Helen Thayer

POLAR DREAM

The First Solo Expedition
by a Woman and Her Dog
to the Magnetic North Pole

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HELEN THAYER

FOREWORD BY SIR EDMUND HILLARY

STARPATH - ELIBRA

Seattle

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Seattle, WA 98107

Photos courtesy of author's collection.

TO MY HUSBAND, BILL,

AND MY PARENTS,

RAY AND

MARGARET NICHOLSON,

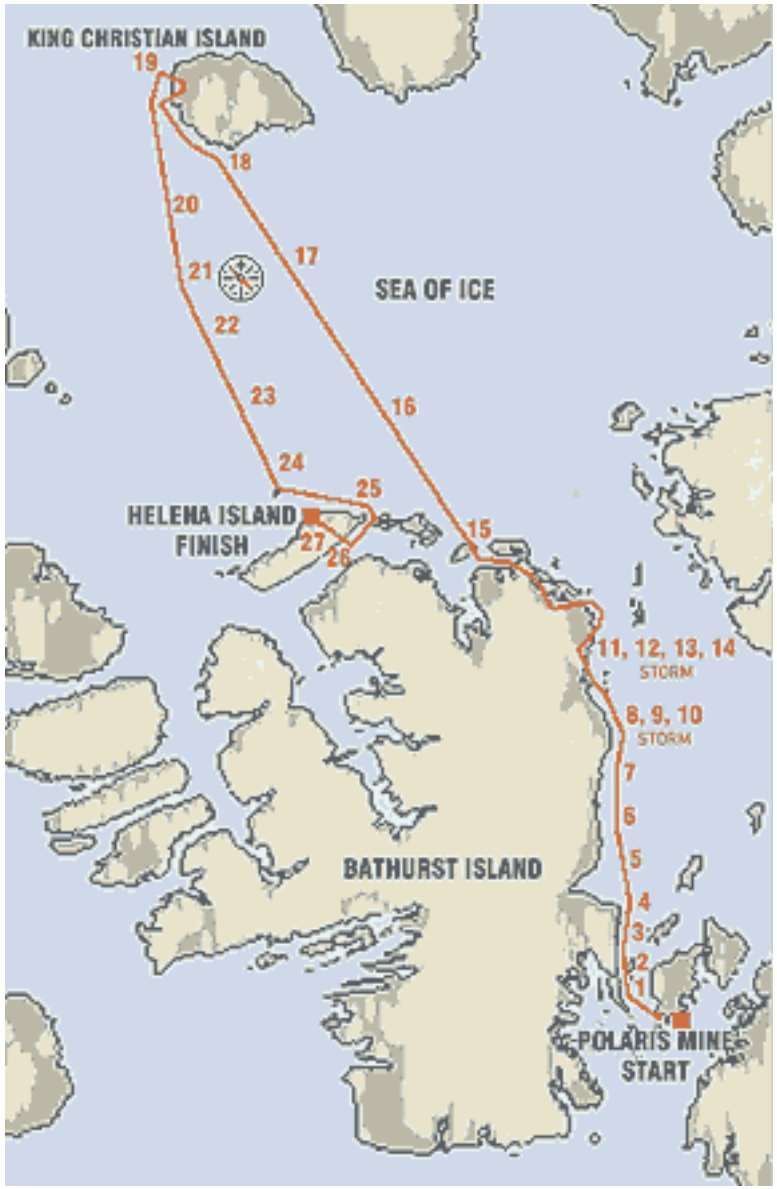
WHOSE LOVE AND

ENCOURAGEMENT

URGED ME ONWARD.

INTERACTIVE MAP

(click a day number to go to that section)



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FOREWORD

BY

SIR EDMUND HILLARY

I first met Helen Thayer when she was attending a small high school near Auckland, in New Zealand. The headmaster, Dan Bryant, a renowned alpinist and a close friend of mine, energetically encouraged his students to meet the challenge of mountain climbing. No one responded more enthusiastically than Helen Thayer. She developed a deep love for the mountains, and went on to climb a multitude of great peaks all over the world.

But nothing Helen has done was more difficult and challenging than her solo journey in 1988 to the magnetic North Pole. She traveled alone, on foot or skis,

pulling her supplies and equipment on a sled. Her only companion was a big black husky she had met only three days before she began her journey. She called the dog Charlie, and together they embarked on an expedition that lasted twenty-seven days and covered 364 miles. During that arduous journey, a unique bond between them was woven and strengthened. Charlie, a work dog that had never been treated like a pet or a partner, learned for the first time to bond with a human. He taught Helen the ways of Arctic survival and even saved her life from marauding polar bears. They began the journey as strangers and returned as inseparable friends.

But this is just one aspect of the enthralling story of a woman who at age of fifty took and extraordinary journey that brought her to the edge of emotional and physical survival — an epic undertaking that few people of any age of sex could have achieved. Helen faced subzero temperatures, rough and cracking ice, fierce Arctic storms, frostbite, hunger, and menacing polar bears. But her discipline and unwavering motivation kept her going despite all obstacles, until she reached her goal and she and Charlie returned safely.

Helen recorded her experience in the journal she kept during her journey, carefully noting not only the physical challenges she continually faced, gut also her own deep emotional reactions to the dangers and isolation of the Arctic regions. Her journal became the basis for this book – a remarkable odyssey by a truly remarkable woman.

INTRODUCTION

The idea seemed rather far-fetched at first. Polar expeditions are not new, of course. In recent years, they have been undertaken with increasing frequency, and increasing sophistication: snowmobiles instead of dog-sleds, airplanes resupplying and supporting well equipped teams experienced in the dangers of polar exploration. But my idea was new: a solo journey to the world's magnetic North Pole, a journey on foot and skis, no dog-teams or snowmobiles and no more equipment than I could pull behind me on a sled. I would be the first woman to make such a journey. And I was fifty years

old.

I was also an experienced mountain climber. I grew up on a large farm in New Zealand that I remember for its sprawling emerald green pastures that stretched across rolling hills where sheep and cattle grazed. My parents, hard-working and disciplined, often went mountain climbing and one day when I was nine, they and some friends decided to climb Mount Egmont, a snow-capped, 8,258-foot peak. To my delight, they invited me to go with them. " If you can carry your own pack," they said, "you can go."

After that climb, I couldn't resist the thought of becoming a real mountain climber like the people I admired. Besides my parents and their friends, my hero was Sir Edmund Hillary, a fellow New Zealander who, in 1953, became the first person to climb Mount Everest. When Hillary went to the South Pole in 1958, I dreamed that someday I, too, would go to one of the world's poles.

Over the years that followed, I guess I was secretly preparing for my polar expedition. I loved outdoor sports, especially winter sports. I competed in international track and field events, at times representing New Zealand, Guatemala, and the United States. After watching luge races on television in 1972, and envying the thrill of racing down thin ribbons of ice on a tiny sled with no brakes, I took up the sport and won the United States National Championship in 1975. But after representing the United States in luge competition in Europe, I realized something about myself. I didn't really enjoy competing against others. I found more pleasure competing

against myself, setting goals and meeting the challenge of attaining them.

I returned to my first love, mountain climbing, and since then, I've reached the summits of the highest mountains in New Zealand, North and South America, the Soviet Union and one of the highest in China. It was while I stood in the thin air of the 23,405-foot summit of Peak Lenin in the Pamirs of the Soviet Union in 1986, that I decided the time had come to realize my polar dream, and I began to lay out a plan as I descended the mountain.

Ever since I was a young girl in New Zealand, I been fascinated by the polar regions of the world and as I learned about them I experienced a growing curiosity about the magnetic North Pole, in particular. After all, over the years as I navigated my way through the valleys and over the ridges of mountain ranges, my compass needle always pointed to the magnetic North Pole. I wondered what it would be like to go there, and as I descended Peak Lenin I decided this would be the pole I would attempt to reach on foot.

Flying back to my home in Washington State, I was anxious to talk over my plans with Bill, my husband, best friend and a commercial helicopter pilot. Bill supported me in everything I did and his mountain climbing and expedition experience would give him a total understanding of a journey I contemplated. Indeed, he enjoyed a challenge himself and had a curiosity "that wanted to see over the other side of the hill." My mother and father had also supported me through all sorts of sports and adventures. More than parents, they too, had

always been my close friends. I was eager to share my plans with them.

Bill met me at the Seattle airport and within minutes I had told him of my new decision to travel to the magnetic North Pole. He was immediately enthusiastic. "A woman has never soloed any of the world's Poles," he said with excitement. "It's a great idea." But how to turn that idea into reality?

We began by looking at a budget and ways to pay for the expedition. After much pencil sharpening we arrived at a figure of ten thousand dollars. We could scrape that much together over the next two years, giving us time to read and research the Arctic, while gathering the necessary specialized equipment.

Next day I telephoned my parents in Whangarei, New Zealand. "Well you've talked about the Poles for a long time," Mother said. "I think the time is right and you should go, but what about the polar bears?" At the mention of polar bears Dad quickly came on the line. "What's this about polar bears? What are you planning now?" When I told him, he was apprehensive about the bears, but after I reassured him that if it appeared to be too dangerous I wouldn't go, be became excited about the journey and eagerly discussed logistics. Mother already had suggestions about clothing and food.

Some of my friends just shook their heads when I told them of my plans. "It's crazy, a woman can't survive out there alone," one friend told me. Another said, " You'll never come back alive, forget it, go somewhere safer." Then there were those who told me, "you can't walk to the Pole pulling your own sled. At least take a dog team

to pull your supplies." Fortunately, other's made more positive comments and even wrote letters of encouragement.

Although I knew my compass always pointed to the magnetic North Pole, I really didn't know much about it, so I decided to talk to the scientists who study and track the pole each year. Canadian government scientists in Ottawa told me that when discussing the location of the pole, they refer only to an average position. The magnetic North Pole cannot be defined as a dot on the map. Instead, it is an elusive target in constant motion as it travels a daily, jagged, elliptical path in a clockwise direction over a wide area, sometimes moving more than a hundred miles in a single day. The cause of this erratic movement is the sun. As the pole slowly drifts northwest, the sun constantly emits charged particles which, as they encounter the earth's magnetic field, produce electrical currents in the upper atmosphere. These electric currents disturb the magnetic field, resulting in a shift in the pole's position. The distance and speed of the pole's movement depends on disturbances within the magnetic field, but the pole is constantly moving, sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly.

Scientists who try to determine the average position of the pole, must take into account all of its transient wanderings and can at best, come up with only an average position. Even they sometimes differ from each other in their calculations by several miles. Therefore, the pole area covers a wide expanse. Because compasses point to the vicinity of the magnetic North Pole, the pole is used throughout the world as a vital navigational tool by sailors, aviators and land travelers. Within the vicinity of the

pole however, a magnetic compass is completely useless, turning lazily and unpredictably in all directions due to the lack of horizontal magnetic pull.

In 1988, the year I planned to make my journey, the magnetic North Pole would be situated in the Northwest Territories of northern Canada, south of King Christian Island, a lonely, barren, ice covered island, swept by fierce arctic winds that lies almost 800 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

My plan, as it evolved, was to fly from Seattle, near my home in Washington state, to Resolute Bay, a tiny Inuit village of about 250 people on Cornwallis Island, in the Northwest Territories. It was the traditional gathering place for past polar expeditions. After two weeks of training on the sea ice with the Inuit hunters of Resolute Bay, I would pack my sled and take the short, fifty-seven mile flight, northwest from Resolute Bay to Little Cornwallis Island. The people working at the Polaris lead and zinc mine on the island would be the last humans I would encounter after starting my journey. From there my route would take me about 360 miles, depending on detours around mounds of rough ice and other obstacles, through a maze of barren islands and across a vast expanse of sea ice, home to polar bears but a place where no humans have ever lived.

I knew this expedition would be a test of every outdoor skill I possessed. The possibility of minus 50 degree temperatures, hurricane force winds, and sea ice that could split beneath my tent as I slept, loomed large in my mind as I tried to think of every danger I might face. Of course the greatest danger would be the polar bears.

The Inuit call them nanuk and tell tales of a stealthy, silent animal, that sometimes hunts and kill humans for food. Traveling alone on foot would make me more vulnerable to attack than if I were traveling by snowmobile or dog-team. I had confidence in my outdoor abilities which had been fine-tuned over many years. But I had yet to encounter a polar bear.

I had decided I would walk and ski to the pole pulling my own sled behind me, without resupply by aircraft or snowmobile. Traveling the entire distance, living with only the food and equipment I could pull in my sled, appealed to me as a demanding challenge and as a method that would have an environmentally low impact on my surroundings.

This, combined with my plan to train in the Arctic with the Inuit just prior to starting my journey to the Pole, would allow me to learn to survive the Arctic and the polar bears, just as the Inuit, the masters of arctic survival, had done for generations. Knowing the physical demands of traveling on foot, pulling a heavily loaded sled behind me, I embarked on a rigorous endurance program. In addition to climbing and skiing in the nearby Cascade mountains, I ran ten miles a day through the forest, lifted weights in our basement gym, and kayaked on Storm Lake where the blue herons looked on in wonder as I paddled up and down the lake for an hour at a time.

While gathering my equipment, I read all I could about the Arctic and polar bears. Still, I knew that I needed to test equipment "on location" at Resolute Bay before finally deciding what to take on the expedition.

I telephoned Bezal Jesudason, an Arctic tourist outfitter, who was born in India and graduated with an engineering degree from a German university. While working in Canada, he married Terry, a Canadian girl, and moved to Resolute Bay, where he set up an outfitting business. He invited me to fly to Resolute and stay at his Inn. I flew there in November, 1987. Winter had begun and the days were already only 6 hours long and the sea ice in the Bay was freezing into a solid, white sheet.

As a defense against polar bears, I borrowed a rather ancient-looking shotgun from Bezal, who assured me that it was in good working order. "Anyway," he said, "the bears will be more afraid of you than you are of them. They haven't seen a woman out there alone before." I hoped he was right as I started out on a five day journey to test my equipment. I just couldn't imagine a polar bear being scared of anything, let alone a woman who had so much to learn about the Arctic and who had only seen polar bears at the zoo. But polar bears or not, it was important for me to experience the aloneness and silence of the Arctic, depending only on myself. That challenge worried me just as much as polar bears.

The ice of Resolute Bay was rock-hard and slippery and I had to stretch ski-skins, long strips of synthetic material, along the underside of the skis to prevent them from skidding. They also prevented my skis from sliding backwards when I pulled a heavily loaded sled, which had been strengthened to with-stand the rough ice and low temperatures. I tried different types of clothing, tents and stoves. I even practiced taking 35 mm photos of myself, a necessity of a solo journey. After the tip of

my nose became frostbitten when I touched the metal camera, I decided to add a good neoprene mask to my equipment list.

As for my choice of clothing, I narrowed it down to wind-proof jacket with a hood, a nylon fleece under-jacket, another lighter -weight fleece jacket and finally, two layers of synthetic "long johns" with high necks to keep the wind and blowing snow out. My gloves were large insulated mitts, with lighter mittens underneath and thin liner gloves next to my skin. A sturdy tent would be essential on my journey and I chose a two person, double walled, three poled structure, which, with no wind I could erect in three minutes. However, after I tossed my large down sleeping bag and other gear into the tent, it was immediately reduced to a one person model with no room to spare. My living quarters would be adequate, but not roomy. I chose an MSR stove, they are noisy but very reliable and burn white-gas, which I could buy in Resolute.

After five days alone on the sea ice, I was confident that I could handle the solitude and silence of an Arctic journey. I skied back to land, looking forward to talking to people once more and hearing sounds other than the grinding and groaning of the ice pack beneath my feet. I had seen no sign of polar bears which was a relief and I was satisfied with my choice of equipment. But I knew this had been merely a test run, not the real thing.

Back at the Inn, I arranged with Bezal to rent a high frequency radio for the duration of my expedition, so that I could call Bezal and Terry each night while I was traveling to the Pole. Their Inn would become my base

camp, as it had for earlier Arctic expeditions.

I would be alone on the ice, but my location would always be known in case of emergency.

I walked over to the airport to meet Rudi Kellar, the base manager of Bradley Air Services, a charter operation of Twin Otters that flies to many parts of the Arctic. I talked over my plans with Rudi and he agreed to send a plane to pick me up at the end of my journey.

Before leaving Resolute, I talked to some of the local Inuit about my journey. At first they were aghast at the thought of a woman even thinking of such a trip, let alone traveling by myself on foot. I was urged by some to travel by snowmobile, while others thought the only way I could survive the polar bears would be to take a dog team. But pulling my own sled behind me was a method I had used for many years climbing mountains with long glacier approaches, which had to be crossed before reaching the start of the actual climb. I stuck to my original plan.

Tony, an Inuit polar bear hunter, was particularly concerned about my safety without a dog team. Inuit dogs and polar bears are natural enemies, and a dog team would be my best protection against marauding bears. I listened carefully to his warnings and concerns. Then hoping he could understand my logic, I replied, "If I'm going to make this journey, I want to use human power and depend on my own skills, rather than use a dog team." As for polar bears, I believed I could travel safely on foot as long as I took a firearm and flare gun for protection. I reasoned that the flare gun would be a good, nonlethal warning device, while the firearm would be a

last resort. The Inuit, who hunt polar bears with high powered rifles, favored a rifle over a shot gun. But I wanted a firearm only as a defensive weapon. I decided to make the final decision about what kind of gun to take after talking to people experienced in self defense against large animals.

Soon it was time to say good-bye to my new friends in Resolute. While talking and listening to the Inuit, I developed the utmost respect for their survival skills and knowledge of the Arctic. I decided to take another two weeks of training at Resolute Bay with the Inuit immediately before beginning my expedition in March 1988. Those two weeks would give me an opportunity to learn more from the Inuit about polar bears and how I would have to deal with them.

Back home, as I continued to prepare for my journey, I was surprised to find how little information had been written about the Arctic, and I realized my expedition would present a unique opportunity to collect geographical, historical and scientific information, which could become a school educational program. The idea was received with enthusiasm by the teachers I spoke to. The Arctic was virtually unknown to school children. Because I would be traveling on foot to the pole, I could enter detailed descriptions of everything I saw into an extensive journal. I could describe the landscape and the places named after early Arctic explorers. I could describe the sea ice and the wildlife that lived and hunted on it. I could record details of weather and temperatures and describe what it was like to live in such an environment. After my return, the information I gathered, illustrated by my photography, would go to schools to create a

better understanding of a little-known place. While realizing my own dream, I also hoped to increase an awareness among school children of the delicate environment of the Arctic and the need to protect it.

The idea of my journey as the basis for an educational project inspired a change in my plan. I decided that rather than travel to the Pole area and immediately be flown back to base camp, I would travel throughout the area to better understand and photograph the islands surrounding the Pole.

When scientists in Ottawa, learned of my upcoming expedition and my intention to travel extensively within the Pole area, they asked me to collect snow samples and temperature data, which they would use in their continuing study of the Arctic environment.

Soon it was March, 1988 and I was ready to leave for Resolute Bay. I loaded our small, yellow 1976 Datsun pickup truck with a wooden box full of my equipment and drove for three hours, crossing the international border, to Vancouver, Canada, to air freight my sled and skis to Resolute Bay. Two days after my freight left, it was time for me to leave. I had been so busy preparing for the adventure ahead of me that I hadn't given any thought to what my feelings would be when I had to say good-bye to Bill, my parents and friends. I have never been very good at good-byes and really dreaded this one because I knew people would worry about me because I was traveling alone.

I called my parents in New Zealand, and as they wished me luck, I only just held back my tears. After all, I told myself, I'm not leaving forever.