

MAULIQ

A WINTER SEAL HUNT



by David F. Pelly

Dawn has not yet broken over the small cluster of iglus on the vast plain of ice. Inside, lying beneath their caribou-skin robes, the hunters awake while it is still dark. They sit on the edge of their sleeping platforms and quickly dress. The air inside the iglus is so frigid that they can see their breath as they speak. Will the weather today permit a hunt?



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Eating raw liver from a freshly caught seal, on the sea ice, western Canadian Arctic, ca.1915.
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In this scene from the early 20th century, in a winter camp somewhere on the Arctic sea ice, 10 Inuit families have cast their fates together in the struggle to survive. There are about a hundred people in the camp – more than in the less-well-off groups, those with no dogs and less of the equipment necessary for travel and the hunt. More hunters mean a better chance of success and survival. They are living life on the edge, for there is no excess of food here. Their families’ survival depends on their success at the seal hunt.

Sometime before the winter solstice, once the sea ice was solid and enough snow had accumulated to enable them to build iglus, the families left their camps on the land and moved onto the ice, taking with them only the barest necessities. The lucky ones had a dog team to pull their loaded sleds. Many carried all their possessions on their backs: the caribou skins to keep them warm, the *qulliq* (soapstone oil lamp) to heat and light the iglu, and the winter seal-hunting tools that had been readied over the preceding months.

Now the most difficult phase of life in the Arctic is beginning. Windswept and barren, the sea ice will be the people’s home and their principal hunting ground for half the year. For several months there will be very little light, sometimes only twilight, by which to travel and hunt. Much of the time, the families are hungry and have little blubber to burn in the lamps.

On this day, the weather is clear. The hunters will go out in search of *nattiq*, the ringed seal, the linchpin in the traditional Inuit struggle to survive in much of the circumpolar world. At the onset of freeze-up, the seals make small holes through the relatively thin ice so that they can breathe. As winter progresses, they swim under the ever-thickening ice from one *aghu* to the next in turn, keeping them open by gnawing and scraping at the ice. It is these holes (*agluit*) that the hunters look for. In the winter hunt, called *mauliq*, the hunters wait for the seals to appear at their breathing holes and strike them with their harpoon as the animals rise to the surface to take a breath.

On this early winter morning, the hunters dress by the light of their *qulliq*, pulling on their warm caribou-skin clothing, which their wives made at their camp on land before the family moved out onto the sea ice for the winter. Out of respect for the animals, the products of land mammals and those of sea

mammals must be kept separate. Because the ice is the domain of sea mammals, the caribou-skin clothing to be worn while seal hunting out on the ice must be made on land. In the same way, a pot used for cooking caribou meat is not to be used for cooking seal, and any tools soiled with caribou blood are not to be used on seals.

The hunters put on caribou-skin parkas, the warmest coat there is, made from the thick hides of the autumn caribou. Their pants and mittens, too, are made from caribou skin, but their boots

Several families travelling to their winter camp, western Canadian Arctic, ca.1915.
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might be made of either caribou or sealskin, which is waterproof. To improve his chances at the hunt, by ensuring that the seals' souls are positively disposed toward him, a hunter might carry the teeth of an Arctic fox, or a sea scorpion might be sewn into the back of his inner coat. Teeth or claws from a seal he caught previously might be sewn onto the outside of the inner coat. All of these amulets will bring the hunter good fortune.

The hunters leave camp as a hint of daylight slowly spreads across the sky. Before departing, they might eat a piece of meat, if there is any left from the hunt the day before, or they might just drink some warmed seal blood or water. Then they head out across the ice. They walk, together with two or three dogs, to the chosen hunting area, sometimes two or three kilometres distant, where they have previously found some productive *agluit*.

When the hunters finally arrive in the area where they know there must be seals, they go straight to work to find the *agluit* used by seals in the past few days. They use the shafts of their harpoons to poke the crust of snow that covers the sea ice, hoping to hit the tiny breathing holes underneath. It is worse than trying to find a needle in a haystack. They also look for visual clues: sometimes the snow over an *aglu* has a slight contour to it. It is very subtle, but a hunter can spot it on the flat sea ice from some distance away. Often dogs aid hunters in their search. Even the hunters without enough dogs to pull a sled usually have one or two dogs to help find the *agluit*.

After a hunter has found an *aglu*, he peers through the hole to examine the water underneath. Black, open water is a sign that the seal has visited recently, probably within the last few minutes. Some hunters say they can even smell the residue of the seal's breath. Somewhat cloudy water, as it begins to freeze, suggests a longer time has passed since the seal's last visit. A thin crust of ice means even longer, and thick ice suggests an abandoned hole.

Each hunter sets up at a different hole. The hunter usually stands on something, such as an old piece of caribou hide with the hair still on, to muffle any sound his feet might make on the hard-packed squeaky snow. One hunter has brought his son with him so that he can learn the traditional methods of the hunt. The boy walks in a wide circle around his father's *aglu*. As he walks, he slowly decreases the radius of the circle, hoping the noise of his feet on the ice will drive a seal in toward the breathing hole, where the hunter waits.

Ten men are scattered across the sea ice, bent over at the waist, motionless, waiting – tiny, insignificant figures in a vast panorama of whiteness. Each hunter is positioned on the downwind side of the hole so that the seal won't smell him when it surfaces, and the frigid wind blows in their faces. It is bone-chillingly cold, and there are no snowmobiles parked off to one side, no warm houses an hour's drive away, no refrigerators at home full of store-bought food, no stoves to turn on with the flick of a switch. The hunters stand motionless for hours, harpoon in hand, waiting and concentrating, listening for the sound of the water rising up in a sudden gush. That means that the seal is swimming up toward the breathing hole. When



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Inuit families building their iglus on the sea ice in the western Canadian Arctic, ca.1915.
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A family heads out onto the sea ice in early winter to establish their seal-hunting camp, Coronation Gulf, western Canadian Arctic, ca.1915.
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Dragging a seal back to camp after a successful hunt at the aglu, western Arctic, ca.1915. Diamond Jenness Collection, Canadian Museum of Civilization.



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the hunter hears a *whoosh*, the seal is exhaling and the hunter must strike downward with his harpoon.

Each hunter hopes for success. But far more important, they all understand, is their collective success. If just one of them catches a single seal, everyone in camp will have something to eat and every iglu will have some blubber for the lamp. If several men catch seals, they will feast. If one of them is fortunate enough to catch two in the day at the *aglu*, he will consider it a very good day. More than that, and it will likely be a day he will never forget.

Hours pass. Finally, one hunter hears the gushing sound of a seal pushing water ahead of it through the conical hole in the ice. He reacts quickly and precisely, thrusting his harpoon down forcefully into the *aglu* and into the seal as it rises to the surface. Once the harpoon head is lodged beneath the skin of the seal, it comes off the end of the shaft as the hunter pulls back his harpoon. As tension comes onto the sealskin line tied to the middle of the harpoon head, it rotates inside the seal and turns perpendicular to the open cut through which it entered. In this way, the harpoon head acts as a toggle under the animal's skin. The seal is now firmly attached to the end of a strong length of sealskin rope. With his other hand, the hunter uses the shaft of his disarmed harpoon to open the hole so that the seal can be pulled up on top of the ice, where it is killed by a quick, sharp blow to the head.

After the seal is lying dead on the ice, the hunter splits open the belly at just the right spot to remove the liver and a small piece of blubber. All the other hunters from nearby *agluit* gather to share in the first taste of the seal. The man who caught the seal kneels and carefully slices the fat and the steaming liver and lays them on the white snow. The other hunters kneel to one side and watch in silence, as if paying homage. Then they all eat together. It is part of the ritual, even a mark of respect. Afterwards, the hunter closes up the seal again, using a long bone needle, so that the seal will not lose any precious blood or internal organs, all of which will be consumed later.

Back at the camp, the women and children are waiting patiently, with a quiet resignation for whatever may come. There may be fresh meat, or there may not. With luck, they will know by nightfall. The hunter who caught the seal drags it back to his iglu, another arduous walk, this time in failing light. People in camp are happy to see that there will be some meat to eat. The hunter's wife immediately gives the dead seal a drink of fresh water, as a mark of respect, and then she completes the butcher's task. The meat is distributed throughout the camp according to custom, certain pieces going to certain people, depending on relationships.

After the seal has been butchered and distributed, everyone gathers together to eat, to share in the spoils of the day's hunt, however meagre, however bountiful. Every woman receives a small portion of the seal fat, which she will work, pounding it with the rounded end of a musk ox horn, to render the oil used for the *qulliq*, the oil lamp, which lights and warms her family's iglu.

In the warmth of the *qulliq*'s soft light, the evening ends with the hunters sharing their experiences of the day. Their thoughts are never far from the hunt. Tomorrow, they hope, will be another day for *mauliq*. 

Regular contributor
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