

QUICK IMPACT



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Crossing the Arctic with the Canadian Rangers

Tony Kunuk with P. Whitney Lackenbauer

With all of the talk about Arctic sovereignty and security these days, it is an honour to be part of 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group's (1 CRPG) current long-range patrol across the Arctic coastline. As Canadian Rangers, we are the military's permanent presence in every community in the Canadian North. We are not trained for combat, but we are skilled at operating on the land. We are not just the eyes, ears, and voice of the Canadian Armed Forces in the North, we also guide and support many types of military operations.

I am from Igloolik, Nunavut, and have lots of experience on the land, but this patrol is something different. In December, we conducted intensive, cold weather camping training in Yellowknife for two weeks in which we slept in tents without a heat source. This was a lot different from camping at home, where we usually keep a Coleman or heater going all night. Our instructors showed us a systematic procedure to setting up the tents, and the logic behind their "chaos" paid off during trip when 80 km/hour winds hit our tired group after a gruelling day on the land and all of the Rangers who did the training knew their roles like clockwork.

It took me almost a week to get to Inuvik to start Operation NUNALIVUT in mid-February. The first phase was to assemble the team of Rangers and 1 CRPG headquarters staff that would travel from Inuvik to the Arctic Coast and then head east, eventually ending up in Churchill, Manitoba. The plan was that, over the next fifty days, we would cover approximately 5000 kilometres by snowmobile – the vast majority of which would involve breaking our own trail.

The first group heading to Fort MacPherson before traversing extremely difficult conditions to Old Crow. From low snow and hummocky ground in the mountains to deep snow, river overflow, total whiteouts, and extreme cold, the conditions tested the team's limits. Our group had a more favourable experience travelling to Aklavik and Shingle Point before high winds forced us to take shelter in cabins for several days. It was an ordeal just gathering driftwood along the shore to fuel the stove. Plans to meet at Herschel Island were adjusted so that our teams linked up on the Babbage River, where glare ice, overflow, and high winds convinced us to hunker down as a big group until visibility improved enough to travel safely. Our now combined group returned to Shingle Point before pushing east across the Delta to Tuktoyaktuk.

We were warmly welcomed in various communities and at the BAR-2 North Warning System site on the Yukon North Slope. Rangers from local patrols rode their snowmobiles to guide our core team into their towns, where we were greeted with smiles, country food, and warm soup.

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Visibility improved as we headed east from Paulatuk, but conditions forced us to stay alert. We enjoyed sunny skies and mild winds en route to Kugluktuk, where Roger Hitkolok, an Elder and longstanding Ranger, regaled us with stories and guidance. We made exceptional progress each day, but the temperature plummeted as we made a frigid crossing of Coronation Gulf before arriving in Cambridge Bay. Here we paused for a few days for resupply, repairs, and rest before our next bounds to Gjoa Haven and Kugaaruk.

This operation is an incredible experience. As Rangers, we are backed by an excellent team from 1 CRPG, who ensure that we are well supplied and looked after, as well as the Twin Otter crews of the Royal Canadian Air Force's 440 (Transport) Squadron. We will soon turn south to track the Kivilliq coast to Churchill, Manitoba, where we plan to arrive in mid-March.

I am proud to be a part of this skilled team, which demonstrates the expertise, adaptability, and resourcefulness of those of us who live across the Canadian Arctic and North. We come from diverse backgrounds and different communities, but our service in the Rangers brings us together as a strong team. We try to avoid the pressure ridges, but we can't always do so. That is the same for Canada in an increasingly competitive world. But operations like NUNALIVUT showcase how Canadians are able to accomplish great things when we work together to exercise our sovereignty in our Canadian North.

Tony Kunuk is a Canadian Ranger from the Igloolik patrol in Nunavut. Whitney Lackenbauer is the Honorary Lieutenant Colonel of 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group and the network lead of the North American and Arctic Security Network (NAADSN).