

Arctic Survival—

Wolves Slink Along Riverbank Stalking Fleeing Eskimos

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Times Editor

(Editor's Note: Shocked into numbness by the death of her four children in a short period of time, Siqvoana had drifted into a reverie of days gone by. She was awakened by the jar of the umiak as it swiped against a bank of the Kukpuk River. Shortly after that, little Olaqroaq, the youngest daughter, noticed "five dogs" in the dusk ahead of them. Siqvoana looked and recognized them as wolves. As the umiak floated down the river, the wolves began to follow along the edge of the water!)

Fearfully, Siqvoana steered the umiak as far away as she could from the wolves. This was not hard to do as long as the animals were on the coarse gravel because the channel was on the high bank side of the river. But as the umiak progressed the channel began to wind toward the opposite side. This meant the deep water would be along the bank where the wolves were.

Siqvoana, of course, could not do anything else but to follow the channel. She did not dare to ground the umiak and get stuck creating the possibility of the wolves to swim to it.

The wolves were now climbing a gentle incline on to the high bank. They slinked along, some of them growling from time to time. Their shadowy shapes loomed large in the darkness. They looked uncomfortably close to the umiak — close enough that one or all might jump into the craft.

The water in the river, during that time of year, was at its lowest and Siqvoana could not help but maneuver close to the animals. The narrow channel ran about two hundred yards along the bend. She paddled as hard as she could to pass the bend as quickly as possible so she could be in the wider part of the river.

As Siqvoana paddled frantically, one of the wolves snarled suddenly and made a running start on the bank! It stopped abruptly on the edge growling — its fangs bared. Siqvoana lifted her paddle in the air pointing it toward the wolf. It was an instinctive movement — a reflex action to protect her family.

A Protective Will

Siqvoana had not dared to tell her ill husband the minute she recognized the animals as wolves. Because of his condition she did not wish to aggravate his illness. But the moment Attungana heard the snarling, he knew at once that there was trouble. "Siqvoana, those are wolves!" he said, alarmed. "Give me my bow and arrows quickly!"

"You are too ill to do anything now, Attungana!"

"Perhaps I am but give me my bow and arrows — quickly!"

Siqvoana, seeing no alternative fumbled for the weapon and half-tossed it toward her husband and hurriedly went to her position at the stem of the umiak and resumed her frantic paddling. She noticed at once that Attungana was struggling to get into a sitting position. His gasping breath betrayed his great difficulty and alarmed Siqvoana.

"You are hurting yourself, Attungana," she said, worriedly. "We will soon be in the wide part of the river where we'll be safe."

Attungana did not seem to hear his wife. He kept on struggling. He was now in a sitting position, his breath coming in laboring gasps. The rain had stopped falling and the wind had calmed. The wolves continued to slink along on the high bank keeping abreast or over the slowly moving umiak.

The Narrow Channel

Siqvoana's heart leaped as she realized that just a short distance ahead of them was the narrowest part of the channel along the bend. One slim consolation was that the current was swifter. The bank was now getting lower indicating the channel was meandering toward the opposite side.

"How low the river is!" thought Siqvoana. "We'll be very close to the wolves in the next few moments."

The desperate woman hugged the gravel side of the narrow channel as closely as she could. She could feel the bottom with her paddle. Her maneuvering of the craft was such that it began to scrape the bed of the river and she had to head it out toward the channel. The umiak was now in the narrowest stretch!

The Desperate Shot

Unable to paddle effectively

in the shallow water, Siqvoana used her paddle to pole the umiak along. As she did so, the wolves on the bank began to show activity. They growled and snarled as they milled as if they were getting ready for action of some kind!

They were! One of them apparently the leader of the pack, began to make a running start — snarling as it did. A swish went through the air in the darkness! A shrieking yowl echoed on the bank followed instantly by aggravated growling. The animal reared into the air almost straight up but its momentum carried it over the bank and it splashed into the water, its growls dying away!

As soon as the swish hissed through the air, Attungana gasped loudly and emitted an agonized groan. He collapsed backwards in the heap, deathly exhausted! He had shot the arrow in a superhuman effort to protect what was left of his family — his wife Siqvoana and his little daughter Olaqroaq.

Lucky Shot?

It will never be known whether Attungana made a lucky shot or that his aim was true. Lucky or not, it killed the leader of the pack. It was generally agreed that the arrow pierced the wolf's heart because of the animal's violent reaction when it was hit.

"When Attungana hit the wolf, it went straight up in the air, stiffly, violently contorted, and fell over the bank," Siqvoana had said relating the incident afterwards.

The Retreat

As soon as their leader was hit, the rest of the milling wolf pack slowed its actions to hardly a stir. Some of them whined — one of them snarled defiance. The umiak was now in the widening part of the Kukpuk River and safely away from the wolves.

Siqvoana looked back. She could see the animals retreating away from the bank disappearing into the darkness. She pulled in her paddle and set it in the umiak. She slumped over. She was very tired. She began to weep from grief and from a feeling of relief — or safety of the remnants of her family from the frightening encounter with the wolves.

Not far behind them the wolves began to howl — weirdly and with a sound of profound mournfulness. In the full darkness now, the eerie howling seemed to be amplified by the stillness of the windless night. It also seemed to have a deepening effect on the tragic grief of the slight statured woman whose heroic actions were witnessed only by her deathly ill husband and her tiny daughter.

Tiny Daughter Comforts

Little Olaqroaq, although afraid, was remarkably composed during the desperate emergency with the wolf pack. She did not make a wrong move that would have hindered her parents. She was curled at the feet of her mother at the stern, occasionally holding on the calf of the leg of her parent.

When her mother broke down, the little girl rose and tried to put her arms around the sobbing woman. This quieted Siqvoana and she gathered her daughter in her arms.

"I really thought they were dogs, mother, until father said they were wolves and then I was afraid," said little Olaqroaq. "They were not very friendly were they, mother. They were terrible and mean."

"No. They were not friendly, paneorahing (my little daughter)," the mother replied.

The breakdown of the woman was only a couple of minutes. She regained her composure quickly. She went to her husband who was now suffering greatly as a result of the extraordinary action he had just taken to save his family. The effort was just too much in his weakened condition.

"I will always believe that no other man would have done what Attungana did that night," Siqvoana said in later years. "He was a strong man as well as strongwilled."

Man Without Hope

Siqvoana had gone to her husband with a feeling of urgency and alarm. She knew that his great effort in saving their lives would have dire consequences on the already desperately ill man. And indeed it had. Attungana seemed to be barely conscious. He hardly noticed that his wife was near him.

He became aware only after Siqvoana gently shook him and called, "Attungana — Attungana!" She did this several times.

"Siqvoana — Siqvoana — after all the terrible things you have been through — it is not my wish to make you suffer anymore but I can feel the end is near for me," Attungana said, painfully. "I will not be around to provide for you and Olaqroaq. You will have to live on — and to live on, Siqvoana, you must have a hunter. Our sons are all gone — all gone!"

At this point, Attungana's voice broke in a terrible, deep-throated voice. He went on, "Siqvoana — you must find a hunter to provide for you!"

"You must not talk this way — you are my husband. Don't talk now. Try to rest now."

"Where are we in the river, Siqvoana?"

"We are at the delta now. Try to rest. I want to stay at your side but the current might take our umiak out to the ocean. I must steer it and paddle to the tasiqpuq (big lake or lagoon)," Siqvoana said, hesitantly.

The Great Calm

"I will try to rest. Do what you must — do what you must," Attungana replied in a hoarse whisper.

Siqvoana touched her husband's face tenderly and went to the stern. She picked up the paddle. Although close to being exhausted, she began to do the work at hand with determination.

The sky had cleared partly and Siqvoana could see some stars. There was no wind at all — a rare occurrence in the Tikiaq area (Point Hope area). Great stillness abounded. Even in the darkness, Siqvoana could plainly see the calm, glassy surface of the water. A bright star not far from the horizon reflected with a clear glint off the bow of the umiak.

Attungana's breathing had subsided and it was hardly audible. His wife listened intently for it — worriedly. She was comforted somewhat that it was coming regularly. The only sound now was the sound of the paddle as she dug it into the water.

The progress Siqvoana was making was slow but steady. From where she was now, it would be about twelve miles to the end of the big lagoon a mile east of Tikiaq. She was out of the current now and she headed for the north shore of the lagoon. She could see the familiar long low hill to the north.

The Delirium

Still the great silence. Siqvoana almost hated to dig her paddle into the water. The gurgling sound it made seemed uncannily loud and disturbing.

And then — with a great suddenness rose a stentorian voice incredibly loud — terrible!

"AHYII! AHYII! AHYII! THERE CAME A GREAT POLAR BEAR — A GREAT BEAR!"

Attungana had gone into a delirium!

The unnerving outburst came so suddenly — so unexpectedly — that it froze Siqvoana with great fright! Little Olaqroaq, who had been sleeping, suddenly awoke and screamed!

The frightened mother could not move — she didn't know for how long. The instant the voice exploded into the still night, she dropped her paddle into the water with a splash. She bent over, wrapped her arms around the waist of her frightened little daughter tightly. The great disturbance twisted Siqvoana's face into a grimace!

(To Be Continued)

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