

# FORGOTTEN

The Canadian Arctic Expedition's white leaders got the glory, but



# OTTEN

it was the Inuit who made their discoveries possible. *by Kate Jaimet*



Canadian explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson drags a seal carcass across the ice during the Canadian Arctic Expedition.

**T**he Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913–18 was, in its time, the largest Arctic expedition ever mounted by the Canadian government. It comprised more than a hundred people, including scientists, sailors, a surgeon, a photographer, and dozens of Inuit hunters, dogsled drivers, and seamstresses. The southern party, headed by Dr. R.M. Anderson, undertook geographic and scientific surveys of the Arctic coast, while the northern party, under Vilhjalmur Stefansson, searched for undiscovered land in the Beaufort Sea. During the northern party's exploratory trip of 1916, two Inupiat Inuit men, Natkusiak and Emiu, were critical to the mission's success.

On a cold day in March 1916, three men in fur parkas stood on the north shore of Banks Island and looked out at the frozen waters of McClure Strait. Across the strait lay Melville Island, home to caribou, muskoxen, and polar bears, but no permanent human settlement. Beyond Melville stretched the distant Arctic islands, and beyond them still the far northern reaches of the Beaufort Sea — an unmapped realm of ice and snow. The three men belonged to a small team of adventurers that would soon embark on one of the last great exploratory journeys in Canadian history.

One of the three was Vilhjalmur Stefansson, commander of the Canadian Arctic Expedition. The Canadian government had commissioned Stefansson to search for undiscovered islands in the Far North. Unsupported by airplanes or radio — both still too early in their development to be of use in the Arctic — Stefansson and his

men would use dogsleds for transportation, hunt seal and caribou to survive, and communicate by means of handwritten notes left in stone cairns.

The stakes were high. The government had financed the expedition to assert sovereignty over any new Arctic islands ahead of rival explorers from Scandinavia and the United States. Stefansson, who was born to Icelandic immigrants in what is now Manitoba, was both an explorer and an anthropologist. He made a living from writing and lecturing about his northern adventures. His audiences were captivated by his theory that some Copper Inuit were descended from Europeans, possibly early Norse explorers. New discoveries would bolster his reputation and ensure his fame and prosperity.

During the third year of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, 1915, Stefansson had discovered an island that straddled the 78th paral-



Local people watch the Canadian Arctic Expedition's ships in Bernard Harbour in what is now Nunavut in 1914.

Inuit guide Emiu, also known as Split-the-Wind, with his sled dogs. He was an invaluable addition to the Canadian Arctic Expedition.





Above: Ikpukuak and Higgilak were Copper Inuit with the Canadian Arctic Expedition.

Right: The men who hauled Vihjalmur Stefansson after the explorer sprained his ankle. They are likely, from left to right, Emiu, Natkusiak, and Arnout Castel.



lel, which he dubbed “New Land” (later named Brock Island). His goals for 1916 were to travel by dogsled across Melville Island to Brock Island, explore it, and then venture further north in search of more undiscovered islands to claim for Canada.

Beside Stefansson on that March day in 1916 stood two Inuit men, whose knowledge as hunters, pathfinders, and dogsled drivers would prove critical to the mission’s success. Yet they remain largely unremembered in Canadian history. Their names were Natkusiak and Emiu. Over the months to come, as snowstorms, injuries, and hunger threatened the welfare of the expedition, Emiu’s speed and Natkusiak’s skill ensured the group’s success and survival.

**O**f the two Inuit men, less is known about Emiu. Stefansson said “he was always a most amiable and charming little fellow.” According to Stefansson, Emiu was an orphan who grew up with foster parents in the vicinity of the mining camps around Nome, Alaska. “He had never lived very much with his own people under Eskimo conditions,” noted Stefansson in *The Friendly Arctic*. But his speed as a long-distance runner and dogsled racer

was valuable to the expedition and had earned him the nickname “Split-the-Wind.” Expedition member Harold Noice observed that he would sometimes run ahead of the dogs: “When the dogs flagged, he would like down flat on his stomach and play seal to get them excited and when they had nearly pounced upon him, up he would bound like a jack-in-the-box and race on ahead,” Noice wrote in *With Stefansson in the Arctic*.

Natkusiak had more experience than Emiu in Arctic exploration. He had roamed far and wide with Stefansson on the explorer’s previous Arctic expedition in 1908–12 and even taught him Inuktitut. Natkusiak had a reputation as a practical joker. In his visits to isolated Inuit villages, he would light up his pipe and blow smoke through his nostrils, telling the assembled country folk that he was a great magician with fire in his body. Yet his love of a good prank never overshadowed his competence, trustworthiness, and fortitude, as far as Stefansson was concerned.

“In all my long travels ... Natkusiak had always been my mainstay and in many cases the only man on whom I could rely,” Stefansson wrote in his 1913 book, *My Life with the Eskimos*.



Top: An Inuit hunter demonstrates bow-shooting from a crouched position.

Bottom: Copper Inuit at a fishing camp. Inuit hunters and fishers were vital in providing food for the Canadian Arctic Expedition.

Natkusiak and Emiu were not simply guides, showing Stefansson the way through lands familiar to them. By voyaging far out on the sea ice, beyond their usual hunting territory, they were going to places they didn't know and were taking risks. Thus the two Inuit men were also explorers who had to rely on their wits and skills to survive in unknown country.

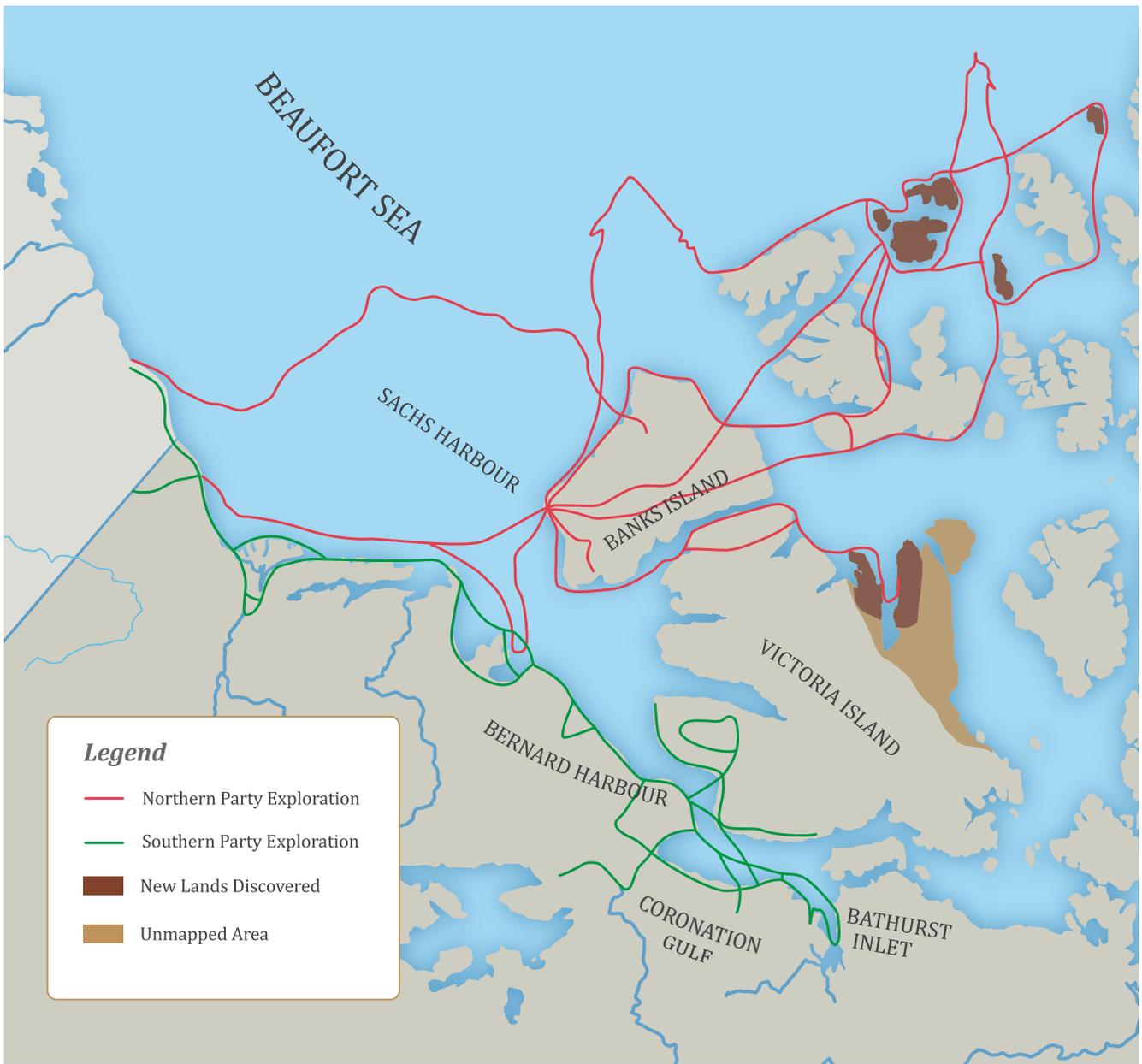
The men and women under Stefansson's command had spent the winter of 1915 living at several different coastal camps, separated by hundreds of kilometres of ice and snow. Contact between the camps was sporadic, and in the early months of 1916 Stefansson wanted eagerly to connect with his second-in-command, the Norwegian expatriate Storker Storkerson, to discuss their forthcoming summer explorations.

Storkerson was a former merchant seaman who found his way to North America and participated in an earlier Anglo-American polar expedition in which Stefansson had also participated. Stefansson had sought him out because he considered Storkerson the best "all around" man for the expedition.

The two were supposed to rendezvous in February at Natkusiak's camp at Cape Prince Alfred, on the northwest coast of Banks Island. But Storkerson never made the rendezvous, leading Stefansson to worry that something was seriously wrong. "We thought of illness, of accident, and of nearly every explanation except the correct one," wrote Stefansson in *The Friendly Arctic*.

Intent on pushing north with the explorations, Stefansson, Natkusiak, and Emiu, along with some other expedition members, spent February and March hauling thousands of kilograms of equipment and food from the base camp at Cape Kellett northward up the coast of Banks Island, in the face of fog, blizzards, and the darkness of long polar nights.

Stefansson estimated that his expeditionary team of six men and twenty-five dogs would need eighteen kilograms of food per day to survive. For a six-month trip, this meant about three tonnes of food; yet those same twenty-five dogs could collectively haul only a bit more than one tonne. The men would need to hunt seal and caribou to supplement the flour, tea, sugar, chocolate, and pemmican they carried on their sleds.



By the end of March, Stefansson, Emiu, and Natkusiak at last reached Mercy Bay on the north coast of Banks Island with their loads of supplies. There, Storkerson had left a letter in a stone cairn: Having missed his rendezvous, the second-in-command had decided to go ahead with his own team to explore the uncharted seas beyond newly discovered Brock Island.

Upset by this news — which meant that Storkerson would receive credit for any new discoveries — Stefansson resolved to overtake Storkerson and regain his rightful control of the expedition.

**O**n April 5, Stefansson, Natkusiak, and Emiu, along with three other team members, set out to cross the frozen strait between Banks and Melville islands. The going was rough. A kilometre and a half offshore, a belt of rubble ice about eight hundred metres wide blocked their way. They hacked it with pickaxes to make a passage. As the days wore on, fog obscured their vision,

while blizzards whipped snow in the faces of men and dogs. Still, they travelled sixteen to twenty-four kilometres a day, until finally, on April 13, they arrived on the shore of Melville Island.

There they found a polar bear prowling around a food cache marked by a stone cairn. After Natkusiak shot the bear, they opened the cache and found some six hundred kilograms of food, along with a note from Storkerson: He had left nine days earlier, heading north.

Though anxious to catch up, the party needed to stay in camp a few days to rest the dogs. They were further delayed by blizzards, snow blindness, and, finally, food poisoning induced by an ill-timed experiment. Stefansson had a big interest in the nutritional benefits of the Inuit diet, which was almost all meat. Since they had a polar bear carcass available, he chose this time to determine whether there was any scientific validity behind the Inuit taboo against eating polar bear liver. There was: After eating the liver,

# 'PRICELESS' INUIT SEAMSTRESSES

Inuit women alone possessed the skill to sew the waterproof fur clothing on which the expedition members depended for survival. These unsung women – who often lived in expedition camps far from home and endured the same harsh conditions as the men – included Natkusiak's wife, Ikiuna, her mother, Guinana, and Pannigabluk, who was married to Stefansson according to local custom during his previous trip of 1908-12 and bore him a son, Alex.

"The women as seamstresses are priceless," Stefansson wrote in *The Friendly Arctic*. "Seamstresses such as these we need so badly that we are willing to engage along with them comparatively useless husbands and families of several children."

The women used several techniques to create waterproof clothing, says Lisa Truong, curator of Skin Deep, an exhibition on the art of Inuit skin clothing at Carleton University. The clothing was designed with the fewest possible seams, and the pieces were oriented so that droplets would naturally roll off the fur. A special stitching method was used to avoid holes that pierced all the way through both layers of hide, thereby becoming conduits of water. In addition, the diameter of the holes was smaller than the natural diameter of the caribou sinew used as thread. The sinew, already squeezed tight through the holes, expanded when it came into contact with water and swelled, making an even tighter seam.

"If a good seamstress sees you rubbing oil on boots she has made she is likely to become angry, considering it an insult to be suspected of a seam that needs grease to cover up deficiencies of workmanship," Stefansson wrote.

several men, including Emiu, fell violently ill with headaches and vomiting. "This was the last occasion when I was able to get any member of my party to make [liver eating] experiments with me," wrote Stefansson, who claimed to have eaten polar bear liver many times with no ill effects. (Polar bear livers contain extremely high levels of vitamin A, making them toxic to humans.)

After everyone had recovered, they at last left camp on April 20, following Storkerson's tracks and sleeping in the snow huts he'd built along the way. They passed many herds of muskox and caribou but came no closer to catching the speedy Norwegian. On April 28, Stefansson decided on a different tactic:

"I shall go ahead tomorrow, if the weather is fair, with Emiu's [dogsled] team light, to try [reaching] two snowhouses a day till we overtake them," he wrote in his diary. But on that very day, Stefansson injured his ankle — an injury so severe that it would prevent him from walking or driving a dogsled for more than a month.



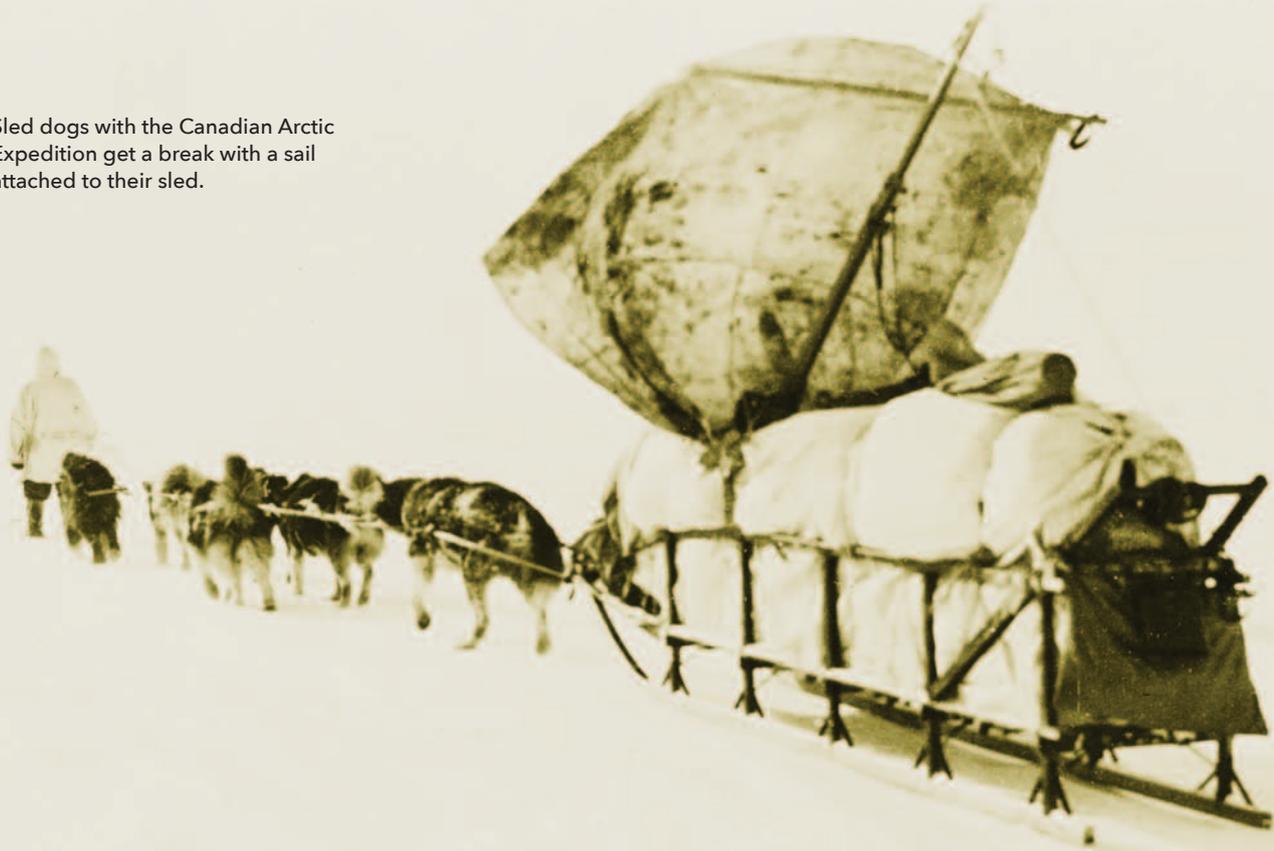
Kunmuk at work as a seamstress with the Canadian Arctic Expedition.

With the extra weight of the expedition leader riding on his sled, Emiu could not drive his dogs fast enough to catch up to Storkerson. When drifting snow and a fifty-kilometre-per-hour wind kept them in camp on April 30, Stefansson grew increasingly frustrated. On May 1, he finally sent Emiu ahead carrying a succinct note: "Dear Storkersen: Wait for me near where you get this until we catch up."

At 4:00 a.m. on May 2, Emiu came dashing into Storkerson's camp on the north coast of Brock Island. He had caught the party in the nick of time; had Storkerson continued ahead, he — not Stefansson — might have been the first to make discoveries beyond Brock Island.

When the men of both Stefansson and Storkerson's parties were finally assembled, Stefansson reasserted his command. He split up the expedition, sending Storkerson back south with three men to map the north coast of Victoria Island. Although he still could not walk or

Sled dogs with the Canadian Arctic Expedition get a break with a sail attached to their sled.



drive a dogsled, Stefansson resolved to continue northward with Emiu, Natkusiak, and three other men — ship's master Aarnout Castel and two young American sailors, Harold Noice and Karsten Andersen.

While these arrangements were being made, Natkusiak went hunting for caribou, becoming the first man in recorded history to explore the interior of Brock Island. He found a hilly landscape and tall, hoodoo-like rock pillars. At first he thought the formations had been built by men — the large boulders at the top placed by human hands upon the slender pillars — but upon closer inspection he reasoned that they'd been shaped by blowing snow.

**R**esuming their voyage, Emiu, Natkusiak, and the rest of Stefansson's party drove their dogsleds around the coast of Brock Island until they spotted a set of high cliffs looming to the east of them, across a channel covered in sea ice. Stefansson had seen the cliffs the previous year but thought they were part of the same island. They mushed across the channel and, on May 9, set foot on what they now realized was a new island, which they dubbed "First Land" (later renamed Mackenzie King Island). As the team followed the coast of the newly discovered island, a blizzard set in and brought thick fog and snow for several days. Stefansson, still lame, continued to ride on Emiu's sled.

To the north of them stretched an expanse of ice that Stefansson thought was a deep bay or inlet, indenting the island's coast.

On May 12, Emiu and Natkusiak caught a glimpse of land on the opposite side of the ice, looming through the fog and snow. They set off across the ice through heavy snow under the mid-

night sun and arrived on the other side at about 4:00 a.m. on May 13. They didn't realize at the time that the ice they had just crossed was in fact a strait. They had just discovered another island, later to be named Borden Island.

Reaching the other side of the strait, they continued their travels along the coast. Natkusiak, with his heavy sled, travelled from point to distant point, while Emiu and Stefansson, in the lighter sled, investigated the indentations

between them. To one side of them lay the shoreline of low mud and gravel; to the other were rough ridges of sea ice that had been forced up by pressure, sometimes rising as high as fifteen metres. Fog and snowstorms impeded their progress, as the dogs struggled with their heavy loads through soft snow up to their bellies. At last, on May 20, they reached the northwest tip of the island. As unexplored realms of sea ice stretched ahead of them, the men set up a camp and took stock of their situation. Three of Emiu's dogs and four of Natkusiak's ten dogs were in "very poor shape."

## Fog and snowstorms impeded their progress, as the dogs

“Steady hard work on insufficient food” took its toll. And they had only enough food left for twenty days for men and dogs. If they continued north the expedition could take several more months. Stefansson, normally an excellent hunter, was incapacitated by his injury. Of the six men, only one had shown reliable success in hunting — Natkusiak.

It would be hard enough for one hunter to supply the needs of six men and twenty-five dogs, but now game was growing even more scarce. At one point, Natkusiak and Emiu watched a lead of open water for five hours but saw no seals. If animals were sparse here, would they even exist in the area farther north that Stefansson intended to explore?

Stefansson sent ahead a party consisting of the fittest dogs, most of the food supplies, and two of the men: Aarnout Castel and Harold Noice. The other dogs were allowed a few more days rest. Then, on May 23 — a cold, windy, cloudy day — Stefansson, Natkusiak, Emiu, and the sailor Karsten Andersen left the safety of the coast and struck out northeast to explore, in Stefansson’s words, “the unsounded and untraversed seas that lie within our reach.”

For the next few days they travelled across rough ice and through cloudy skies, heavy snow, and frozen fog. Stefansson rode on Emiu’s sled, and Natkusiak, besides driving the second sled, hunted for seal nearly every day. Though he often brought home a kill, the meat was soon devoured. “The future is beginning to look black to me,” Stefansson wrote in his diary on May 29. “I have never endured anything harder than lying at home in camp now that we need meat both as food and to encourage the men.”

The men’s mood must have been anxious, for Stefansson’s diary entry continued: “Emiu is turning out badly. He is continually peevish, complaining of hardships.... If my foot were in good shape I would send Emiu and Natkusiak south so as to get rid of Emiu’s whining.”

“Peevish” and “whining” seem like harsh words to use against the man who had been carrying Stefansson on his sled for a month. Emiu’s dogs were exhausted, his expedition leader was lame, food was low, and he faced dwindling hunting prospects in uncharted wilderness. Perhaps he simply expressed the opinion that it would be wiser to turn back. Still, they continued northward until, on June 3, they caught up with Castel and Noice.

After resting in camp, Stefansson found on June 4 that he could walk for ten kilometres with “not a twinge” to his ankle. He therefore decided to split up the party again, sending Natkusiak, Emiu, and Castel back south with two sleds, twenty-seven dogs, and instructions for preparations against the coming winter, while he continued northeast with one sled, eight dogs, and the American sailors Noice and Andersen.

Natkusiak, Emiu, and Castel made good time on their jour-

ney south, arriving on June 21 at Liddon Gulf on Melville Island, where they met up with their old crew mate, Storkerson. Meanwhile, Stefansson continued to trek north. On June 16, his party reached an undiscovered island north of the 79th parallel and dubbed it “Second Land” (later renamed Meighen Island). The

three built a stone cairn with a note claiming it for King George V on behalf of Canada.

“By June 22, the sun had gone as far north as it intended, and so had we,” wrote Stefansson. His team turned southward and spent two months hunting and exploring on another newly discovered island, which they dubbed “Third Land” (later renamed Lougheed Island).

By the fall of 1916, Stefansson and his team were weary, low on food, and feeding their sled dogs caribou skins to survive. Then, on October 7, on the northwest tip of Melville Island, they spotted a sled trail and the figure of a man running to meet them.

“It was Natkusiak, apparently quite as glad to see me as I was

him, which is saying much,” Stefansson wrote in his diary.

The ever-dependable Natkusiak had brought a team of Inuit hunters and seamstresses to establish a northern winter base camp for Stefansson, a jumping-off point for their next round of explorations in the summer of 1917.

**M**uch was accomplished on that summer exploration trip of 1916. The explorers had established that “New Land” (Brock Island) was separate from “First Land.” They had crossed the channel that divided “First Land” into two distinct islands (Borden Island and Mackenzie King Island). They had also discovered two new islands — Meighen and Lougheed. Although Natkusiak and Emiu did not set foot on those islands, without them Stefansson could not have reached them.

Stefansson left the Arctic in 1918 and never returned. He was elected president of the prestigious Explorer’s Club, wrote books, and was feted as a daring, though controversial, Arctic explorer.

Emiu “Split-the-Wind” stayed with the Canadian Arctic Expedition until it ended, then returned to Nome, Alaska, where he unfortunately died during the influenza epidemic of 1918.

Natkusiak lived a long and prosperous life. At the end of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, he received one of the expedition’s schooners, the *North Star*, as partial payment for his services. He stayed with his wife and family on Banks Island for several years, trapping white foxes, and earned the nickname Billy Banksland. He settled on Victoria Island in 1937 and became one of the founders of the community of Ulukhaktok (until 2006 known as Holman). He died in 1947, leaving many descendants. Natkusiak Peninsula on Victoria Island is named in his honour. 🐾

// See more at [CanadasHistory.ca/CAE](http://CanadasHistory.ca/CAE)



Vihjalmur Stefansson types expedition notes on his typewriter at a coastal camp in January 1916.