

I fell through Arctic ice

by Gary Rolfe

I have travelled 11,000 Arctic miles with dogs, summer and winter. They've been my life. There are fewer than 300 purebred Canadian Eskimo dogs left in the world and I had 15 of them. I sank all my love and money into those dogs, proud to keep the breed's working talents alive. I learnt from the best, guys who in the 1980s had crossed Antarctica and made it to the North Pole with dogs, perfectionists who knew all there was to know. I watched, listened, kept my mouth shut, and one day decided to go it alone. It felt a natural progression.

Alone, it's always dangerous. Something was bound to go wrong one day, and on Sunday March 5 last year it did. Moving over Amundsen Gulf in the Northwest Passage, sea ice gave way. Everything was sinking: my dogs, my sled and me. We kicked for our lives. Powerful Arctic Ocean currents dragged vast sheets of sea ice. Underwater, I couldn't find the hole I had fallen through and had to make one, punching, then breathing again as ice and sea water clashed against my face.

Polar bears eat people, and swim to kill. We'd crossed bear tracks an hour before going through the ice. I remember thinking, did the bastard follow us? Was he under us now? What will it feel like when he bites? The floe edge was a mile away, this a busy hunting area where bears bludgeon seals twice my size. Frantic, I ripped off my mittens. Trying to save my dogs, I was prepared to lose my hands to savage cold. It wasn't enough. Soon drowning and the cold had killed all but one of them.

Out of the water I stripped off sodden, icing-up clothing. The cold was brutal. My limbs and head shook uncontrollably. I stopped shivering, indicating I was severely hypothermic. I was slowly dying. Barely conscious, I pulled on my down suit with fingers that knocked like wood. My blood was freezing. Human consciousness is lost when the body temperature plummets below 30C. I was heading for oblivion.

My satellite phone failed. I always have a phone backed up with a ground to air VHF transceiver, but it made no difference – I knew no plane was flying over. I flipped my location beacon. This is a last resort. To flip it means I'm in a life-threatening situation and want out. In the end three polar bear hunters came out on snowmobiles. What they saw frightened them.

I had fourth-degree frostbite, the worst form. My fingers were covered in deathly black blisters, my hands freezing to the bone. The pain when it thaws is colossal, at the top of the human tolerance scale, like a huge invisible parasite with a million fangs. The agony was suffocating; I writhed with it, wild for relief.

Heavy doses of morphine helped to dull the pain for two months. The side-effects included dreams, hallucinations, flashbacks – and constipation. Just as well because for weeks I couldn't wipe my arse. I went eight days without a crap. When prune juice was administered, I passed a turd the size of a baby's leg.

My fingers were debrided, scalpels cutting dead meat off thumbs and fingers. It hurt. Fingernails dropped off and smelt funny, and tendons stiffened. Physiotherapy was agony, but I wanted my hands back so badly and to endure meant to get better. My fingers looked a bloody mess, distorted and gnarled. They were always disturbingly cold. I was told the longer we waited, the better: even dead-looking fingers can recover.

Exercising my hands took up all my days – and within minutes they would stiffen up, giving the impression they were dying on me. I kept going, though, and one day I clasped a cup with my right hand. I was so excited. The first time I went out in the sun, my fingers turned blue. Without fingerprint ridges, picking up coins was difficult. Coins felt freezing, copper ones less so.

Soon the time to thaw before the saw was up. The surgeon cut a tip as if sharpening a pencil.

I felt nothing. It jolted me to learn that the fingertip was dead. It was the only part still black, solid and stone-cold; if it wasn't removed, I'd have been susceptible to dry gangrene. It had to go.

I left hospital with 27 stitches and a metal plate on one stub-ended finger. Surgeons described my recovery as "inexplicable" – I had been expected to lose both hands.

So what now? My dogs and I were inseparable; I miss them desperately. All I want is dog hairs on my clothes again. The plan is a move to Greenland. It's time to live again.