar snow. The good thing is I am walking in the last position at that moment so like nothing happened I grab myself together and start walking again.



At soup break, clouds rolled with a bone-chilling mist which lasted until nearly the end of the day. We struggled through some pressure for a little while at one point finding an alleyway of ice blocks that formed a perfect paths through two adjacent ridge lines. Neil has rebounded fairly decently from yesterday which is great because our goal is to reach the pole as a team. We have been making decent progress, today 10.9 nautical miles, but we have also been moving North while we slept so we are now at 89.36, which means that we crossed the half way mark and now “only” need to go another 24 nautical miles.

### **Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> of April**

Something is burning in my shoe!

There is no such thing as luck on the Arctic Ocean but somehow we got just that, lucky. The day was an easy slog with only a few minor ridges blocking our path north. Most of the day we spent winding around the drifts trying to cut straight a line northward as possible. In the afternoon, we encountered nearly a half mile of 'first year' ice - flat as a pancake without much snow on its surface which makes pulling sleds nearly effortless.

Eric was struggling a bit with his energy through much of the first three hours of the day as he had unluckily acquired Neil's bad cold, but if he would not have mentioned this to me I wouldn't have noticed it. Eric might not be the strongest guide (don't get me wrong, he is strong) but for sure very effective and clever in this kind of environment.

We are progressing nicely and we as expedition members are feeling day by day more comfortable with the Arctic. I have to say that I feel extremely strong in combination with being very effective which results in enjoying what I am doing instead of wasting energy. The only thing is that my 6000 calorie intake during a day still feels as not enough so I decide to take the coming days 2 more snack bars during the breaks. Neil is almost recovered from his illness but David has been persevered through nagging



knee pain and I have discover in the tent finally what was burning in my shoe, a blister, so I decide to cut it open with my nails and after that I clean it as good as I can.



We covered a record breaking 11 miles today, so 10 to go to the pole!

## Friday 20<sup>th</sup> of April

### Summit fever

We woke up with the goal of reaching the Geographic North Pole. I am almost sure that this was on my mind already the whole night because similarly with climbing expeditions and a summit day, I cannot sleep! But no time to complain as we had drifted roughly a mile north (one and a half total miles of drift) while we slept which left a total distance of 9.8 nautical miles from the pole. If our prior two days progress was any indication, we would be able to reach the pole without having to split the remaining mileage into two days of travel.

Of course, the sky was overcast, and while not a total white out, the light was flat enough that it was fairly difficult to distinguish some of the more obvious features of the terrain. Eric snaked through a small pressure ridge then some drifted areas. It wasn't wide open pans, but we made decent progress. Within half an hour, we encountered a slightly bigger pressure ridge and we had to take our skis off to traverse it. After our first break, we skied straight into another huge swath of pressure. The wall of ice was formidable but Eric managed to climb up on top of a sloping slab of ice that was easily two meters thick and shoved into the air twice as high. It didn't look good. For as far as he could see to the east - pressure - huge blocks and slabs (as big as trucks) blocking the path. To the west the same, but in the distance he could see a couple of open spots. We shuttled, hauled, and heaved the sleds for over an hour through four heavily ice choked - 'routes' if you could even call them that. Then, into an open area about 800 meters. And yet another set of huge blocks. By our second break (three hours of travel) I asked Eric about our progress almost knowing already the answer. We progressed less than two miles north. It became clear to me to focus on today, not on reaching the Pole, that will come later.

By soup break, we had broken free into some bigger pans but were still five and a half nautical miles from the pole. We were eating quickly and whilst Neil was still coughing, he had recovered significantly and was skiing well. Eric has no cold challenges today and is making a steady pace. Vivian had quietly managed the entire journey and seemed relieved to get to the pole today. David, who just a few days ago, hauled extra fuel for Neil, was nursing intense knee pain. Remarkably, his knee felt better when negotiating rough ice than skiing on flats, but he would push through. And I could go for two days if necessary.

It wasn't to be. Roughly one mile from the Pole, we hit another huge fracture zone. We would have to go around again. This time, we were able to follow a path of one of the prior groups who was just a few hours ahead of us. Still it took half an hour to relay sleds and haul through large slabs and rubble. 800 meters out, a thin ice lead blocked our path, but the new snow had solidified the ice enough to support our weight. Stepping up on the other side and following the tracks 'North' Eric could see a wide open expanse of ice. 100 meters out, Eric told us to unhook from our sleds and ski alongside him. From here, he used his GPS to ski back and forth, watching the numbers go up (or down). It's a bit of an art form on a moving surface like the Arctic Ocean (the ice is drifting) but after a bit of back and forth we had reached 90 degrees North at seventeen minutes past seven in the evening!!



Most obvious is that we took many pictures after hugging each other. The temperature was not too bad so I managed to shoot a personal video for Daan and the kids. I mentioned several times that you need people around you that support you and although the kids are still young they are 100% involved in all my adventures and the conversations I have with them (especially with Lente and Iris) are getting more intense and really mean a lot to me. I know that Daan and I give them in different ways a perspective of life and try to show them what is possible with the right mindset. The biggest challenge for us is more that we also need to discover their way of doing things. Back to the Pole, it's great to reach our goal but I have to admit that it feels as expected really strange to literally chase your destination instead of really seeing it. My outtake is that I must not compare the Pole with a mountain because it's simply not the same. I guess this will take some time. After making pictures with my Beyond Summits flag and one with the kids on it I share with the team 5 small bottles of Belvedere Vodka to celebrate our success. Mark a friend of us is working for LVMH (Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton) SE and this exclusive vodka is one of their brands and is very famous in Poland. I had to say that I stick to my promise not to drink alcohol before reaching my goal (safe back in Berneo) but also the 40% would probably have a negative effect on all us after 6 intense days on the ice, in combination with a very low outside temperature and still some work (read 'building camp') on our to do list.

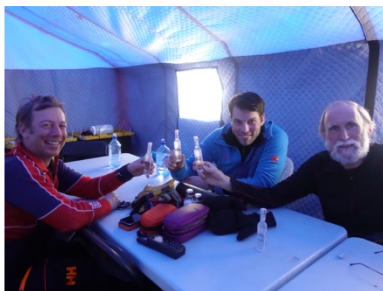
We make our way to the area where the helicopter can pick us up tomorrow and where three other teams already have put up their tents. It's still not the best weather so we set up camp quickly and make our dinner before I close my sleeping bag around eleven with a big smile on my face..

### **Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> of April**

Too much relaxing

After waking up around eight in the morning we receive the news that the second helicopter will pick us up around half past ten, so an easy lazy morning for us and time for me to start looking back at this achievement. It's always strange that I am so nervous before I go. Am I strong enough, how is my condition, will I stay healthy and so on. But this also is on my mind during the expeditions. The good thing is that I start to more and more recognize this behavior with myself and I have to say that this time I have not been nervous about anything (besides reaching the Pole) during the expedition and as a result of that I was able to take it all in. This last part is pretty important because the chances are really big that I will not come back to this place, maybe only with one of the kids if still possible at that time.

This time we only have 10 people in the heli which makes it a bit more comfortable and not wearing my down jacket is also making a huge difference. Back in Barneo luck is not in our favor because the plane that will fly out today is already full with passengers and cargo. It's not too bad to stay here one day but we have to sleep with 12 people in one big tent and they serve food but I can tell you the instant food the last day is Michelin star rated compared to this. Taking a canoe is not an option so I start chatting with some other adventurers and we open our Vodka, which makes a huge difference (especially after not drinking for almost 4 months). In the evening Keith from Polar Adventures brings a bottle of Champagne and wine on the table and we start playing connecting four (vier op een rij, in Dutch). It's not a surprise that I am together with Abdul (from Abu Dhabi) in the winning team so we keep on sitting around the game board whilst other teams make their way to sit in front of us. In the end a very nice evening so I am ready for the tent challenge.



## Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> of April

### Back to reality

I can assure you it was a challenge and if I was already tired from this trip then now it's even worse. For me it's clear Russians don't like cold nights and as a result of that they had put a huge heater in the corner of our tent with an air temperature close to +40 (that's my guess). The result is that everybody is lying half naked on his mattress and that I wake up (like all the others) every 30 minutes. At five thirty I am done and make my way to the toilet which again was on the ice a more pleasant activity than here.

After breakfast I put on all my gear again because Eric is offering to make some (I think in the end more than 300) pictures of me with the big lens. The first results that he is showing me are stunning so really happy that we took the time to do this because I will use them for sure for my presentations and web-site. It's a pity that we need to skip the lunch ... (not really) because the sound of the Anotonov 74 is approaching



us. After our sledges are packed in the plane I make my way to my seat and wait for my Coke before starting to listen to some music. With a last view outside I say goodbye to this magnificent piece of ice and really hope that we as humans are able to make changes in our behavior to keep all this beauty.

As soon as we hit the ground, phones around me start making all kind of sounds .... Wifi reception is confronting me, we are back in the civilized world.

The last days at Svalbrad I have time to relax, to call the kids, Daan and my parents and I still have the energy to go on a snowmobile scooter trip of close to 200km into the wilderness. But also with this adventure everything comes to an end.

What's next? I don't know yet, the South Pole? Another mountain? Nothing? For sure something will come up, but not yet! First quality time with the family, many motivational talks and after that I will inform you all...

My last comment speaks for itself. To all people who have been reading my updates, visited my Facebook page or website, sent me text messages and what so every I would like to say **thank you** for all your support again!

Dare to Dream!!

Jaco