

BAFFINLAND BLOG – AARON TOOKER

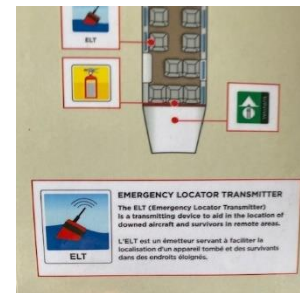


Sometimes the best opportunities present themselves when you least expect them. It was just another normal workday, when my supervisor came out of his office and said, "Aaron, Kyle needs you for the plane today." Little did I know, that one simple sentence would be the start of a once-in-a-lifetime adventure.

I'm Aaron Tooker. I've worked as a tech in the mobile maintenance shop at the Baffinland Mary River Mine for over three years and I'm also a member of the Baffinland Emergency Response Team.

Initially, when the request was made, I figured maybe they wanted me down at the aerodrome on standby, as one of the weekly flights came in from down south. But that wasn't the ask. Turns out the physician's assistant wasn't available, and they needed someone to screen passengers for COVID-19 before boarding the community flights. I had only recently completed my training as a member of the Emergency Response Team, and this was my first assignment. I was nervous but really excited.

They set me up with everything I needed - I was given screening forms, some masks and of course a digital thermometer. And then we boarded the small plane – a Dornier 228, operated by Summit Air, bound for our first stop – Sanirajak. I knew this wouldn't be an ordinary flight when Kyle, our pilot, showed us where the Emergency Locator Transmitter was to be found, and how to turn it on.



You get a real sense of just what "remote" means, when you fly over large rock formations and icy blue water and then, out of nowhere, a small community appears. Each hamlet is nestled right next to the water, which makes sense when you consider it's such a key source of food and transportation for those who live there.



Over the next 5 days, I visited all the communities that Baffinland flies into, including Pond Inlet, Igloolik, Clyde River and Arctic Bay. It was amazing to see these places in person. Pictures are one thing, but to see them with your own eyes brings a whole different perspective.

Although I wasn't able to leave the airports because of the tight schedule, I did have a chance to take in a few of the displays that showcased the carvings, history and some wildlife warnings.

In my hometown of Truro, Nova Scotia, we have signs that say "Don't Feed the Deer." In Clyde River, they have posters instructing visitors what they should do in case they come face-to-face with a polar bear. Yikes.



Another big difference I noticed right away, is I'm used to seeing families at airports with babies in strollers and chest carriers. In Igloolik, I saw a family carry their little boy in the hood of a special parka, called an Amauti. The traditional Arctic parka is designed to keep children safe and warm. It also helps develop bonding between mother and child. In a way, it was like stepping back in time.



When I landed in Pond Inlet, I chatted with a lady named Hanna, who works in the laundry department at the Mary River Mine. She was knitting – likely a toque – as she waited to board the plane. The encounter brought back fond memories of my grandmother, teaching me to knit when I was a boy.

There are many things I will take away from this gift of an adventure, including experiencing the landscape first hand and seeing just how remote and beautiful it is, but also realizing just how unforgiving and brutal it can be.



Now, when I chat with my BIM co-workers about their communities, I will have a better understanding of what they are talking about. I also have a better grasp on how difficult it can be, and the challenges they face, just to get basic food and supplies - things I know I have often taken for granted.

Without a doubt, I know that travelling to work on Baffin Island was be a once-in-a-lifetime experience that not many people in the world get to have. After all, how many can say they worked above the Arctic Circle? And now that I've travelled to those five amazing communities, I can say I've been to places most people will never get to see.

Memories will come and go, but I can honestly say that the experience that began with my supervisor saying "Kyle needs you for the plane!" is one I won't ever forget.

I want to say *thank you* Baffinland, for giving me this amazing opportunity!