

Day 3 - watching the crew

- Posted by [Kristy](#) on August 14, 2008 at 11:00pm

Today was a quiet one for me, but not for the crew. During the course of the morning as I was doing some paperwork I was aware that the helicopter had taken off. A short time later I heard some unfamiliar bangs and rattles...I dashed up to the bridge (I'll be in shape soon....that's 7 flights of stairs!) and was just in time to see the tail end of hauling in the anchor, and we were underway! There were quite a few of us on the bridge, along with the officers and seamen, but it was surprisingly hushed...most of us were standing at the window watching the bow slice cleanly through the water, with nothing but a quiet rumble coming from the depths of the ship. We were all aware of the size and power of this icebreaker - it seemed very big to me.

Shortly after, we passed by a small island of rock that rose up starkly against the horizon. Captain Hull passed me some serious binoculars and I could make out my first Inuksuks, piles of rocks that resemble the shape of a human. There were many on this rock, and the Captain confirmed that they had been made during summer "camps" by Inuit who were hunting or fishing.

We continued to slice along, until around 2 when we came to a full stop - the sound of the anchor chain being released was quite startling! I then knew where the helicopter had gone...Len had taken 4 crew members to Locker Point, north of Kugluktuk. There was a navigational aid at the point, one of the triangular, neon orange towers that is used as a marker. The three aluminum legs had eroded over the year and had to be replaced...I watched Len bring the helicopter back to the ship where new legs were strapped under the helicopter and taken back. Len also very carefully, with hand and radio signals from the bosuns' mate, attached his line and hook to the top of the tower, and gently manoeuvred it on its side so the wooden slats could be repainted. One of the reasons wood is used rather than a more durable material, is that if anyone is caught on the land and is in trouble, they can burn the wood for warmth...the Captain said from time to time they come to where a tower is supposed to be and the only thing remaining is a pile of ashes. It is almost unfathomable to imagine the water we are in right now being solid ice, and the tundra covered in windswept snow. The isolation is breathtaking - I can't imagine what it would be like to be alone out here, hunting or fishing for survival.

I am beginning to learn that although every crew member has a title and a shift, they operate 24 hours a day as a supportive team, and they all can do everything. Yesterday Christina impressed me with her confidence and competence in driving the zodiac - this morning when I first came up to the bridge she was steering the ship! When I chatted with her about her "job description" she told me that about half of the time her responsibility is on the bridge - seamen are the eyes of the officers when the officers need to be checking charts and other things. Since the Laurier is a working ship Christina has to be efficient in crane operations, search and rescue, science support, and helicopter operations. She's only 25, but she's already experienced a wealth of adventures and has many stories to tell.

I've also been impressed with Alana (well, actually I've been impressed with all the crew), who is an officer. She always has a smile and a laugh - she's not very big, but behind the wheel of the Laurier she's all business and exudes confidence. She confirmed for me that the crew of the Laurier are close and look after each other, and take pride in the important and often dangerous work that they do up here. Alana, Christina and another seaman, Shannon, are going to bike the Cabot trail during their 6 weeks of R and R after this rotation in the Arctic - I've heard many crew say they operate like a family, and it's not difficult to see that this is true.

It took about 5 hours for the triangular tower to be repaired, painted and placed back up (the legs sit in gravel about 3 feet underground). I popped back and forth throughout the afternoon to watch from the bridge. The Captain has assured me he'll get me over to the tundra to do some hiking over the next week or so, but today wasn't the day for it, the crew was very intent on getting the job done and moving on. We've been underway again for the last 7 hours traveling slowly at about 4 knots towards Sisters Island, where a buoy has to be repaired. The Captain doesn't want to anchor there during the night, hence the slower pace.

When I wasn't up on the bridge today, I was practicing downloading, uploading, and transferring information on the computer. I have always left the technological stuff to my husband, but I've been forced to do it myself this time! I worry that I'll lose all my pictures or the computer will implode, but it's going quite well actually. I've also had some help from Shane and Jean-Christophe, who are very patient with me.

The weather has calmed down considerably tonight. The sky has cleared and the water isn't as choppy...it feels a bit warmer too. I spent some time tonight standing by myself for quite awhile out on the deck, watching the sun go down, and watching the occasional small island go by. Whenever we see land, it's very flat...it's almost difficult to make out - it looks just like some humps on the horizon - the coast and land blend together and it can be difficult to see where one stops and the other begins. When I wake just before 6 in the morning, I 'll be looking for Sister's Island through my beloved porthole.

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