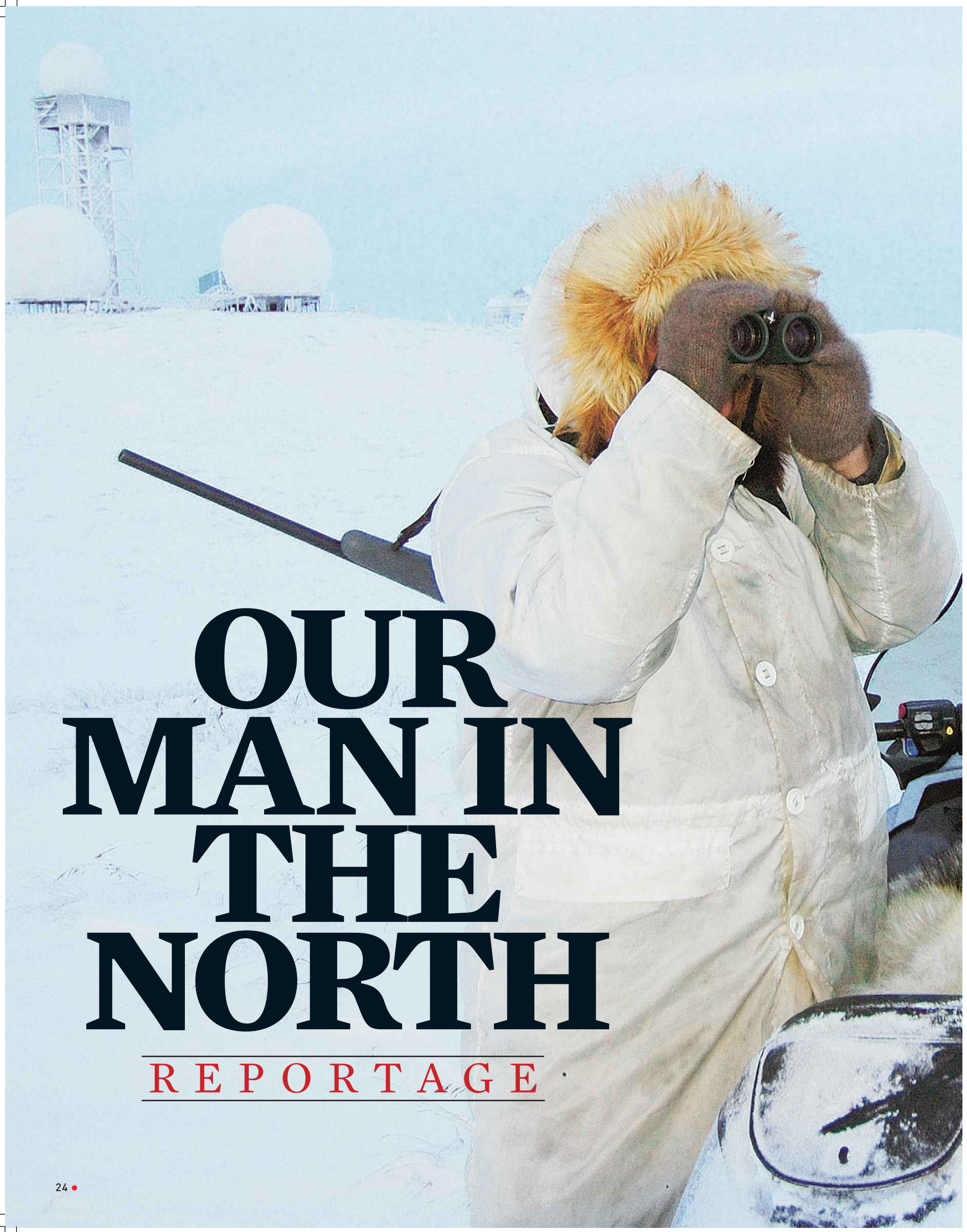
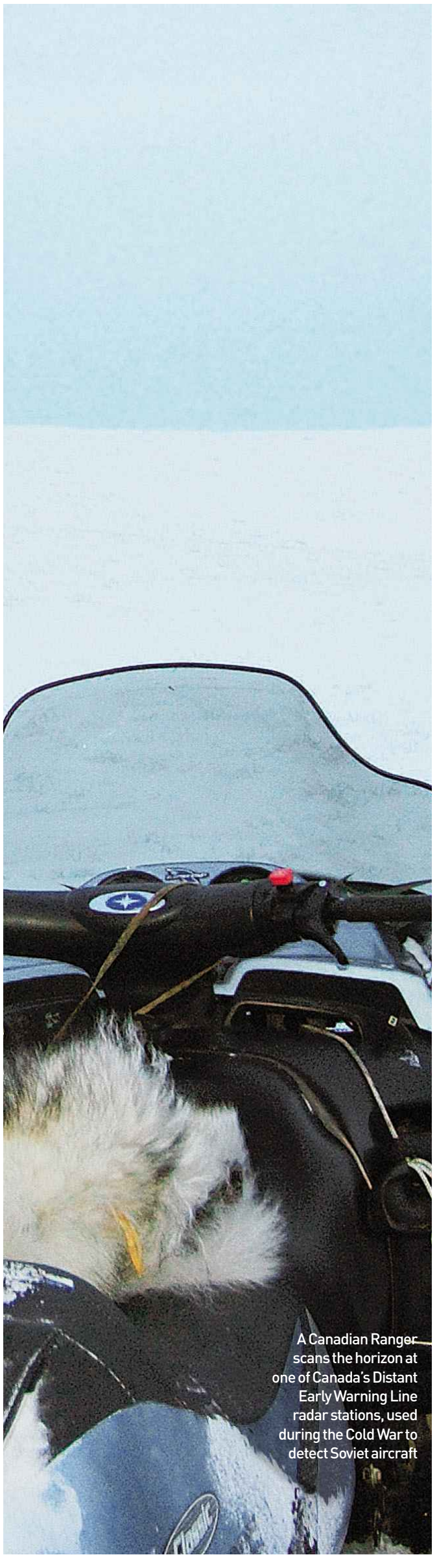


OUR MAN IN THE NORTH

REPORTAGE

At –73°C, the Arctic is the hottest place to be. Superpowers craving oil are sniffing around Canada's loneliest acres with only a hardy troop of patrolling Eskimos in their way. *Live*'s Jonathan Green braved raw caribou, ravenous polar bears and snow falling like concrete to join their body-numbing watch



A Canadian Ranger scans the horizon at one of Canada's Distant Early Warning Line radar stations, used during the Cold War to detect Soviet aircraft

JONATHAN GREEN

The blizzard explodes with full force. Shards of razored ice whip into my face while cyclonic flurries of snow make the whiteout complete. I can't see the trail ahead or the soldiers who are protecting my life in this hostile, limitless wilderness.

We are gunning snowmobiles over the wind-scoured tundra and the frozen wastes of the Arctic Ocean, a winter lunarscape of cracking and moaning lime-green ice. It runs all the way to the horizon and on to the North Pole. We are beyond the 70th parallel, deep inside the Arctic Circle, in the Canadian Northwest Territories. The previous day the temperature dropped to –35°C, an improvement on –45°C earlier in the week. At 30mph on a snowmobile that brings the figure, with the wind-chill factor, down to –73°C. At that temperature you can get frostbite in less than five minutes. Unprotected skin, even through clothes and boots, freezes and turns black. Depending on the time it takes you to reach a hospital, you run the risk of having fingers, toes and perhaps even your nose amputated. Even through two ski masks, goggles, a neck warmer and a scarf, my face feels like it has been scrubbed with a frozen Brillo pad. The skin turns an angry red and sloughs off at night.

'THIS FRONTIER IS A NEW BATTLEGROUND FOR TRILLION-DOLLAR OIL AND GAS RESOURCES'

Last night, shortly after we pitched our tent on the permafrost (soil or rock consistently below 0°C), one of the Eskimos unhooked his rifle, laid it against his snowmobile and peered at the portentous rings around the Moon. 'That is a bad sign,' he declared, laconically. He knew a big storm was on its way, the first for two years. Before long, the wind picked up and the tent flaps started rattling like a machine gun.

There are other dangers here, too. One of my guides scanned the frozen crests of the Beaufort Sea with his binoculars, looking for predatory polar bears, the only mammals known to hunt humans. I was told the story of two Esso oil workers who excitedly went outside to take snapshots of an inquisitive bear. Five minutes later all that remained was the head of one and 20lb of bloody meat lying on the ice. There have been documented instances of hungry polar bears tearing into tents, swiping, mauling and eating human flesh.

Now in the teeth of the storm, we stop in our tracks, dismount our snowmobiles and kill the engines. A compass would be useless here – we're so close to the magnetic North Pole that it would just spin manically – and these Canadian Rangers have neither maps nor GPS. Instead, they have 'traditional knowledge'. In the eerie silence of the screaming blizzard, streams of snow gusting along the ice, they start to 'read' the direction. They look at the slant of the wolverine fur that lines the hood of their parkas and at the pattern the wind has chiselled into the hardened ridges of the ice. Then, wordlessly, they swing astride their snowmobiles and lead us south-west as the storm increases in intensity.

Few people are crazy enough to venture out here in the full bite of winter. But the fight for the Arctic is on. This wild frontier is becoming a new battleground for nations competing to plunder the trillion-dollar energy resources under the polar ice caps. Geologists suspect that the region contains some 25 per cent of the world's stocks of oil and gas. Hitherto, the hostile conditions and polar ice, hundreds of feet thick, have prevented drilling. But with the erratic temperatures brought on by climate change, the ice caps are receding; some 386,000 square miles have disappeared in the past 30 years.

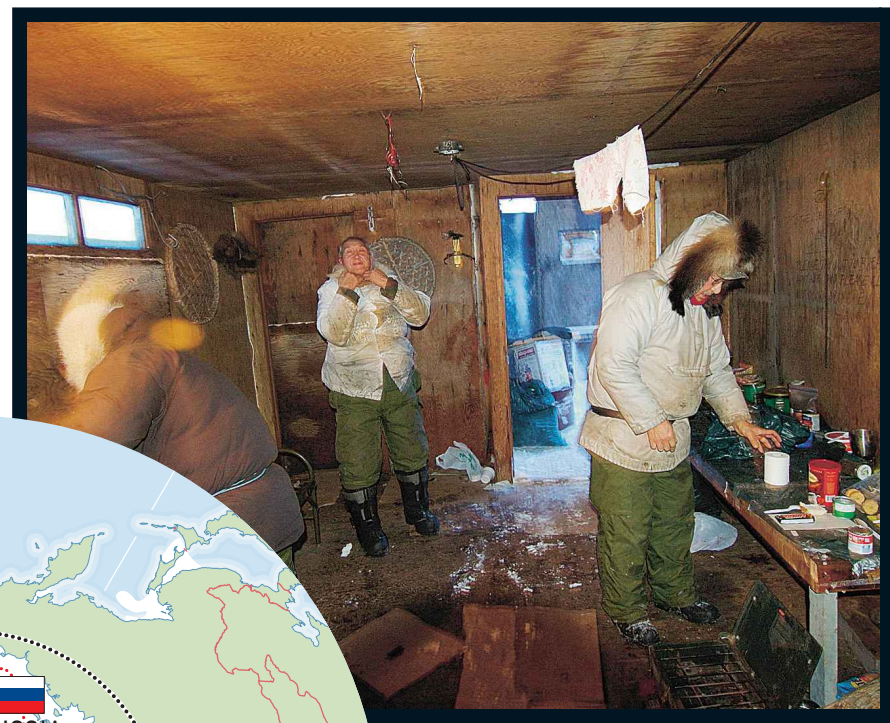
As the dwindling ice reveals its bounty, an international colonial scramble for territory is breaking out between Russia, the US, Canada, Denmark (Greenland) and Norway, who are all trying to claim it first at a UN Commission. The US is trying to extend Alaska, while Canada and Denmark are even fighting over Hans Island, a tiny, uninhabited rock that is only half a square mile in area.

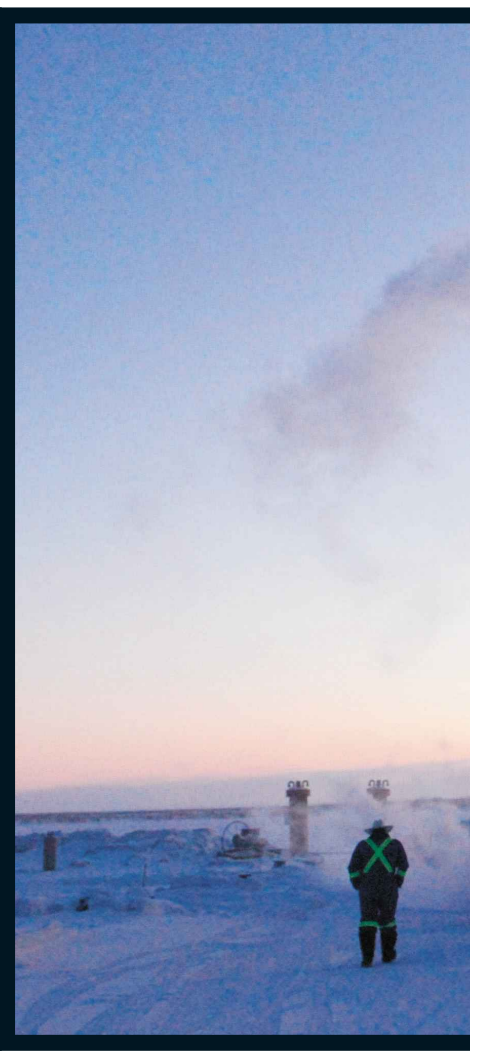
And it's not only an issue for the countries battling for territory. This week, an EU report warned that the situation opens up the possibility of serious 'potential conflicts', with 'consequences for international stability and European security'.

For much of human history the Arctic has presented as much a challenge as the race to the Moon. It wasn't until 100 years ago that the first person even reached the North ▶

▶ Pole. Scores of men died trying – the temperatures, lack of sunlight, paucity of food, brutal weather and predatory polar bears all conspired to make it as unattainable as Mars.

But with global warming, all that is changing. Canada's Arctic archipelago of islands could provide the world's next oil 'elephant' – a field of more than one billion barrels. Russian oil companies such as Lukoil are moving into the pack ice. The Murmansk shipping company is outfitting the atomic-powered icebreaker *Sevmorput*, which will become a mobile drilling rig able to head into the deepest, remotest and most hostile parts of the Arctic.





Left: The North Pole and the Arctic Ocean around it are not owned by any nation, and the bordering countries – Canada, the US, Russia, Norway and Denmark (Greenland) – are now battling for oil-drilling rights. Last year, Russia planted a flag on the sea bed and staked a claim to a massive part of the region. Above: Canadian Rangers take refuge from the elements in a rundown hut. Right: an operations centre for oil exploration workers on the ice

Three-quarters of Canadians live only 150 miles from the US border, in the second-largest country in the world, bigger than China, yet with a population half the size of Britain's. This leaves the massive expanse of the Arctic north unpopulated and unprotected. Who will protect their interests?

The only people who can are the Canadian Rangers – a unique military unit comprised of 4,000 native Eskimo men drawn from Arctic communities living on the ice. I am here with them on patrol, protecting Canadian sovereignty from potentially aggressive incursions.

'We have lived and patrolled up here for generations,' says the Rangers' Master Corporal Emanuel Adam. 'Because we have boots on the ice and we have people living here, the Russians can't take this land. We will protect it for future generations as we have for hundreds of years.'

It was Russia that upped the ante last summer when one of its ice-breakers released two mini submarines that descended 14,000ft and planted a titanium Russian flag on the sea bed. They audaciously claimed the North Pole and a piece of the Arctic the size of Western Europe as Russian. Naturally, the Canadians were outraged. 'This isn't the 15th century,' stormed Peter MacKay, the Canadian foreign minister. 'You can't go around the world and just plant flags and say, "We're claiming this territory."'

The Canadian government acted quickly and decisively. Immediately it announced plans to build a special Arctic warfare centre and a new deep-water sea port. Melting sea ice in summer means that the Northwest Passage – a shipping lane that could link Europe and Asia – may be navigable again, so Canada also pledged to build six naval patrol vessels to secure the passage.

Russia responded the following month. Twelve TU-95MC 'Bear' strategic bombers began military exercises over the Arctic, which marked the start of regular Russian patrols. The move triggered the more frequent deployment of Canada's secret weapon: the Rangers.

'Satellite imaging or even modern, highly trained soldiers cannot do what the Rangers can do,' says Captain Conrad Schubert of the 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group. 'Even Canada's elite soldiers find it tough surviving in these hostile temperatures, but to the Rangers, –20°C is a balmy day. They are the true eyes and ears of the north and our first line of defence against the Russians.'

Arriving in Inuvik in the Northwest Territories, the final gateway to the Canadian Arctic, the –40°C air sends your lungs into a sort of shock spasm and it's hard to catch your breath. At the bar of the Mackenzie Hotel, newly stationed Canadian fighter pilots rub shoulders with scores of newly arrived exploratory oil workers.

'ONCE YOU GET 100 YARDS OUT OF TOWN YOU BECOME PART OF THE FOOD CHAIN'

They must all be instructed in Arctic safety. 'Once you get 100 yards out of town you become part of the food chain,' says Wayne Ross, regional manager of Arctic Operations for Veri-Illuq, an oil company. But none of this danger is any deterrent to the scores of companies hungrily descending into the Mackenzie Delta looking for those lucrative oil and gas reserves.

I journey out to an exploratory gas-drilling rig operated by Canadian company MGM Energy Corp. It has built a small environment-controlled settlement on the tundra; heated Portakabins, hot food and water all have to be brought in. Sewage has to be carted away and everything is powered by generators. Very tight environmental regulations mean that the drilling rig has to be set on a bed of ice so as not to destroy the permafrost.

Companies seeking to exploit the resources of the Arctic do so at considerable financial and physical risk. Only one out of five wells will produce energy. And with each one costing £10 million, it's an expensive gamble.

And for companies not used to drilling in the Arctic, the extra costs quickly build up. 'One of the first things our director got when we started working up here – almost giving him a heart attack – was a £35,000 bill for parkas,' says Gary Bunio, vice-president of operations at MGM Energy.

The route north to where the Rangers are on patrol is via a huge ice highway that's actually the north-flowing

Mackenzie River. In the summer months it's filled with commercial river traffic but in the winter it freezes solid and is used as an ice road.

We reach Tuktoyaktuk after an hour-and-a-half of perilous driving. It's an Eskimo whaling village with a population of around 600. The community here hasn't always done well with visitors; the population was almost wiped out by influenza when the first American missionaries and whalers arrived at the end of the 19th century.

Visitors haven't just brought bad luck, however. The last big oil boom here in the Eighties made some of the Eskimos wealthy beyond their wildest dreams. 'One generation ago our people were in the Stone Age and then all of a sudden the oil companies came and brought us into the 20th century,' says local inhabitant Fred Jacobson.

Then came the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster, when 11 million gallons of oil spilled into the sea. With their hunting lands poisoned, the Eskimo communities demanded £50 million to let the oil companies drill. They refused and left to find more profitable areas. Now, with the climbing price of oil, the drillers are back, and the community, ravaged by alcoholism and unemployment, is delighted. Some bumper stickers say, 'Please God Let There Be Another Oil Rush... I Won't Blow It This Time.'

Tuktoyaktuk is at the front line of climate change. I meet Randall 'Boogie' Poliak, 58, a squat man with a leathery face who has made his living hunting and trapping on the land. Just by tracks in the snow Boogie can tell whether a polar bear is left- or right-'handed', how it will fight if cornered, and whether it's frightened of humans. 'Animals have personalities just like us,' he says.

He has learned these things because his life and those of his children have depended on it. 'The way I was raised, if you didn't kill something to eat then you died,' he says. 'We have "traditional knowledge" that's just a part of us. You could go four or five generations and they wouldn't have to use that knowledge but then, without any teaching, it would be there.'

Now, though, the yo-yo effects of climate change, shortening seasons and the differing migration patterns of the animals have destroyed his living. 'The wildlife is not where it's meant to be,' he says. 'Or if it is, there are only half the numbers there should be. We used to be able to set up camp, the beluga whales would arrive and we were ready. Now we're lucky if they show up at all.'

In this hostile environment every minute wasted means burning up valuable calories or other resources. And melting ice is dangerous, too. 'If ▶

▶ spring comes early the ice gets rotten,' says Boogie. 'Last year I was crossing one area and I just fell in. How can I hunt if I go somewhere, the ice melts and I can't get back?' These days Boogie makes a living guiding wealthy American hunters looking to shoot a polar bear. The going rate is £10,000.

My time has come to head out further north on patrol with the Rangers. Before we leave, they want to inspect my gear to check that it's up to the rigours of an Arctic winter.

Master Corporal Emanuel Adam is a middle-aged Pentecostal minister, with silver streaks in his black hair and moustache, who runs the Glad Tidings Mission, a little clapboard church. He arrives with Sam, 73, his right-hand man who makes a living as an 'environmental monitor' for oil companies in the area. His job is to ensure that the drilling doesn't damage the fragile permafrost or the local ecosystem.

I have been up in the high Himalaya mountains in Nepal and camped in –20°C temperatures in some of the remotest mountain ranges in Alaska. I thought I was well equipped. But Emanuel says, stoically: 'The white man's concept of cold is completely different from ours.' Almost to prove his point, earlier that day the brass handles on the doors turned a ghostly white as the temperature dropped to –52°C. Even the school closed.

As I begin to pull out my gear, both men look embarrassed. When I produce my brand new –40°C polar boots, my Everest expedition tent, gloves certified to –20°C and my Julbo glacier glasses they fall about laughing. 'This isn't a summer camping trip!' they say. 'Did you pack your flip-flops as well?'

We have to source other gear. Luckily we find a pair of huge heavyweight –100°C Baffin Boots that look like something Herman Munster might wear, and I manage to borrow some additional heavyweight dungarees to wear over a thermal layer along with my thick ski pants.

The next day, we set out across the frozen bay. With their blood-stained parkas, mittens made from wolf fur and rifles slung across their backs, the Rangers look like they're ready to take on a marauding Russian battalion.

Along with Emanuel and Sam, there is 30-year-old Richard Pamaktalok, a shy, taciturn local handyman. And there is the squat figure of David Nasogalvak, streaking across the ice on his Polaris snowmobile. I am astonished to discover later that he is 74. 'We only retire when we die,' he says.

As the sunlight dwindles to a burnt tangerine smudge on the horizon, plunging the Arctic wastes into darkness, I desperately try to keep up with them while wrestling with the layers of clothing that ice up within a few short minutes. As the ski masks ride up, exposing the top of my cheeks, I steer with one hand while frantically pulling it down with the other.

But the Rangers aren't stopping for anybody. We slice through the wilderness, tearing up over 100ft mounds of frozen coastal sand dunes, plunging down treacherous bluffs in the darkness and roaring back on to frosted sea ice. The environment is so hostile here that trees can't survive, so the topography is just a flat cotton-wool whiteness. Yet the snow here is different to, say, alpine snow. It's heavy, like powdered concrete, and squeaks noisily when you walk on it. Hitting a bank of this type of snow on a snowmobile is like driving into a pavement.

The Rangers have their rifles to hand. 'Your gun must always be close out here,' says Emanuel. Some of the men carry the British Army World War II-issue .303 Lee-Enfield. It is one of the few rifles robust enough to withstand sub-zero temperatures.

After several hours we reach a deserted, dilapidated cabin set on rusty oil barrels in the middle of the tundra. 'A five-star hotel,' says David, giving the door a nudge with his shoulder and revealing a filthy, windowless cabin strewn with rubbish that has the stench of some sort of wild animal.

WHEN I PRODUCE MY EVEREST TENT THE RANGERS START LAUGHING. 'THIS ISN'T A CAMPING TRIP!'

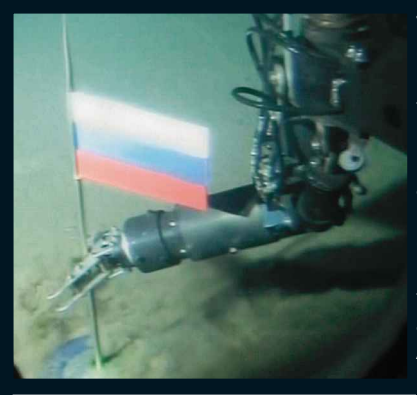
'A wolverine was in here,' he says, sniffing the air. A wolverine is a rodent-like creature, utterly ferocious, which grows as big as 70lb. They are not scared of humans and have been known to attack bears and to fend off or even attack packs of wolves for food. Thankfully, it has gone. David shoulders his rifle. 'I didn't think you'd make it here,' he says to me, as I stamp my feet to get the circulation going. 'Tough white man, eh?'

We light the stove with wood we have hauled in sleds and the Rangers break out their food. In a small, red tub is perhaps the most foul odour I have ever come across: it is oshtuk, fermented beluga-whale oil extracted from the blubber. The only thing worse than the smell is how it tastes.

Richard saws up a huge piece of frozen, raw fish and smears a tiny smudge of oleaginous oshtuk on top. He hands it to me. I reluctantly pop it into my mouth. It's like eating an entire rancid fish market. And the taste lingers for hours afterwards. 'You'll never keep warm if you don't eat raw fish or meat,' says David, happily slicing off a frozen piece of raw caribou before sinking his teeth into it. I begin to feel nauseous.

It would be easy to dismiss these men as a gritty polar version of *Dad's Army* but each one of them has been in life-or-death situations out here. David was five miles out of town with his team of huskies when a 14ft bear attacked and reared up over him. He managed to save his life only by shooting it.

The next day we ride out to one of the Distant Early Warning Line sites. These constitute a line of radar stations arranged along the top of the globe, stretching from Alaska, Canada and Greenland to Iceland. During the Cold War, the stations were used to detect incoming Soviet aircraft, but when intercontinental ballistic missiles were developed the sites went out of use. AP



Top: The Tuktoyaktuk cemetery, which contains the graves of the Eskimos wiped out by flu brought in by 19th-century prospectors and missionaries.
Far left: Rangers skin caribou for food.
Left: a submersible plants the Russian flag at the bottom of the Arctic Ocean last year

However, with the new Cold War in the Arctic they are assuming strategic significance. The men check the huge domes, the fuel tanks and the other outbuildings coated in a thick frost and ice. We head further north to check another site, camping overnight before turning tail and heading south again.

Ahead of us, crossing the sea ice, we see huge roaming herds of caribou galloping with a sound like rumbling thunder. The Rangers unsling their rifles and begin to hunt. They expertly corral the animals and pick them off at a range of 600 yards.

After shooting five or six caribou the Rangers skin them there and then on the frozen lake. There's so much blood and gore it looks like a combine harvester has been through the herd. Emanuel Adam, covered in blood, wipes his hands on the front of his parka. Squinting at me, he declares, 'Doctors say blood is the most cleansing thing. Like the blood of Christ, it washes everything away.'

We spend that night in another filthy cabin. The Rangers cook up their kill, smacking their lips and wiping greasy fingers on their shirts after they eat. I just can't stomach the sight of blood and guts, the greasy caribou flesh or the foul-tasting oshtuk. I switch to my secret stash of Mars bars, to mounting suspicion. 'You're not vegetarian are you?' asks David, waggling his knife at me, as if I've just made some irredeemable faux pas.

'Vegetarians shouldn't travel. What happens in a place like this where you can't get nuts and berries? You would die.' Lying beside me on an orange box is the grey flesh of a half-eaten caribou tongue, an Eskimo delicacy, which David had been munching on but discarded. Outside, the storm is building again, whistling through the cracked and rusty oil drums and making the cabin sway.

'YOU'LL NEVER KEEP WARM IF YOU DON'T EAT RAW MEAT,' HE SAYS, SINKING HIS TEETH INTO FROZEN CARIBOU

We leave at dawn the following day, just as the blizzard erupts. It's a tortuous ride back, impossible to make out the trail or the drop-offs, cliffs and other hazards we ride over. We just make it back to Tuktoyaktuk in time. Wind speeds top 100mph as we scurry for cover in houses that are creaking on their supports. For days the whole community are confined to their houses as the storm batters and rages. The ice road is closed, deemed far too dangerous to attempt.

Finally, there is a brief lull in the storm. I catch a flight home on a local plane, breathing a sigh of relief as the icy runway falls away beneath us.

The Arctic remains a brutal place, with extremes of weather that will search out any weakness you have and exploit it. Just surviving here, let alone sucking out natural resources, takes a supreme level of knowledge and a wily toughness. But the potential prize is too great to resist, so the fight for the right to drill will go on.

As a result, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper recently announced a £22 million modernisation programme that will beef up the types of weapons to which the Ranger patrols have access. But it's their unique and generations-old knowledge of the land that makes the Eskimo Rangers so formidable.

'You could take away the store here, my skidoo, my guns – everything,' said hunter Boogie. 'And I can guarantee you that I could not only survive, but live well. I wonder how well the Russians would do?' ■