Episode Book

EPISODE #5709

Life at 76°N: Inside Canada's Arctic Outposts

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SYNOPSIS

Canada's Arctic Archipelago is the largest on Earth, and it holds civilian communities at latitudes no other country can match. This episode explores two radically different models of Canadian presence on Ellesmere Island: Grise Fiord (Ausuittuq), an Inuit hamlet of 144 people with no roads, one airstrip, and a single sealift a year — and CFS Alert, the northernmost permanently inhabited place on Earth, staffed entirely by rotating military and government personnel. We trace the 1953–55 High Arctic relocation, when Inuit families were moved roughly 2,000 kilometres north and told they could return in two or three years — a promise later withdrawn on sovereignty grounds. We also dig into the infrastructure that makes these places livable: the world's most northerly telephone exchange, satellite service, 4G LTE, an annual fuel delivery, and the counterintuitive safety data suggesting the most isolated community in the Baffin Region also feels like the safest.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's a thing. In January, a town in Nunavut called Resolute scored nine thousand eight hundred and thirty-nine on a remoteness index. Out of ten thousand.



Herman

For people who haven't seen that index, it's a zero to one scale and Toronto is a zero.



Corn

Right. Resolute is about as far from everything as the scale allows. And that's just one of them. Daniel wrote in with a whole thing about this. His framing was interesting. He said when we think about the most isolated places on Earth, we don't tend to think about countries that are everyday names. Canada and Russia, sure, but Canada particularly. He reckons Canada has more spectacularly remote hamlets than any other country on the planet.



Herman

He's on firm ground there.



Corn

He wants three things. Broadly, the remote communities of the Canadian Arctic. Specifically, the Alert base up on Ellesmere Island. And then Grise Fiord, which he spells out by its Inuktitut name as well, Ausuittuq, on Ellesmere, in Nunavut. He called it one of the most fascinating examples of how Canadian communities exist with basic state infrastructure in places where it's almost unfathomable how humans could live there.



Herman

That's the good version of the question, yeah. Because it's not really about the temperature. It's about the infrastructure.



Corn

He also asked about the Inuit communities, and what daily life actually looks like in places that seem almost unfathomable. So. Let's start with the geography that makes this possible, and the numbers that prove how far it goes.



Herman

Start with the shape of the country. Canada's Arctic Archipelago is the largest archipelago in the world — that's not a contested fact, it's just true. And the mainland landmass extends well past the Arctic Circle, which is why you get permanent settlements at latitudes that almost no other sovereign state can match. Grise Fiord sits at seventy-six degrees north. There's no other country on Earth with a civilian community at that latitude. Not Norway, not Russia, nobody.



Corn

And the remoteness index is the tool that quantifies it. Statistics Canada built a zero-to-one scale, and Resolute, Nunavut, scores 0.9839. Toronto is a zero. That's the hard number. You've got a G7 industrial power with a settlement on the same scale, at the far end, that's closer to the theoretical maximum of remoteness than it is to anything in southern Canada.



Herman

Which is why I think the two models on Ellesmere Island are the way in. Grise Fiord has a hundred and forty-four people, almost all Inuit, living a subsistence-plus economy. No roads. One airstrip. One sealift a year. And then about eight hundred kilometres further north, on the same island, CFS Alert. About fifty-five people, all rotating, all military or government. Supplied entirely by air. Those two communities represent completely different models of what it means for Canada to be present in the Arctic, and they're both on the same chunk of rock.



Corn

And the Grise Fiord one has an origin story that runs through the whole episode.



Herman

The High Arctic relocation. Nineteen fifty-three and fifty-five.



Corn

So. Let's start with Grise Fiord. The place that never thaws. And the extraordinary story of how it came to exist.



Herman

The Inuktitut name is Aujuittuq, and it means "the place that never thaws." Which is — I mean, that's a name that tells you everything. The English name, Grise Fiord, means "pig inlet." That came from Otto Sverdrup, the Norwegian explorer, around nineteen hundred. He named it that because the walruses in the inlet sounded like pigs. So the place has a name that literally means "never thaws" and a name that means "pig noise." Both are accurate.



Corn

Pig inlet. Great.



Herman

Seventy-six degrees twenty-five north, eighty-two degrees fifty-three west. Southern tip of Ellesmere Island. It is the only public community on Ellesmere. There's no other civilian settlement on the whole island. It's eleven hundred and sixty kilometres north of the Arctic Circle. The community's own website points out that it is much closer to the North Pole than it is to southern Canada. That's not rhetorical. It's just the geography.



Corn

So give me the climate. People will want the number.



Herman

Average yearly temperature, minus sixteen point five Celsius. Record low, minus forty-seven. Record low wind chill, minus fifty-four point five. Record high, fifteen point six. So the record high, the warmest day in the recorded history of Grise Fiord, is fifteen degrees. That's not a warm day in Toronto. That's a cool spring afternoon in Toronto.



Corn

And it's a tundra climate, which means the warmest month is doing almost nothing.



Herman

Köppen classification ETf. Long, cold winters dominate nearly the entire year. And the houses — this is a detail I love — the houses are wooden, and they're built on platforms, because of permafrost freeze-thaw. You can't just pour a foundation into permafrost and call it done. The ground moves. So the whole community is on stilts, essentially.



Corn

And the human origin. Nineteen fifty-three.



Herman

Under Louis St. Laurent's government, the Canadian government moved about ninety-two Inuit — from Inukjuak, which used to be called Port Harrison, in northern Quebec, and from Pond Inlet on Baffin Island. They were moved to Grise Fiord and to Resolute. The stated reasons were a mix of sovereignty and welfare. In practice it's widely understood as a sovereignty move. The relocated Inuit were described at the time as human flagpoles.



Corn

Human flagpoles.



Herman

To assert Canadian claims over the disputed Arctic Archipelago during the Cold War. Families were promised homes and abundant game. What they found was no buildings and very little familiar wildlife. They were told they could return after two or three years. That promise was later withdrawn, on the grounds that it would damage Canada's sovereignty claims.



Corn

So the mechanism of the harm wasn't that the move happened. It's that the way back was closed.



Herman

Correct. They'd been moved about two thousand kilometres into a completely different ecosystem. Northern Quebec has polar night and midnight sun too, but the wildlife is different. The beluga migration routes are different. They had to learn the local ones from scratch, and they eventually did. The relocatees hunted over eighteen thousand square kilometres annually once they'd figured it out.



Corn

Eighteen thousand.



Herman

Square kilometres. That's the area a single community's hunters were covering in a year, on snowmobile and by boat.



Corn

So let's talk about how modern Grise Fiord actually works. Because Daniel's question is really about infrastructure. How does the state reach a place like that?



Herman

No connecting roads on Ellesmere Island. None. There is no road out of Grise Fiord. You get there by air or by sea. The airstrip is one thousand six hundred and seventy-five feet. That's five hundred and eleven metres. Which is — look, a lot of small-town airstrips in North America are three thousand feet. Grise Fiord's is about half that, on a slope, in a place with unpredictable mountain weather. The Canada Flight Supplement describes it as having one of the most difficult approaches for aircraft. Only very experienced pilots fly it, and they fly specific types — the Pilatus PC-12, the Twin Otter, sometimes the Dash 7. This is not a place you fly into casually.



Corn

And the sea.



Herman

Once a year, a sealift ship brings supplies and fuel. That's it. One resupply window a year. If you missed it, you missed it. So the community has to plan a full year of fuel and heavy goods against a single arrival.



Corn

That's the whole logic of a place like this. You're not on a supply chain. You're on an annual delivery.



Herman

And that shapes everything about the economy, because the things you can't ship in, you hunt. Hunting remains central — seals, walrus, narwhal, beluga, polar bear, muskox. Quota systems supply much of the local need. So there's a formal economy and a subsistence economy running in parallel, and the subsistence one is doing a lot of the caloric work.



Corn

The quota point is interesting, because it's an intersection of state regulation and local food security. The state decides how many narwhal can be taken, and the community eats what the state allows.



Herman

And then there's the wildlife tourism angle, which is growing. People fly in to see narwhal.



Corn

Do they? To Grise Fiord.



Herman

They do. It's a real thing.



Corn

Okay. So the state infrastructure does reach. Give me the timeline. Communications.



Herman

Bell Canada established what was then the world's most northerly telephone exchange there in nineteen seventy. That's now run by Northwestel. Fixed-wireless satellite service through Qiniq since two thousand and five. Upgraded to 4G LTE in two thousand and seventeen. Bell Mobility arrives in two thousand and nineteen. So you've got a fifty-year timeline of the state and private carriers extending southern-grade telecom northward in steps. And the villagers weren't going to do that themselves — a hundred and forty-four people cannot pay for a telephone exchange. That's the basic state infrastructure Daniel is asking about, in one line. The place can't fund it and it wouldn't be built without a policy decision to build it.



Corn

And the safety data is counterintuitive. That's what I keep coming back to.



Herman

A Simon Fraser University study found Grise Fiord had the lowest criminal-offence rate of all the Baffin Region communities examined in nineteen ninety-two. And a nineteen ninety-four Statistics Canada survey found it had the highest perception of personal safety. People there felt safer than people in Iqaluit. And Canada's northernmost RCMP



Herman (continued)

detachment is in Grise Fiord.



Corn

So there's an RCMP detachment, and it has almost nothing to do.



Herman

Almost nothing. And you can speculate about why. The isolation means few strangers. The community is small enough that formal policing is almost redundant because informal social pressure does the work. But the counterintuitive part isn't that the crime rate is low. It's that the perception of safety is the highest in the region. You'd think isolation would produce fear. Instead it produces the opposite.



Corn

That's the thing people don't expect. The place that looks most hostile on a map is the place people report feeling safest.



Herman

Okay. And there's a piece here that's worth flagging because it connects to the whole episode. The infrastructure you just described — the exchange, the LTE, the detachment — all of that exists partly because of the sovereignty argument. Same argument that put the families there in the first place. The community has the RCMP because Canada wants to demonstrate it administers the place.



Corn

Right.



Herman

And the monuments that went up in twenty ten make the same point differently. Looty Pijamini carved the one in Grise Fiord. The late Simeonie Amagoalik carved the one in Resolute. They were designed to face each other across the distance. Two families,



Herman (continued)

separated, looking toward each other over the water.



Corn

That's a heavy piece of public art.



Herman

It is. And the Grise Fiord plaque reads, roughly: "They came to these desolate shores to pursue the government's promise of a more prosperous life. They endured and overcame great hardship, and dedicated their lives to Canada's sovereignty in these lands and waters."



Corn

Grise Fiord is one model of Arctic presence. Now let's look at the other. CFS Alert, the northernmost permanently inhabited place on Earth.



Herman

Alert is a different animal entirely. It's on the northeastern tip of Ellesmere Island. Eighty-two degrees twenty-nine minutes north. About eight hundred and seventeen kilometres from the North Pole. The nearest community is Grise Fiord, and it's about eight hundred kilometres away. So the two settlements on Ellesmere are, themselves, further apart than most European capitals are from each other.



Corn

And what is Alert, functionally?



Herman

It's a signals-intelligence intercept facility of the Canadian Armed Forces. The motto is "Inuit Nunangata Ungata" — "beyond the Inuit land." It's named after HMS Alert, which wintered nearby in eighteen seventy-five and seventy-six. First settled April ninth, nineteen fifty, as a Joint Arctic Weather Station. The military intercept station began



Herman (continued)

operations September first, nineteen fifty-eight.



Corn

And here's the fact that rearranges your mental map. Alert is closer to Moscow than it is to Ottawa.



Herman

By about a hundred and fifty kilometres. Four thousand to Moscow, four thousand one hundred and fifty to Ottawa. Which tells you why it exists. It's a listening post pointed at the pole, and the pole is the shortest path between the two great-power capitals.



Corn

And what does it actually look like, physically? Because the image people have is a shed in the snow.



Herman

It's a small enclosed town. Alert Airport. A gym. Power plants. A water treatment plant. The main building has five halls — Churchill Hall is admin and dining, and it's got a gathering area called the beach. There's a library. A barber shop. A radio station. A post office. A store. Three barrack blocks named Chimo, Ladner, and Whitehorse, plus Polaris Hall for the operations side. And all of it is connected by a linkway, because going outside means going outside at minus fifty, and the exterior doors are like walk-in refrigerator doors.



Corn

The barber shop is the one that gets me. Someone is posted north of eighty, eight hundred kilometres from anyone, and still getting their hair cut on schedule.



Herman

That's the whole logic of a station like that — you build in the small conveniences because otherwise the posting isn't sustainable. Master Corporal Arthur Melanson, the resident piper, said: "It's no different than being on exercise or being deployed anywhere else, other than the weather." Which is either the most stoic sentence ever said about the Arctic, or it's just true.



Corn

And the weather is the whole point, isn't it. What does the daily routine actually look like?



Herman

At its peak, Alert housed over two hundred and fifteen personnel. By ninety-seven, ninety-eight, it was down to about seventy-four. As of two thousand twenty-four, about fifty-five people are stationed there — military, plus Environment and Climate Change Canada staff and civilians. And here's the detail: only about six of them handle the actual operations. The rest are keeping the place running. Feeding it, powering it, water-treating it, maintaining it.



Corn

Six operators out of fifty-five people total. The ratio is the story. You need ten people sustaining one, at that latitude.



Herman

And the daily texture is specific. Twenty-four-hour sunlight in the summer. Twenty-four-hour darkness in the winter. Temperatures well below minus fifty. And icebergs floating in the harbour in summer. Environment Canada's team releases weather balloons four times a day — a normal task, in an abnormal place. And then there's the polar bear problem, which is the part I find most human. There's a station warrant officer whose job includes scaring off bears. Warrant Officer Patrick Marceau had done it about eight times at the time he was interviewed. Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan spotted three polar bears about five hundred metres offshore during a visit.



Corn

And Marceau's line about it.



Herman

"We live in their environment. It's just to make sure that we're safe in the area." Which is a very calm way to describe carrying a rifle at a weather station.



Corn

So how do you get fuel and food to fifty-five people eight hundred kilometres from the nearest community?



Herman

Operation Boxtop. It's the resupply operation. And the 2022 imagery is the one I'd lead with — a Royal Air Force C-17 Globemaster landing on a semi-prepared gravel-and-compacted-snow runway. That's a heavy strategic airlifter, the kind of aircraft built for intercontinental military logistics, landing on a runway that isn't a paved runway. It carries up to forty-five thousand three hundred and sixty kilograms of freight. Fuel and supplies. So the same aircraft that flies into combat zones and disaster areas is flying a year's worth of essentials onto a snow runway in the High Arctic.



Corn

Forty-five tonnes on a snow runway. That's a lot of pizza.



Herman

And in October of twenty twenty-two, the Government of Canada awarded a new support-services contract for Alert, explicitly reaffirming its role for Arctic sovereignty and signals intelligence. So there's a fifty-year-old mission still being re-upped, with about the same size of crew and the same line of airlift.



Corn

Okay. Now synthesize the two, because this is where Daniel's question actually lives.



Herman

Same island. Grise Fiord and Alert are on the same island, and they are profoundly different. Grise Fiord has a hundred and forty-four Inuit residents, permanent and rooted, with a history that begins in forced relocation. Alert has about fifty-five rotating staff, none of whom live there long-term in a civilian sense, and all of whom are there for work. Grise Fiord is supplied once a year by sealift plus a very difficult airstrip. Alert is supplied entirely by air with strategic lifters and forty-five-tonne payloads. Grise Fiord runs a subsistence economy and a quota system. Alert runs on logistics planning, currency purchasing, and a diet that comes out of a freezer. One is a community. The other is a station.



Corn

Both are assertions of Canadian sovereignty. That's what they have in common.



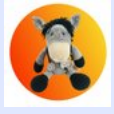
Herman

Both are assertions, and the mechanisms are different. The station asserts authority through monitoring and communications. The community asserts authority through being there. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, in nineteen ninety-four, put it plainly: "There is therefore no doubt that the presence of Inuit settlements in the High Arctic, once established, did contribute to the maintenance of Canadian sovereignty."



Corn

That's the arc. The state did something that was later acknowledged to be wrong, and the same state now cites the community as sovereignty.



Herman

Right. There were decades of claims and hearings. The Royal Commission came in nineteen ninety-four. The government created a ten million dollar trust fund in nineteen ninety-six. And on August eighteenth, twenty ten, the Minister of Indian Affairs, John Duncan, issued a formal apology. He said: "The Government of Canada deeply regrets the mistakes and broken promises of this dark chapter of our history and apologizes for the High Arctic relocation having taken place. We would like to pay tribute to the relocatees



Herman (continued)

for their perseverance and courage."



Corn

The ten million comes to about a hundred and nine thousand per person, split across the families. Forced relocation, lost years, no way back, and that's the number.



Herman

That's the number.



Corn

Hm.



Herman

That's the number.



Corn

I want to hear what Daniel's question is actually pointing at here. Because I think it's not the temperature. Temperature is just arithmetic.



Herman

He's pointing at the pattern, I think. The state that says it wants to be present in the Arctic — and it does, and that's a real strategic interest — has to do the boring work of building exchanges and flying freight and staffing a nursing station and maintaining a runway. That boring work is the assertion. Sovereignty isn't a flag on a map. It's a barber shop at eighty degrees north.



Corn

There's one more piece from the research that I think is underrated. The economic substance. What do a hundred and forty-four people actually do all day? And the answer is that most of them are engaged in getting food. The economic system is subsistence with cash on top. It's not the same thing as a small town in the south.



Hilbert

Proportionally, that's true everywhere. Everybody who's ever lived in a place where you had to work out how to eat through the winter spends most of their day thinking about it. The trick is that once you have enough saved up, you stop noticing. Some places never stop noticing.



Corn

Mm.



Herman

Yeah.



Hilbert

You can tell the difference between a kitchen that's been provisioned and one that hasn't by the way people move in it, before you even see the shelves.



Herman

There's something to that. The rotation at Alert is, what, six months?



Hilbert

Six months is what I'm aware of. That's the posting.



Corn

Huh. Okay, that makes sense.



Herman

So that lines up with the CBC portrait — people cycle through, nobody's there year over year, and the rhythm of the place is set by the airlift and the rotation.



Hilbert

By the daylight, which doesn't help. But there's a piece there that's separate from all of that. There's the official supply chain and there's the other one.



Herman

Go on.



Hilbert

The official supply chain is fifty-five people, an airlift, forty-five tonnes of freight, the whole apparatus. The other one is what the people who live there actually do between shipments, which is trade with each other.



Corn

Trade with who?



Hilbert

The hunters. Not the station trading with the hunters as a supply contract — there isn't one. Just informal trade. You have something they want, they have something you want, and you swap. Char for fuel. Char for tools. It doesn't show up anywhere on a balance sheet. But it's how a lot of the actual days get eaten.



Herman

There's a parallelism there with the quota system, because the quotas allocate the harvest and the trade allocates the harvest's downstream value. So the formal system handles the front end and the informal system handles the back end. Neither shows up in a spreadsheet and only one is governed.



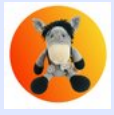
Corn

That's a real point. The research is all about the formal infrastructure because the formal infrastructure is what gets documented. Nobody audits a fish.



Hilbert

Right.



Herman

So the picture of these communities isn't just deliveries and detachments. There's a thick, informal layer underneath, and it's doing a lot of the load bearing. That's the thing I hadn't been holding in the same frame.



Corn

Yeah.



Hilbert

I'll get out of the way. We're at time.



Corn

Okay. So. The one thing.



Herman

The one thing is the word "sustains." It's not that the state provides these communities the way it provides a town in Ontario. It's that the state provides a frame — a runway, a satellite link, an airlift window, a quota — and then the community does the rest with knowledge the state doesn't have and logistics the state doesn't see. Neither half works alone. And the half the state can see is the smaller half.



Corn

Grise Fiord's population went up eleven point six percent between twenty-sixteen and twenty-twenty-one. A hundred and twenty-nine to a hundred and forty-four. So the trend is not decline. The place that looks like the end of the world is growing.



Herman

Which is a pretty good answer to the question of whether people can live there. They already are, and more of them are.



Corn

The forward-looking question is the informal layer. When Qiniq went from satellite to 4G, did the barter economy get smaller or did it just get a wider range of things to trade. My guess is the second. Every time you upgrade the pipe, you widen the market, and the informal layer gets more valuable, not less.



Herman

That's the thing to watch.



Corn

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

It exists because of automation, and the people who had to do it on a Tuesday are the ones who know it exists.



Corn

If you liked this, drop a review wherever you listen. We'll be back soon.