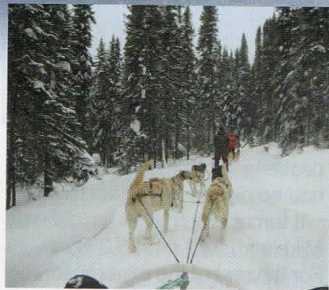




Above: Peter was a victim of the black ice and slid into a ditch.
 Right: A real Christmas scene.
 Centre right: Each Cree community has modern structures plus a traditional teepee for summer cooking and smoking meats.
 Far right: Even the road signs were in the Cree language!



▶ DAY FOUR:

Day four and we had some hauling to do. 613kms to Wemindji, our first contact with Cree Indians.

The Baie James road is remote and isolated at best. A single highway stretching 666kms due north. As such, we all had to register at the Bureau D'information, just in case the authorities needed to find us.

During the summer the road has tourists making the same trip and, along the way, there are numerous picnic areas and emergency phones.

As we trundled by the kilometer markers, we glanced through the trees to spot evidence of picnic tables or phones. Everything was buried in snow! After a few hours it became obvious that this was remote. Nothing, absolutely nothing. A single lane road, with the occasional road sign. Inside the vehicle we had warmth, snacks and continuous banter on the CBs. Outside was frigid, sterile, harsh, desolate and quiet enough to hear yourself think. I felt like I was trespassing.

The one (and only) fuel stop is aptly named KM381 and, strange as it may seem, it is located at Km381 on the road. The cluster of non-descript buildings were home to the area's snow plow fleet, fuel depot, meager overnight accommodations and

café. For ease and convenience, orders were kept simple with toasted cheese sandwiches and cheese burgers.

Topping off with gas was painful both physically and mentally. The weather was certainly turning the thermostat down, while gas prices were heading in the opposite direction. Having a captive customer, the gas station certainly added a premium to their prices.

Being only half way we had to hustle. The hotel in Wemindji locked the front door at 8pm.

The average speed of the convoy was ratcheted up and the 'klicks' were melting away. Turning onto the Wemindji road, the trail conditions took a turn for the worse. We were on packed snow. The sun had already disappeared displaying a wonderful sunset so we were hurtling toward Wemindji in our 7,000lbs bob-sleds! Luckily the roads were dusted with sand, so traction was surprisingly good. We made it just in time, so at least we had rooms for the night.

The café was closed so it was time to improvise. Having our official lock in and being the only guests, we had the place to ourselves. Jim Leach produced an assortment of Army RTE meals, whilst others contributed cookies, chips, Jello and drinks. Our personal smorgasbord was ready for the team to chow down.

What followed must be filed under 'you had to be there'. The bathroom became an improvised kitchen; the sink being used as an ice bucket, the tub being used to heat up the RTE meals.

Samples of the culinary delights started to emerge from the drab packaging.

"What was it?"

"Real meat?"

Washed down with multiple beers it didn't matter.

DAY FIVE:

Waking up the following morning and we had our first glance of James Bay.

At first my thought was: "why would people want to live here?"

A small, desolate community, miles from anywhere, similar to a low security prison. Then it dawned on me: it was quiet, there was no noise. The silence and peace made you at one with nature and, in our case, machines too. I felt like an Arctic Bedouin in a permanent Christmas scene. Moving on, we rejoined the Baie James road, still heading north toward Radisson and one of the highlights of the expedition, a guided tour of Le Grande dam. The Le Grande Dam project is a complex of eight hydro electric generating stations spread along a 800kms stretch of the Grande river. The total power capacity (at present) is approxi-

mately 16,000 MW.

The construction of the dams and generating stations is an engineering marvel. For almost 25 years the Le Grande Dam project was the world's largest construction project, resulting in the world's largest underground generating station.

Having registered (for security) we jumped on the Hydro Quebec shuttle and started the short trip into the dam complex. Additional security personnel joined us as we entered the mountain, large doors closed behind us, reminiscent of a movie involving a NORAD missile silo!

Deep inside the mountain, it was hot. Not quite the nostril burning heat from the dry desert but certainly a 100 plus degree differential from the outside temperature.

Once back from the mountain we dined at the local café then we retired to Jim and Mike's room which had been dubbed 'party central'. As with previous nights, various snacks and beverages were assembled, the beer cooler being the window sill. The outside temperature was so cold that within minutes we had beer slushies.

DAY SIX:

Our mission for day six was to get to the end of the road, Chisasibi. Situated on the