

# Tuesday, March 30th

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*"It's kind of fun to do the impossible."*

- Walt Disney (1901-1966)

Practice and reality blended together today as the participants of the Northbound Quest attempted to set-up their tents in particularly harsh Longyearbyen weather conditions. Temperatures hovered at minus 25°C and persistent winds made for an excellent imitation of the Arctic environment which awaits them in just a few days.

New couples were formed among the group in order to already establish a routine within each of the 6 expedition tents:

Gijs & Patrick, Joost & Raf, Boudewijn & Jo, Sabine & Ruud, Doug & Perry & Wim, and Dixie & Troy.

Each participant also received his/her individual sled. This may seem like a simple allocation, but one's sled becomes a partner and assumes life-like qualities which can please as well as exasperate any expeditioner. It is an extremely important task to organize the contents of one's sled, but even more important is the duty to establish a graceful cadence with it. Just like a dance partner, one's progress depends totally upon the rhythm established between expeditioner & sled.

The important chore of food organization also occupied much of their time today. A first of possibly several disappointments during such a journey - the Belgian Oud Brugge cheese unfortunately spoiled during the shipment from Brussels to Longyearbyen. The group will have to make do with Norwegian cheese, which is also delicious in its own way.

Tomorrow the group will spend the early part of the day with the tedious task of weighing all equipment. Due to the extravagant cost of each extra kilo on board the flight to Barneo Station, the measurements need to be exact. Later in the day, Dixie hopes to take the group on a ski tour around Longyearbyen in order to test the boots, skis & bindings.

Step by step ...

# Wednesday, March 31<sup>st</sup>

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*"Adversity is like a strong wind. It tears away from us all but the things that cannot be torn, so that we see ourselves as we really are."*

-Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of a Geisha*

The settlement of Longyearbyen is preparing to close most of its shops & services for the long Easter weekend which begins tomorrow, Maundy Thursday. Fortunately, restaurants & bars will remain open, so the group will enjoy a proverbial Last Supper tomorrow night before their departure on Friday.

It was a day of much scattered activity - last shopping trips, final packing and weighing of equipment, and a strenuous ski tour and tent set-up in one of the neighboring valleys just outside of Longyearbyen. For those of you in Belgium, you will certainly identify with the challenges faced by the group as they refined their tent assembly skills in a biting relentless wind. Many of us here in Belgium did our best to stay out of the heavy winds as much as possible today, but Joost, Jo,

Boudewijn, Perry, Wim, Raf, Doug, Ruud, Sabine, Patrick & Gijs learned to accept its assault and work within its parameters.

During initial exposure to bitter polar cold, Dixie teaches inexperienced visitors to relax instead of fight the cold or resist the wind. It takes practice, but once the reflex to relax becomes natural, intricate movements feel less complicated. Dixie reported that he and Troy are very proud of this group and they see that each individual has learned much already in his/her extensive preparation.

## Thursday, April 1<sup>st</sup>

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*"The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science."*

Albert Einstein 1879 - 1955

*"He who hesitates is a damned fool."*

Mae West 1893 - 1980

It has come so far.

Tomorrow morning at 10:00 the intrepid members of the Northbound Quest will take-off from a perfectly good runway in Longyearbyen and land some 2 ½ hours later on the frozen Arctic Ocean at Barneo Station.

Who is the April Fool?

Actually, we are if we underestimate the engineering marvel that composes Barneo Station. Joost, Jo, Boudewijn, Patrick, Doug, Gijs, Sabine, Wim, Ruud, Raf, and Perry accompanied Troy and Dixie this evening to the general meeting hosted by Vicaar, the Russian company which runs all activities in and around Barneo Station. The team listened to an eye-opening account of the yearly Barneo installation, an intricate process which commences with parachute drops of fuel, followed by helicopter deposits of tractors. Those tractors then work in a final push for 2 solid days, round the clock. The result: a runway "sculpture" which defies the imagination. The first flight into that runway contains (obviously a courageous crew) and the tents and other equipment which compose the tent city of Barneo. And tomorrow it will open its doors (so to speak) to the first wave of visitors, which will include our group.

The safety portion of tonight's briefing by Vicaar was a reassuring blend of strict organization and total professionalism. Tomorrow's passengers were prepared for a basic flight, one in which they are expected to wear their expedition clothing and encouraged to practice self-restraint as their will be no toilets on board. Each passenger was also asked to bring a thermos full of hot water for his/her arrival into Barneo. That thermos will provide them with their first refreshment once they are out on the ice - the kitchen staff at Barneo simply does not have the time nor the resources to supply every incoming expeditioner with a full thermos of boiled water.

The group also said goodbye to their sleds and expedition equipment, which have already been loaded into the cargo section of the airplane.

All that is left for the team to do is eat a nourishing final dinner in Longyearbyen, get a good night's rest, and step into the airplane which will transport them to a mysterious place - a place which will slowly reveal itself once the aircraft gently kisses the Arctic ice and each individual steps into a world of surreal beauty.

# Bonus Departure Update – Friday, April 2<sup>nd</sup> - 9:23 am

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The Northbound Quest Team has left their Longyearbyen guesthouse and is now at the airport awaiting departure for Barneo.

Scheduled take-off time: 10:00 UTC +2 (same time zone as Belgium).

At a moment like this, it is especially important to thank Telenet for their partnership in the Northbound Quest. Dank u wel voor jullie steun. (“Thank you for your support.”) The Northbound Quest is composed of a group of incredibly motivated individuals who should make you very proud.

Some of you may have also heard from your loved one this morning, and I just had a quick phone call from Dixie. Please know that even though he has been on many similar departures, he was just as excited this morning as if it were his first visit to the North Pole. Fun, exciting moments to be sure.

## Friday, April 2<sup>nd</sup> – evening update

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*“ You may find yourself in another part of the world ... You may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?”*

*Once in a Lifetime, David Byrne et al*

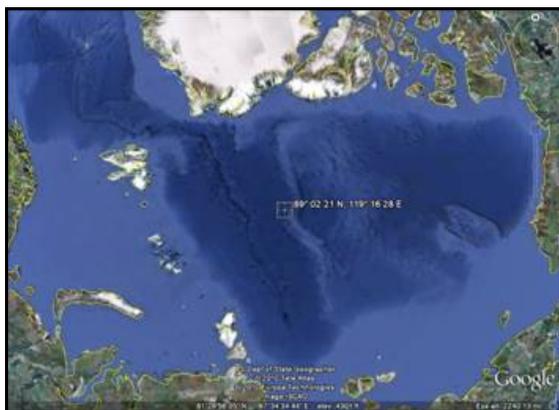
Daily Positions:

Start: 89° 00' 40 N

119° 43' 11 E

End: 89° 02' 21 N

119° 16' 28 E



Stoves were purring at each tent site as the weary members of the Northbound Quest were settling in for dinner at their first campsite on the Arctic Ocean.

Dixie's report: "All good. Very good."

The pilot of their flight into Barneo must have been a bit of a "show-off" because he provided his passengers with a perfect landing on the ice. Truly a soft kiss and a gentle roll. So much for abstinence!

The team spent it first hours at Barneo taking care of details such as:

- Loading fuel for stoves
- Receiving 2 rifles, 2 day/night flares and 2 warning guns
- Equipment check and final meeting with the Vicaar staff in the Barneo mess tent

Our team received a spot on the first helicopter flight to their Last Degree drop-off point and set out for the rest of the day. It is hard to imagine, but many expeditioners were also waiting to get started so the privileged first flight was much appreciated.

The weather forecast, provided by our own Belgian climatologist Marc De Keyser from World Wide Weather Expeditions (<http://weather.thisconnect.com/>), looks good for the next 2 days to come.

For those of you with Google Earth, I will provide their daily position - you can plug it in and their location on the map will appear.

Now Jo, Ruud, Doug, Raf, Wim, Perry, Gijs, Boudewijn, Sabine, Patrick & Joost are slowly winding down and most probably trying to comprehend where on Earth they are ... perhaps the greater shock will be tomorrow morning when their eyes first open.

Surreal, exciting & humbling. Welcome to the Arctic!

## Saturday, April 3rd

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*"When you're safe at home you wish you were having an adventure; when you're having an adventure you wish you were safe at home."* ~ Thornton Wilder

Daily Position:

89° 09 05 N

118° 14 28 E

Distance covered (in "zig zag"): 3km on Day 1 + 14km on Day 2 = Total of 17km

Distance to the North Pole: 94 km

Tonight's phone call from Dixie was unfortunately filled with some worrisome news: Northbound Quest participant Joost Callens discovered this evening in camp that 3 of his fingers are showing signs of frost-bite. We are sharing this information only in the knowledge that both Dixie and Joost have telephoned Joost's partner back in Belgium, Ann.

Safety remains THE top priority on this and any expedition and Dixie and Troy are not taking this situation lightly. A doctor from the Barneo Station will arrive by helicopter at around 21:40 this evening to examine Joost. If he determines that Joost needs further attention, then Joost will be taken by helicopter back to Barneo Station. Should further medical care be deemed necessary, he will fly out on the first flight back to Longyearbyen.

According to Dixie's brief update, the day proceeded very nicely and progression was smooth although in a "zig zag" manner instead of a straight line. While temperatures were indeed cold (mid-minus 20°'s), there were no unusually harsh conditions - no exposure to open water, no assault from high winds. Shortly after setting up camp, Joost called Dixie to his tent to show him his fingers. Dixie was shocked to see that visible frost bite was apparent and called over the doctors in the team to offer their opinion. A unanimous decision was made to call in the helicopter.

Luckily, the weather and ice conditions are good for a helicopter landing at the team's campsite. No polar expedition is complete without a trustworthy and knowledgeable climatologist. Our Belgian weatherman, Marc De Keyser, is having short contact with Dixie each night for weather updates & short-term forecasts in the North Pole region. His link:

<http://weather.thisconnect.com/2010/04/north-bound-quest-and-dixie-on-the-arctic-ice/>

It goes without saying that I will send any additional information through to you all as soon as I hear back from Dixie. He is scheduled to call back at around 22:00 tonight.

Until then, we'll hope for the best for Joost and give thanks that swift action is being taken.

## April 3<sup>rd</sup> follow-up update – 11:03pm:

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NB Quest team member Joost Callens has been evacuated via helicopter from the team's campsite back to Barneo Station.

After a quick on-site examination by the Barneo Station doctor, it was determined to proceed with strict prudence due to the visible frost-bite on Joost's fingers.

The helicopter intervention was smooth, efficient and without incident. A decision will be made tomorrow morning if Joost will take the scheduled flight back to Longyearbyen for further medical treatment.

It goes without saying that this is a difficult moment for Joost, and also for the rest of the team. Due to the rapid succession of events no one can really place what has happened. Joost's enthusiastic approach to Dixie almost 3 years ago was a decisive factor in commencing with the Northbound Quest in the first place, and his positive attitude has flowed through this team ever since. This will be a first serious mental test for everyone involved. Focus will keep everyone positive - and a good night's sleep will do wonders.

The temperature has dropped to -30°C at the team's campsite, and logistics are being arranged so that Raf will not have to sleep alone in a tent. Body heat from a tent-mate is crucial to sleeping comfort and Joost's departure has created the need for shifting around.

Dixie closed his update by reiterating his respect for the Russian logistics in the Arctic, and in particular the helicopter "cowboy" pilots. It is with comfort and trust that he said "goodnight" and I wish you all the same peace of mind.

May the Easter Bunny (in the US) and the Easter Bells (here in Belgium) bring all of you a joyous Easter morning! Thanks to Raf's chocolate, our loved ones in the Arctic will enjoy some holiday treats of their own.

# Sunday, April 4<sup>th</sup> – Easter morning on the ice

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Happy Easter, Everyone! Brief morning update from the Northbound Quest Team:

The team awakened to bright sunshine and a temperature of -32°C. Very slight wind out of the south, which is welcome indeed. Temperatures are expected to rise within the next 24 hours.

Chocolate eggs somehow were dropped at the campsite ... the Easter Bunny/Easter Bells must have been very determined to travel so far.

News from Barneo confirmed what the team already suspected – Joost has wisely decided to go back to Longyearbyen for further medical examination. He will depart Barneo on the scheduled flight this morning.

The weather forecast shows some potentially challenging conditions for Tuesday, April 6<sup>th</sup>. Therefore, the team hopes to cover as much distance as possible today and tomorrow. Should the inclement weather (snow & increased winds) arrive as predicted, then the team can wait it out safely & comfortably in their tents if need be.

More news later tonight as planned ...

# Sunday, April 4<sup>th</sup> – evening update

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*“Conversation about the weather is the last refuge of the unimaginative.”*

Oscar Wilde, 1854 - 1900

Tonight's Position:

89° 16 18 N

121° 37 42 E

- Distance covered: 14 km
- Distance from the North Pole: 81 km

Without descending into the predictable, it is important to begin tonight's update with the weather conditions that our Northbound Quest team has faced and will most likely encounter.

Everyone in the group expected to be cold in the North Pole region, but expectations and realities are indeed different concepts. The temperature around 20:45 this evening was -24°C, but it may have even been colder during the hours of progression. The team made excellent progression today and in the words of Dixie, “Everyone did very well.”

It will come as no surprise, though, to hear that the cold is taking its toll on several team members, particularly with discomfort in their extremities. Fingers are of course vulnerable since gloves are removed from time to time to manipulate equipment or even to take a picture. It is also only normal

that each body must acclimate in its own time to such temperature variations, and no one with polar experience is surprised to see that on Day 3 that adaptation is not yet complete for several members. The guides and doctors are keeping a close eye on each individual and more importantly, the group is keeping an eye on each other.

The weather is, however, about to change. According to Marc De Keyser from World Wide Weather Expeditions (<http://weather.thisconnect.com/>), the easterly drift which has pushed the team today may change to an undesired southeasterly drift. What is certain is that temperatures will rise and snow will fall the day after tomorrow. Winds will also pick up but by Wednesday, April 7<sup>th</sup> the team may see temperatures as high as -5°C with continued snowfall.

Good news for Joost Callens: he returned to Longyearbyen today and was treated and released from the hospital there. While his frostbite is extremely uncomfortable, he seems to have caught it in time to prevent severe damage. Joost is now arranging his travel plans to return home to Belgium.

Tomorrow I will begin my journey up to Longyearbyen together with our 7-year-old daughter, Robin. As I mentioned to the group earlier, I will not be writing a Daily Update tomorrow since I will be flying from Brussels - Copenhagen - Oslo - Tromso (arriving at midnight) and then continuing to Longyearbyen on Tuesday. Should our travel plans go as scheduled, I will be back with an update to all of you on Tuesday evening, April 6<sup>th</sup>.

## Tuesday, April 6th

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A short update from here in Longyearbyen.

Position:

89° 27 51 N

132° 53 14 E

- KM Covered: 13 km + negative drift
- KM from the North Pole: 59.99
- Temperature: -13°C

When the group awoke this morning, they were 5km backward from their arrival point last night. This is the nature of progression in the Arctic - sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.

By noon today, the group caught up with their deficit and began to gain distance.

Dixie sounded extremely positive about the day. No more complaints about the cold, no more visible struggling ... one solid unit.

More tomorrow ... time for us (7-year-old Robin and Mama Julie) to rest up from our travels.

# Wednesday, April 7th - Morning update

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"Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul."

-John Muir

"Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

A brief morning update from the splendors of Spitsbergen, and in particular the settlement of Longyearbyen. We awoke this morning to the Arctic in all of her glory - extraordinary blue sky and pure white snow are inviting us to get out and play.

But we first wanted to update all of you on Joost Callens, who will be departing Longyearbyen in just a few hours. Joost seems to be doing well on all levels. He spent his time back in Longyearbyen placing his expedition in a useable context, something clearly necessary after the intensity of such a powerful experience. He seems to be physically comfortable and even proudly showed his raw frostbite photos to little Robin while she was eating her pizza - something disgustingly perfect for a 7-year-old! We wish Joost safe travels back to Belgium, but we know that a large part of him will remain out on the ice with his team until they return as well.

Our team continues today in what may be less than ideal weather conditions in their part of the Arctic. Just to keep up their spirits, we have sent them via text one good "blonde" joke (since we are blonde, we don't feel so guilty). From experience, simple & silly works best out there.

# Wednesday, April 7th - Evening Update

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*"I'm not afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship."* - Louisa May Alcott, 1832-1888

This evening's update begins with a wicked fact of Arctic travel: no matter how hard one works to progress, nature possesses the ability to erase the effort with one swipe.

Jo, Boudewijn, Doug, Raf, Sabine, Ruud, Wim, Perry, Gijs & Patrick endured what Troy best described as a "brutal" journey today. While they slept (or attempted to sleep) last night through a raging storm with winds gusting to 53km/hour, they were pushed backward 15 kilometers from their goal. As the storm continued this morning, they lost another 4 ½ kilometers.

How many of us would even consider getting out of our sleeping bag after that? Well, they did.

Dixie and Troy were able to motivate the group to head out this afternoon when the winds diminished, but after a short while they found themselves in a maze of rubble and open water. They picked their way through the intricate puzzle, admittedly needing some strict guidance from Dixie and Troy in this potentially dangerous zone. As they struggled along, visibility reduced back to whiteout conditions and winds increased announcing Part 2 of the inclement weather. One bright side to the storm: temperatures are relatively high tonight at around -5°C.

Exhausted, the group found a safe and sturdy campsite and called Barneo Station for the evening check-in. They learned that other "Last Degree" groups in the area were also huddled down and waiting out the storm.

Despite the difficult conditions, Dixie reported that everyone was in excellent spirits. He described a stunning effort on the part of "novice" polar travelers and clearly expressed sincere respect for their courage today.

## Friday, April 9<sup>th</sup> – early update

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*"Life's challenges are not supposed to paralyze you, they're supposed to help you discover who you are."* ~ Bernice Johnson Reagon (b. 1942)

It seems trite to mention a luxury problem such as internet while our loved ones are struggling to progress toward the North Pole. Suffice to say that we are back on-line after last night's short interruption and enjoying lovely weather once again in Longyearbyen.

Thank you to both Pieterjan Kempynck & Elke Jeurissen for getting the message out that all was fine with the group in their campsite last night. It was another day of cruel efforts as the strong winds continued to create an omnipotent backward drift. As Pieterjan mentioned on the website, the chances for making it to the North Pole are less than ever. But experience with polar expeditions forces me to remind everyone: "Never say never."

It is also very important to add that the team sounded extremely positive last night. They were allowed to "play" with the 2 protective dry suits which Dixie and Troy pulled out for a small training. Due to the lack of ice structure in the leads and increasing open water, the guides thought it would be a good idea to allow the team to practice donning the clumsy suits and experience an Arctic swim. "Magical moments" in the words of Dixie.

We are also receiving regular updates from Joost Callens back in Belgium. He is continuing medical follow-up for his fingers there and clearly still living vicariously with the team out on the ice.

The usual telephone check-in from Dixie is scheduled for 20:00 tonight. Even if it takes smoke signals, we'll get the word out to you that everyone is safe, sound and having the time of his/her life! Until this evening ...

# Friday, April 9<sup>th</sup> – evening update

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Current Position:

89° 16 48 N

144° 31 23 E

While the team has not moved their camp since yesterday, nature has shifted their position by pushing them 12 more kilometers away from the North Pole.

The wind, which was stronger than yesterday, has created visibility so poor that Dixie and Troy have wisely kept the team in their safe campsite instead of trying to progress in potentially dangerous conditions. The sun is only now this evening beginning to shine through the grey skies at their location. If a weather window lies in waiting, it will most likely be too late for our team.

Due to the agreed upon time limit provided by our Russian Arctic transport team, and due to the obvious inability to progress against nature's stubborn forces, the team has abandoned hope of completing the Last Degree to the North Pole.

Vicaar, our Russian logistics team in the Arctic, has scheduled a helicopter pickup for the Northbound Quest team for tomorrow morning BUT ONLY IF WEATHER CONDITIONS PERMIT. Should tomorrow flow as planned by Vicaar, the following events will occur:

- The team will be picked up by helicopter at their current campsite.
- They will fly together to the North Pole, where they will hold a brief celebration of their unforgettable time in the Arctic.
- The helicopter will then deposit the group at Barneo Station, where they will await their airplane flight back to Longyearbyen.

These events will only take place if several pieces of a very intricate puzzle fit together. The weather must be safe for flight in 4 separate locations: the team's campsite, the North Pole, Barneo Station and Longyearbyen.

It goes without saying that I will keep you all posted as I hear from Dixie throughout the day tomorrow. I will be busy hunting down some rooms for everybody as Longyearbyen has filled up with many travelers hoping to achieve their own Arctic expedition - as our group exits the ice, a new load of hopeful adventurers commences with their own polar quests.

Also, many of you may already be asking how soon your loved one can return home. Please know that once they arrive back in Longyearbyen, they will need approximately 2 days to clean, repair, and pack their expedition equipment for the shipment back to Belgium.

Until our next contact - as soon as I hear from Dixie I will pass it along to all of you.

# Saturday, April 10th

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Cruel irony:

The weather gods decided to finally cooperate today in grand style.

The team was picked up from their final Arctic Ocean campsite by helicopter at 9:45 and taken to the North Pole for a small celebration. Some of you were lucky to hear from them via Iridium at the North Pole - a surreal experience to be sure!

Since then, the team has returned to Barneo and has successfully landed with just enough time to transfer to the waiting flight back to Longyearbyen. They are scheduled to land at 15:00.

Since the logistics here need to be finalized, I must close with this short and final update by saying that it has been a sincere pleasure to share the Northbound Quest with you all. Enjoy the many stories you will hear from your loved ones, and even more the reunion which awaits you all in the coming week.

# Sunday, April 11<sup>th</sup> – morning update

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By now you have all probably re-connected with Jo, Boudewijn, Patrick, Gijs, Wim, Doug, Perry, Ruud, Sabine & Raf since their return yesterday afternoon to Longyearbyen.

They all appear to be extremely healthy and very happy - it is no surprise that we shared many stories last night after a dinner together in a beautiful greenhouse here in the middle of the high Arctic. We began the evening with a toast to Joost and the team was touched by his kind message of congratulations which he left behind - Dixie read it aloud to everyone. Robin then gave each participant her homemade artwork, a personalized painting which serves as her official certificate of merit for each of the team.

Today the snow is really blowing around outside and the team is now busy in a protected hangar sorting their equipment. They will be re-packing the sleds for shipment back to Belgium and with "all hands on deck" they should be able to wrap-up the logistics by tomorrow.

It has been a true pleasure sharing the Northbound Quest with all of you. Enjoy the photos, enjoy the stories, and enjoy the moments of being together with your polar traveler.

