

**Day One: April 16, 2001**

Those who have gone before tell us that the hardest moment will be when the huge Russian Mi-8 helicopter takes off, leaving us on the ice. We will be alone on the frozen Arctic Ocean. Our band of women, trying to ski the last distance to the North Pole from the Russian side of the planet, will be on its own. As I sit in the jump seat in the helicopter's cockpit, between the pilot and the copilot, I know that the warning was wrong. The timing was off.

The absolute hardest moment comes just after the helicopter lifts off from the frozen pad at Ice Station Borneo. At that moment, there is really no possibility of making a round trip. Like a chair on a ski lift, there is no downloading. "This is it, baby," my stomach tells me. "We're on the way now." It might as well be a journey to Mars, for all the loneliness that wells up. The moment that I and the rest of the Polar Trek 2001 team have dreamed about and worked hard for is suddenly here. The hollow pit inside me says so.

For nearly eight years, the vision of skiing to the North Pole with only women has danced in front of me—a tantalizing, terrifying prospect. An all-women team would make a statement and show everyone who ever doubted whether "girls" could do it. It could be just the challenge I need to confront my discomfort about turning fifty. And it would be a gift to the next generation of women.

The whirl of the helicopter blades brushes all that aside. I am scared.

Despite my inner desire to glue the helicopter to the ice, it takes off from Ice Station Borneo shortly after noon. The orange and blue Aeroflot chopper looks a bit like a New York subway car with a rotor strapped to the top. The interior is devoid of seats, but jammed with nineteen skiers, most of them as nervous as I am. The chatter and camaraderie of our past two weeks together

has diminished into silence; now all we can hear is the noise of the machine. Packed in cheek by jowl, we have to sit on our skis, sleds, and backpacks. But we are all determined to reach the North Pole. Our WomenQuest group is flying with the Weber-Malakhov Expedition to our respective drop-off points. Everything we will need for our expedition to the North Pole is crammed in along with us. It seems improbable that we can lift off with such a load.

My momentary flash of I-want-to-be-anywhere-else-but-here eases a bit as we fly, and I feel some confidence returning. After all, wasn't I the organizer of this expedition? Hadn't Misha Malakhov, Hero of Russia, called me "Sue Carter, Arctic Explorer"? It is up to me to be brave and assertive. Still, I feel more like a drugstore cowgirl.

The thunderous roar of the two rotors drives us deeper into silence. Occasionally, a nervous smile or a camera's flash breaks our meditation, but mostly we quietly crane to look out the portholes of the helicopter. The light that blazes through is a brilliant contrast to the dark interior. Back and forth, inside and out we look, wondering how much farther until we land. The first drop-off will be for the Weber-Malakhov group.

Focusing on the flying instead of the trek ahead calms me and puts me back in charge of my feelings. Flying has always been exciting to me, ever since I was a child. My father worked for the Air Force, and much of my childhood was spent around airplanes and people who flew them. I had longed for their thrills and yearned to be among the boys who could get close to them. Now, after years of spectating, my desire to fly has been fulfilled at last: my private pilot's license is less than four months old. And even though I am not in the pilot's seat on this aircraft, I feel as though I have entered the inner circle.

Of the members of the two teams on board the helicopter, Ray and I are the only pilots, though we couldn't be further apart in experience. Ray, a Brit, has flown Boeing 747s for a living for Cathay Pacific Airways and was a helicopter pilot in the RAF. The Russians are intrigued by our status, particularly by mine as a woman aviator, and they invite us into the cockpit to sit between the pilots. Because Ray will be leaving with the Weber-Malakhov team, he takes the jump seat first. I am close enough to the front of the craft that I can see him grin as he absorbs the immense icescape less than a thousand feet below.

Twenty minutes, a half hour, and then the helicopter starts to descend. Vladimir, the pilot, cocks his head and talks with Konstantin, the copilot, through the headsets. Ray is tensing with excitement, a signal that we are going to land. For the first time.

Slowly, slowly, the craft eases its way down. Vladimir sets the three wheels deftly on the ice pack. A crewmember leaps out the door before the helicopter settles, and with a thin rod he probes the surface around each wheel to make

sure that the chopper is putting down on *glacies firma* and not on thin ice—or worse yet, an open lead, a break in the ice where the water is exposed.

A check all around, and the crewman gives the sign to the cockpit that the surface is firm. It is time for the Weber-Malakhov team to leave the mother ship. It isn't WomenQuest's time yet, but the knot forming inside me says the next landing will be ours.

With the helicopter on thick, frozen ice and the ladder in place, both teams shift in order to pile out. A few trekkers remain inside and form a human chain. Skis, sleds, and backpacks are passed out, fire-brigade style. All the while, the whomp-whomp of the rotating blades scatters snow and leaves everyone ducking slightly, as the Weber-Malakhov gear is massed into a pile on the left side of the craft.

There are hugs between groups, words of encouragement—"See you at the Pole!"—and a kiss between Arctic veteran Richard Weber and his wife, Josée Auclair. He will be co-leading another expedition, and she is the woman I have chosen to guide my group. A native of Quebec, Josée is a Canadian ski champion with several Arctic expeditions under her belt, and I am trusting her experience and stamina to get us through.

The members of WomenQuest's Polar Trek 2001 then clamber back aboard the helicopter for one last flight to our drop-off point. We are only a liftoff and a landing from beginning our own trek. Suddenly, it starts to be exciting.

Konstantin motions me to come up to the front, to the seat between his and Vladimir's. Konstantin is a Dolgan, a member of one of the groups native to the region. We have been told that he was the first of his people to become a pilot. He speaks some English and likely understands much more. In earlier social gatherings between the Russian helicopter crews and our team on Ice Station Borneo, Konstantin has been very circumspect and polite with our women. He may have done this as much to spare himself the scrutiny of his Russian crewmates as out of concern for us. More likely, though, Konstantin is a gentleman.

Vladimir, a fine pilot and a bit of a roué, is in the left seat. Vladimir misbehaved earlier in the week, to the point where Josée told him during one of our training breaks that if he couldn't behave around the team, we would not come back to visit his crew in their tent. We would spend our available social time with the crew of the other Russian helicopter based at Ice Station Borneo. The loss of my team's favors was clearly too great a risk to take. On a subsequent visit, Vladimir declined even a *chut-chut*—the smallest taste of vodka.

Thoughts of socializing, though, are far distant at the moment. Beyond the windscreen of the cockpit lies an enormous desert of white. Above it is a sharp blue sky with only traces of clouds. But the ice itself is staggering vast.