

A Funeral in the Arctic

By Bernd Gaedeke

It was an icy-cold winter night on Barter Island in Alaska's northeastern corner. I slipped on my warmest winter clothes: insulated underwear, wool pants, shirts, socks, and an outer layer of Air Force Flight pants parka, mukluks, and mittens. Dressed for the minus 30 degree temperature I departed my warm and cozy room on an isolated DEWline station to trudge a quarter mile to the small Eskimo village of Kaktovik. The night was very still and crystal clear. A million stars gazed down on me and the aurora cast a dim flicker of light over the horizon as I crossed the wind-blown snow ridges.

The purpose of my trip, which I shall never forget, was quite unusual. I headed toward a small, dimly lit frame building half buried under a snowdrift. It was the village church where a funeral service was to be conducted tonight.

A child had perished a few

days before during a fire which destroyed a small wooden family house in a matter of minutes.

All chairs in the little church were filled as every inhabitant of this small village had come to pay his last farewell to the little child. A small oil burner in one corner of the church was vainly trying to warm the building. The Eskimos, old and young, were dressed in their fanciest parkas. Every breath turned into a little cloud that dissipated into the cold air. The plain wooden casket was draped in a white sheet which had a humble little cross penciled on it. But this little casket and the humble little cross conveyed an impression of love and devotion like no fancy casket could have, especially in these surroundings.

Our DEWline chaplain conducted the service in English, but he would pause after every sentence as an Eskimo teacher translated it into the native language. The sermon

was short and simple, but again very beautiful in its setting.

After the service the small casket was carried by four village elders to the lonely burial ground on a gentle knoll overlooking the village. The congregation followed with heavy steps. It was a very still night; even the sled dogs, which usually howl on such clear nights, seemed quieter than ever, as if they too sensed a feeling of sorrow.

Everybody had gathered around the graveside when the draped casket was slowly lowered into the cold grave carved out of the solid permafrost. At this very moment the dark night seemed to suddenly light up. The northern lights had suddenly appeared from nowhere and were displaying one of nature's most beautiful exhibits I have ever witnessed. So low that one could almost reach out for them, they hovered in all colors directly over the graveside, as if to pay their last farewell to this little child also.

I felt a sudden lump in my throat, and with a strange feeling of sorrow and happiness I slowly walked back to my warm room. This was the most beautiful funeral I have ever attended.