

MEANWHILE ...

John Winters

(This is what happened after John Winters and Bill Swift separated from George and Tija Luste on their trip down the northeast coast of Labrador; see "Kuujuuaq to Nain" in Nastawgan (Winter 1995).

As Bill and I watched George and Tija paddle south I thought to myself, "wimp." The decision to call for help had been mine. Bill, always game and willing to do more than his share, felt his injured back would be well enough in a couple of days so he could paddle again, but I overruled him. All I could think of was the slow, tedious progress from Collins Point with only me paddling. With that thought superimposed over the furious off-shore winds already encountered, our lack of Portuguese visas, and the possibility that Bill might re-injure himself, the prospect of paddling looked bleak. I tried to rationalize the decision. The Lustes would be better off without us holding them up. We would be better off by getting home and back to work building boats. The trip was risky even for people in good health. Still, watching our companions paddle off into a light westerly made me scratch my back to see if the yellow stripe would come off.

We now had time on our hands. Virtually every means of transport in Labrador was employed in mining exploration and, since we were not in danger, our priority was low. So, Bill retired to his tent and more drugs while I made camp more secure for a possible week-long wait. The barometer was falling rapidly so I tied the canoe painter to the largest luggable rock and put extra rocks on the tent guy lines. Our location was hardly the best. We were camped on a bay open to the ocean and exposed to westerly winds that funnelled down the valley behind us and across Miriam Lake. A slightly better protected Inuit campsite was located farther out on the point among the rocks. We would find out later why they chose this location so far from fresh water and the beach.

Our routine was simple in the extreme. Read, eat, gather wood (more than we would ever need), sleep, hike. I took long walks and mulled over the nagging feeling that I had acted rashly. Despite the falling barometer, 30 July dawned calm with only a heavy swell breaking on the beach and hinting at a storm off-shore. Bill was feeling a bit better so we went for a walk but the uneven terrain aggravated Bill's back and we cut the stroll short.

That evening and night dispelled any doubts about our decision. The wind rose to a howling pitch. Tija's comparison to a windtunnel is apt. Bill's dome tent was blown flat in the gusts and my mountain tent, although it stood erect, shook, flapped, and rattled causing me an anxious night. Here I would like to offer a testimonial to the Eureka Sentinel tent. Mine is old, worn, and many times re-waterproofed and yet it stood up stoutly

to those gusts. At the height of the storm it did begin to flap wildly and I thought the fly had torn, but it had only dragged the tie-down rock up against the tent.

I can only recall one night in worse wind. We were hove to under storm tri-sail off the coast of New Jersey in the Annapolis - Newport race and the wind had that same note of malice. It would shriek and roar and then grow deathly quiet. We would brace for the worst and sure enough the next gust would knock us flat.

That night at Miriam Lake was much the same. At some point Bill, who was closer to the canoe, heard it being flipped over and got up to turn it back. The mistake made him return to his tent in worse pain than ever. This time I placed large rocks on either side of the canoe and ran a strap over top. The force of the wind must have been tremendous. Rocks that surely weighed thirty or forty pounds had been dragged across the ground by the tent guy-lines until the tent flies flogged like torn sails. In the dim light I set about searching for even larger rocks and re-set the tents.

The wind persisted the following day. What an extraordinary place this is and what exceptional reserves of patience and endurance the Inuit must have had to live in this country.

A digression is in order here to deal with the subject of reading matter. Two of our original party had light escapist reading and the other two had books dealing with travel and life in the north. I subscribe heartily to the escapist literature. Books about starvation, cannibalism, and being lost or abandoned in the north are not my idea of reassuring entertainment. I read it anyway and imagined myself in emaciated tatters when the rescue boat arrived months later through some mix-up in communications.

All that third day we watched as the wind whipped the crests off the breaking waves and hurled foam out to sea. If the Lustes were in the same weather system they sure weren't doing any paddling. I joked with Bill that morning about how handy my meagre knowledge of Portuguese would have been had we been caught in that wind. Could we have made any headway against it? I doubt it.

On our fourth day we awoke to fog and a booming surf. There was no doubt Bill was getting better but we were now approaching the first possible date for pick-up. Would he be up to a surf launch under such conditions? The more we looked at the surf the more we felt an alternative launch site was needed. One was found in a small cove just below the Inuit camp site. No doubt they too recognized the danger in a beach launch. Always practical, the Inuit also set up their tents on well-drained ground while we softer white people settled upon grassy meadows that were wet but soft. It was a long carry from the Inuit site but that was preferable to potential capsizing on the beach.