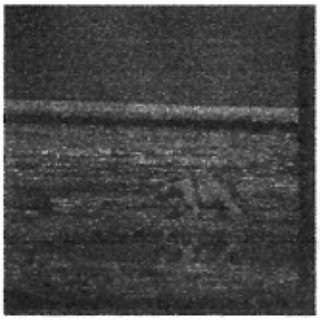

The Derelict Ship

(And the Polar Bear)

By the end of September you could feel a chill in the air. Driving to work along the Rideau Canal that autumn of 1967 I watched the foliage that grew along the Parkway take on their fall colors of yellow and gold. By December the canal wore a thin layer of ice and I was to experience my first Canadian winter in four years. Anyone who has ever experienced an Ottawa Valley winter knows the adjustments I had to make after spending four years in France.

I was an Aviation Safety Technician in the RCAF and took up my new assignment with Aerospace Engineering Test Establishment at Uplands airport. Along with a team of test pilots, engineers and technician such as myself we researched and tested new equipment for the military.

I had returned home in July of our centennial year from a tour of duty with our NATO forces in Europe. My wife and I felt like strangers in own country and we were looking forward to establishing a permanent home in the city where we married ten years previously. During my fourth month at work the air force had a different plan in mind and I found myself on the move again.

On the third of January 1968 when my blood had thickened enough to ward off the cold winds that swept down from the Gatineau hills I was sent to Churchill Manitoba. The air force maintained a base there and we took with us two new aircraft for cold weather trials.

Our assignment would be to conduct cold weather trials on two recently purchased aircraft. One was the Canadian built Buffalo and the other a French Falcon Fanjet. I will not go into the problems we encountered with these aircraft, only to say that the Canadian built bird developed fewer cold weather snags than the French built one!

We had a captain from the US air force attached to our unit and he was eager to go north with us and learn the ways of the Inuit. Before this trip was over he would learn a valuable lesson about Canadian Arctic wild life.

We were billeted in a hotel on the airport, a short walk from the hangar where we were to work during our tenure there. The airbase at Churchill was laid out in much the same manner as most northern town. The majority of the buildings were of the pre-fab style connected by long above ground tunnels that housed the heating pipes, communication cables and water supplies.

We were able to walk through these tunnels to perhaps three hundred yards of the hangar. At the end of the last building to the hangar someone had attached a rope between the two structures and it soon become apparent why this rope was there as the second day on the job we experienced our first whiteout condition. In order to find our way to and from

work we shuffled along heads down against the ever-prevailing wind with one hand on the lifeline and the other holding the hood of our parka tightly around our faces.

In the evenings with the temperature hovering at the –45-degree mark and the world so still you could hear the silence we often walked to the local Hudson Bay store in town to purchase Eskimo carvings.

The stars hung low over our heads and the aurora borealis snapped and hissed at us as we made our way back to the hotel with our lungs burning from the cold frigid air.

One of my most vivid memories of living and working in the Canadian arctic is of the relentless winds that swept over the frozen terrain. Lying in bed at night waiting for sleep to arrive I could hear the building creaking and snapping with each degree of temperature drop.

The winds played a symphony with every nook and cranny of the hotel and shook the screen-covered windows that were a permanent fixture to keep out the hordes of mosquitoes and black flies that appeared during the brief summers.

I will not dwell on the day to day activities of our tenure at Churchill but on a rather humorous event that occurred near the end of our assignment. From the air we were able to see an old derelict ship that had lost her battle with a Hudson Bay storm years ago and was cast ashore on the rocks and ice a few miles from Churchill. Over the years the ice had taken its toll on the hull and about all that remained was the bow.

After lunch on our last Sunday in Churchill the Captain decided to visit the ship and take pictures to show his family back in Florida. Four or five of us piled into a Volkswagen mini van and drove as close to the wreck as possible and walked the remainder of the way across the ice to where she sat.

Making our way to what remained of the deck we clambered about the hulk and the Captain made his way to the bow that stood at a sharp angle and surveyed the horizon. Very little else remained of the ship, having been battered by countless winter storms and years of rust.

Across the frozen bay perhaps a half-mile away we saw a polar bear that from the corner of his eye saw our movements and turned to stare in our direction.

"Let us get a little closer so I can get a better picture the Captain said." "Let us get away from this wreck and into the van," I said with all the authority I could muster. "That bear can make it across the ice quicker than we can make it to the van if he has a mind to." At this point "I jumped ship" and ran to the vehicle followed closely by my companions. The Captain continued taking pictures until the bear started ambling towards the ship.

In 1972 we were scanning the Great Lakes for Energy Mines and Resources with Infra –Red Cameras using one of the airplanes we had tested at Churchill during the winter of 1967/68. The Johnson Space Center in Houston Texas took an interest with the scans of the American sides of the lakes and we were invited to tour the facilities.

Stopping for fuel and lunch at a US airforce base we were filing our flight plan for the next leg of the trip when the Captain who was with us in Churchill arrived at the air movements' hangar.

"I heard some Canadians were on the base" he said "and just stopped by to say hello."

He saw me standing off to the side and said to a friend who was with him. "This is the "damn Canuck" I told you about who had me wrestle a polar bear the winter we spent at Churchill Manitoba."

He walked out to where our airplane was parked and shook hands with all the crew. The pilot kicked the tires of our bird, declared it airworthy and we were off on the next leg of our adventure. *There was no life like it* Roger Cyr