

Photo: Jenafor Ollander

THE CANADIAN RANG TRUE NORTH

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by JUDY WAYTIUK

JEFFREY QAUNAQ JOINED UP AT 18, AS SOON AS HE WAS OLD ENOUGH, BECAUSE "I'M A CANADIAN. I WANT TO PROTECT MY COUNTRY."

Now 29, Qaunaq is one of 1,500 Canadian Rangers, all military reservists, in the 58 patrols that make up the First Canadian Ranger Patrol Group (1CRPG). He's based 1,100 kilometers above the Arctic Circle in the hamlet of Grise Fiord, at the southern tip of Ellesmere Island. Grise Fiord, Canada's most northern community, is called *Aujuittuq*, "the place that never thaws," in Inuit.

The 1CRPG volunteers patrol the Northwest Territory, Yukon Territory, and Nunavut, 40% of Canada's land mass.

1CRPG is one of five Ranger Patrol Groups, 4,500 members in all, that have protected outlying regions of Newfoundland and Labrador, northern Ontario, Québec, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, and the remote west coast regions of British Columbia, for more than sixty years. The Maritimes don't have Rangers, probably because they don't have the kind of isolated communities that need them.

Few Canadians outside the remote regions they serve even know the Rangers exist. Here at West, we stumbled across them while researching the annual Hudson Bay Quest dogsled race a few issues back. The Rangers, we discovered, help the race to run safely every year, staking out the trail and watching for mushers in trouble.

The Rangers' training equips them to help regular troops and to conduct reconnaissance. They're also available to pitch in whenever their communities need them. They even give northern winter survival training to southern Canadian Forces.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE NORTH

"The guys down south have to learn to cope with the cold, because it's not the same there. If you light a stove in the south, you do it in a certain way. Up north ... you have to pour naphtha on it to warm it up, or it just won't work," says 1CRPG Commanding Officer Christian Bergeron who is based in Yellowknife.

There are women Rangers and there's no upper age limit; Bergeron has an 84-year-old in his command and says older Rangers offer invaluable experience. "They've got so much knowledge about the North," he marvels, "ice conditions, navigation — it's one thing to read a GPS, but how can you read the ice to tell what is safe and what is not?"

Arctic-based Rangers carry out more than 110 exercises and operations a year to ensure Canada's sovereignty over the wild, windswept, achingly-empty Arctic terrain. "This year from March 19th to April 14th, we launched three patrols on Ellesmere Island, on the northwest, central and eastern sides," says CO Bergeron.

And, every year or so, Qaunaq and a small band of Ranger companions travel west from Grise Fiord by air to Resolute, Canada's second most-northerly community, aka *Qausuittuq* — where the sun never sets — on Cornwallis Island. They make the 450 km. return trip by snowmobile. The journey can take up to three weeks, depending on the weather and how often the snowmobiles break down. Really harsh weather can drive the patrol group into their tents to hunker

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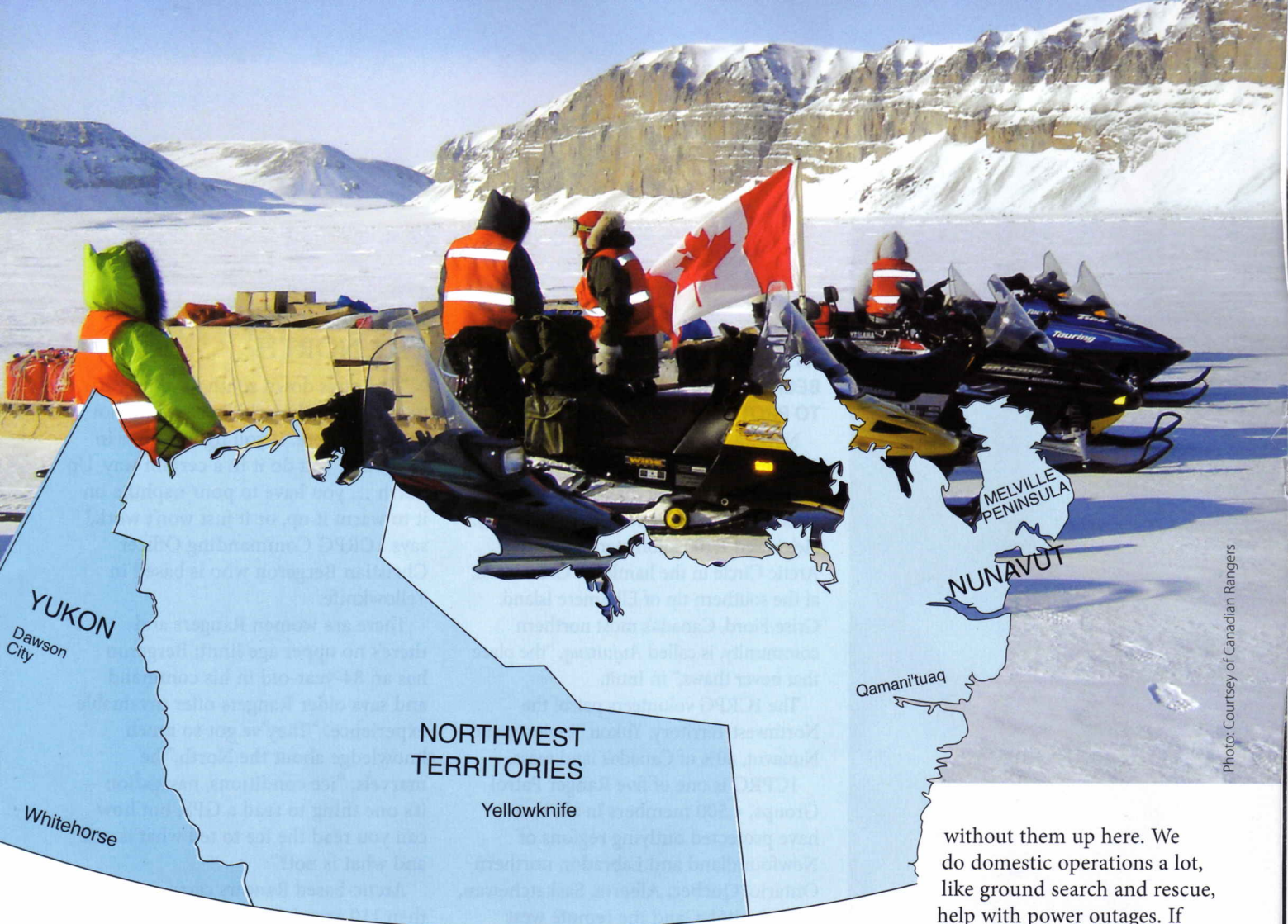


Photo: Courtesy of Canadian Rangers

A Canadian Rangers patrol flies the flag as they halt for tea on Jones Sound en route from Resolute to Grise Fiord in April, 2006.

down, sometimes for days, and wait for a storm to pass.

“We keep the tent warm, the stove filled up, look out from time to time to see if there are any polar bears,” says Qaunaq. They receive military rations, but Qaunaq and his comrades prefer their traditional diet so they hunt caribou, ptarmigan, seal, and rabbit. “A caribou’s about three to four days of food,” he says.

Although the Armed Forces would supply them with winter gear, these Rangers wear their customary clothing of parkas (anoraks), mitts, and mukluks made from animal hides. Caribou, mostly. The traditional clothing is much warmer, says Qaunaq.

KEEPING THE NORTH CANADIAN

The Rangers’ sovereignty patrols, regular training exercises, and simple, steadfast presence up here function as a quiet, continuous declaration that these frozen lands belong to Canada. Resolute and Grise Fiord were both artificially “seeded” by the Canadian government more than fifty years ago when a small number of Inuit families from northern Québec and Baffin Island were moved here partly to establish firmer claims of Canadian sovereignty in the north. (This summer, Russia sent a submarine deep under the ice to plant a flag at the north pole.)

Today, nearly all northern Rangers are local Inuit. They provide critical services to their communities, says CO Bergeron, who’s worked with them for seven years. “It’s impossible to do

without them up here. We do domestic operations a lot, like ground search and rescue, help with power outages. If there is a flood, who else will handle evacuations? Northern communities don’t have any resources, so the Rangers become very important. And we support most of the events in the North; we do the Hudson Bay Quest, the Yukon Quest, the River Quest.”

As well, the Rangers are role models for Northern teens. There’s even a Junior Canadian Rangers program for boys and girls aged 12 to 18 with 104 locations and 3,000 members, half of them in the remote North. The youngsters learn life skills, first aid, firearm safety, and traditional Inuit skills - whatever the community feels its young people need to know. “The Junior Rangers program is designed to respect the needs of each patrol’s communities,” explains CO Bergeron. “We ask the elders what skills they want to teach the kids, and we try to find elders to teach what’s wanted.”

The Rangers’ history goes back to World War II when the volunteer



Photo: Miriam Koerner

When it's stormy, the Rangers pitch camp and wait, peeking outside every now and then to check for polar bears.

Pacific Coast Militia Rangers, modeled loosely after the British Home Guard, were formed in 1942 to act as coastal watchers looking for enemy activity along British Columbia's isolated coastline. Officially stood down on September 30, 1945, they were revived two years later as a corps of the reserve militia and renamed the Canadian Rangers. Their duties were expanded to cover the Arctic and Canada's coastlines.

With active recruiting, Canada's Rangers numbers are slowly increasing. From a current 4,500, they are expected to grow to 4,800 by 2008. And if they're all even half as dedicated as Jeffrey Qaunap, Canada's Northern and remote regions are in strong, quiet hands. [WEST](#)

Ranger BASICS

- The Rangers' weapon is the WWII era .303 calibre Lee Enfield No. 4 rifle. It's an old gun, but it's proven to be the most reliable in Arctic weather conditions. Each Ranger is issued 200 rounds a year. Rangers aren't required to carry the weapon, but most do.
- Rangers get paid for between eight and 12 days of annual service and for special training and operations.
- New Rangers take a ten-day qualification course, including basic drill, shooting, general military knowledge, navigation, search and rescue, wilderness first aid, radio communications, and annual programs of formal military instruction and field exercises.
- The Ranger uniform is a red sweatshirt, t-shirt, ball cap and arm band.
- The Rangers' motto is *Vigilans*.