



HLY0802: March 29-May 6, 2008

Chief Scientist's Log

April 29: Visiting the Community

Post by Carin Ashjian

We have been back in the ice, the lovely ice, since Sunday. As we worked our way north, the ice gradually went from pancakes to fields and became increasingly difficult to work our way through. Late yesterday morning, we reached a location approximately 70 miles south of St. Lawrence Island at which we did an ice station and from which I went on a visit, by helicopter, to the village of Gambell to talk with the people there. Above: Healy “parked” in the ice.

As 19 scientists descended the “brow” (gangplank) to the ice below, the ship operations officer Jeff Stewart, pilot Bill Springer, and I suited up in Mustang suits for the flight to Gambell. I have ridden in helicopters before but it is always a treat and a little strange at first. While the helo warmed up and the blades increased in speed, I could feel the helo tugging upwards, tugging, tugging, until finally Bill released us from the ship and put us into flight. As we rose from the flight deck, and then moved off of the ship, the helo twisted a little, emphasizing that we are now free from the ship and independent. We swooped over the scientists working at the station and flew off to the NW, across the vast ice.

Our flight lasted about an hour. The island was totally covered in snow and has very little relief. At one point, we saw the track where the snowmachines have crossed the Island from Savoonga on the northern shore to SW Cape on the southern portion to hunt. Much of St. Lawrence Island is desolate at this time of year. As we approach Gambell, we start to see a few houses, accessible only by snowmachine or four-wheeler.

We touched down at the airport in Gambell as casually as parking a car. Immediately, we were swarmed by curious people on four-wheelers. The visit of a helicopter, or even the several daily flights from Nome, is a big event. After the prop stopped turning, we tumbled out of the helo and were met by Merlin and Dexter who were to take us to where we will meet with people. We are whisked away on the back of four-wheelers, swooping across the snow at what seems a dizzyingly fast speed. I have never ridden on a four-wheeler before. I never thought I would do so while wearing a bright orange Mustang suit.

We had an interesting meeting with the hunters, talking about our research and hearing from them their insights into the changing of the seasons, how the ocean and ice are changing in recent years, and how this is impacting the distribution of the animals on which they depend for food (e.g., whales, seals, walrus, birds, crabs).

After another madcap ride back to the helicopter through the village on the back of the four-wheelers, we arrived back at our helicopter and bid farewell to our hosts. We hopped in and lifted off, flying away from the snowy village. After nearly five weeks with the same 130 people, it was jarring to suddenly be in the company of others!