

Polar

STORY BY
ROBERT B.
NANCARROW

FIRST
AWARD
23RD BIG
GAME
AWARDS
PROGRAM

NUMBER NINE

Bear

HUNTING POLAR BEAR

by traditional means, using dog sled and Inuit guides, is without question one of North America's greatest challenges. We were using a team of seven dogs, solely for transportation. John, my guide, didn't believe in chasing polar bear with dogs. His exact words were, "We will 'hunt' the polar bear with dogs." That's exactly what we were doing, the sixth day of my 15-day hunt.

I had just been thrown from the sled, when John prematurely threw out the anchor before the sled had slowed enough for a safe dismounting. I landed on my chest, with my rifle under me, sliding across the ice and snow. We had tried to intercept a large boar that had been pursuing a sow, with two year-old cubs. We just weren't quick enough. The boar had reached the new ice, and was quickly on its way to the rough ice. I had to move fast.

At 180 yards, I quickly rested my .300 Winchester Magnum on the nearest block of ice, placed the cross hairs on the bear's shoulder, and pulled the trigger. At the re-

port of the rifle, the bear stopped running and stood up. I was surprised I had not hit the bear, but now I had a standing shot. I squeezed the trigger a second time, again with no results. I shot a third, followed by a fourth and final shot, still with no results. I quickly checked my scope to see if it was loose, and inserted four more shells. By this time, the bear had started to run to the rough ice. I fired two more shots, making a total of six shots fired, and did not touch the bear. My guide looked at me with disbelief, but with calm reservations that we would see another bear and maybe get another shot. Not finding the scope loose, I blamed myself in my excitement for just plain poor shooting, never thinking that my gun was at fault.

It was very difficult to sleep that night because I knew that I had just lost a trophy of a lifetime. John was reassuring and I was able to finally fall asleep. The following day we started our hunt where we left off the day before. The tracks were still there, and the mistakes I made were still fresh in my mind. We then took to the huge track and



JOHN KEOGAK WAS ROBERT NANCARROW'S INUIT GUIDE DURING HIS POLAR BEAR HUNT.

Polar NUMBER NINE Bear

started to hunt again. By noon, we came up against a wall of ice. John decided that we would hunt in the direction of our main camp, 10 miles back. Not feeling as though I was going to have the good fortune of seeing a bear of that magnitude again, I sat in the dog sled with mixed emotions. John stopped and told me to stay with the sled as he climbed a large block of ice, to look for bear. He quickly motioned me to join him, and when I got there, he was pointing a quarter-mile in the distance to a very large bear, eating a bearded seal. The bear was on new ice, approximately four to six inches thick. The wind was coming from the north, and was starting to pick up. According to our GPS, we were 22 miles west of Banks Island, on the Arctic ice flows. I asked John if he would stay with the dogs, so they wouldn't bark, and I would make the stalk alone. He agreed and wished me luck.

I was now on my own, crawling the entire distance since there was nothing but smooth ice between myself and the bear. On my belly, I was instantly aware that the ice was rolling under me. It seemed to intensify as the wind became stronger, but all that mattered was, I was getting closer to my trophy. I was now within 180 yards, and although my heart was hammering, I elected to take my shot from that distance. As I calmly squeezed the trigger, expecting to hit the bear, the horror of the day before became real once more. I fired the second, third and fourth shots, all with the same results. I could not hit the bear at this distance and had to come up with a different plan. My guide was too far away to get his rifle and the bear had now become nervous, moving further away. The one thing in my favor was the

strong cross wind, and the constant cracking of the ice, which sounded as loud as the report of my rifle. The only two options I had were to give it up completely or get within archery range, and hope for the best. I chose the latter.

I had waited for too many years, and spent more money than I could afford getting this far. Only a hunter can understand my decision. As I crawled to within 70 yards, I could truly see the bear's tremendous size. My heart was pounding out of control and I was actually starting to feel fear. At approximately 60 yards I decided to shoot, not knowing what to expect. As I pulled the trigger, I can honestly say I did not know what the results would be. I had the cross hairs on the shoulder of the huge bear, and the bullet struck three feet back from his shoulder. The bear let loose a tremendous roar and started diagonally toward me. Seeing that the gun was that far off, I had to force myself to aim off the bear, in order to hit him again. It worked! The next bullet struck the bear in the chest. The bear turned sideways, going in the opposite direction, so I aimed at his hip, striking the bear square in the shoulder. I was out of bullets and the bear and I were now only 35 yards apart. The bear got up again. Knowing there was nothing I could do, I lay with my face on the ice, hoping he would not see me.

After what seemed like an eternity, the bear finally expired. By that time, I was so exhausted from fear, that I almost could not raise up to look at my monstrous trophy. The bear was 10'9" from nose to tail, and was the ninth bear spotted on my hunt — truly, the most fabulous creature I have ever seen.

What I thought was the conclusion of my dream hunt, was quickly beginning to turn into a nightmare for my guide John and me. The Arctic storm was increasing in its intensity to the point that the wind and waves were breaking the ice around us. The dogs had to be moved to safe ice, which was approximately a quarter-mile away. As John started to move the dogs, I raced back to my bear.

The ice had begun to open with three distinct cracks, from one

to two feet in width. As I began to jump these, John yelled, "No!" and for good reason. Taking chances 22 miles from land, on an open ice flow, was not a normal practice for an Inuit hunter. John was not a careless man, and felt responsible for my welfare and even my life; not to mention he had lost his brother through one of these open-ice leads just four years prior.

I had just finished jumping the third crevice when I heard his yell. I thought his "No!" meant I couldn't make the jumps. But I found out his "No!" meant, "don't leap onto ice that was flowing away from the island" thinking I might not be able to get back. Whatever it meant, I was not about to leave my bear.

When I reached the big boar, he was laying on his stomach and I made one feeble attempt to roll him over — impossible! With no time to spare and no other way of skinning the bear, I immediately started a dorsal incision. This incision, starts between the ears, continues down the spine, to the tail. In all my years as a taxidermist, this was the fastest I had ever skinned a bear in my life. It wasn't the cold, as much as it was the fact that my bear was quickly sinking into the ocean. I was concentrating so much on speed and keeping my fingers that I barely remember John jumping in to help with his knife. With his help, we were able to get the bear rolled over on his back to complete



the task of skinning. The screeching and crunching of the moving ice about us was our incentive to skin as no two men had ever skinned before. Just as we finished pulling the hide and the head clear of the bear, we watched in awe as the carcass slid into the ocean. We couldn't stand and watch for long, our odyssey was far from over.

We started dragging the heavy, wet hide to the safety of the sled, jumping open ice leads as we went. The hide became more wet and heavy each time we made a water crossing. Upon reaching the dog sled, I briefly remember the pain in my legs and arms from adrenaline mixed with overexertion. Relaxing for a second, I was surprised to see John removing the cook stove from under the trap. "We will need water," he said, "to sustain our body heat in the race for the safety of the island."

Within an hour we had reached the main tent. Floyd welcomed our arrival and admired our beautiful trophy, but there was no time for accolades. He had been in radio contact with the island. The news was, the storm was expected to get worse and we had to get moving. John emp-

tyed the dog sled of all unnecessary gear, including mine, and started for the island. Floyd and I immediately dropped the main camp and started loading the two cargo sleds.

Within an hour we broke camp and were following John, who was carrying the GPS. Before we knew it, the storm was completely upon us and we lost John's track. We began to search for the smallest piece of evidence showing which direction he was traveling. Instead of John's tracks we found rough ice and proceeded to flip the sled. I was pinned with my arms at my side as the sled crushed down on me, dragging my head sideways across the ice. I thought my neck was going to break before Floyd got the sled stopped and upright. He didn't miss a beat, and we were on our way again.

Before long, Floyd decided to disconnect the two cargo sleds to speed his search for John. This left me alone with the two sleds and the thoughts that this could really be the end. I don't know why, but I started video tap-

ing, trying to record what had happened, and what was going to happen to me. I was separated from my only human contact, who was looking for John, his GPS, and the way back to the island. "This was not good," I thought to myself. All I could think to do was fire a signal shot from my rifle. Lucky, Floyd heard the shot and found his way back to me. Thinking John might do the same, we fired a few more shots. John did hear our signal and somehow found us in the blizzard. Not wanting to separate again, we decided to set camp and ride the storm out.

I awoke to a bright, white light. It was very still and very quiet — almost surreal. I looked at John and Floyd asleep amongst the furs, got out of my sleeping bag and went to the tent flap. Untying the door, I looked out across the landscape. I'll never forget the sight of that beautiful blue sky; the bright glare of the sun, the dogs' ears sticking up out of the new snow, and my trophy frozen in the sled. I said to myself, "Yes!"

I forgot to mention that my gun barrel was blocked with ice and had split at the magna-portioning when I was thrown from the sled, causing its inaccuracy. ▲ ▲ ▲

**ROBERT B. NANCARROW
WITH HIS POLAR BEAR
SCORING 27·3/16 POINTS.
THE BEAR
RECEIVED A FIRST AWARD
AT THE 23RD AWARDS
BANQUET IN RENO, NE-
VADA. IT WAS TAKEN NEAR
BANKS
ISLAND, NORTHWEST
TERRITORIES, IN 1997.**

