

# THE WOMEN'S EURO-ARABIAN NORTH POLE EXPEDITION 2018

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**CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP 2018**



On top of the world! Misba and the Trust flag at the North Pole

WINSTON  
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**In April 2018 at age nearly 50 I became the first British Muslim woman to ski to the North Pole. For me as a British Pakistani wife and mother, and a finance officer, that is a remarkable statement to make. This report explains how such an extraordinary event came about. The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust played a role in what was the realisation of a dream.**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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My heartfelt thanks go to Felicity Aston, the expedition leader and inspiration, and to my fellow team members for their unstinting support and encouragement.

Along with other expedition members I wish to thank our main sponsor Kaspersky Lab, and other sponsors who helped financially also companies who helped with equipment.

My thanks go to my family, for their patience and understanding during my long absences for training and the expedition itself. A special thanks to Aziz Zeria and Douglas Jackson.

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## SUMMARY



In April 2018 I was a member of the Women's Euro-Arabian North Pole Expedition. This group of women from very diverse backgrounds skied 'the final degree' from 89°N to the North Pole. Its primary objective was to foster greater dialogue and understanding between women from Western and Arabian cultures. In the process the expedition inspired those taking part to reach beyond the expectation of others and fulfil their own ultimate life ambitions.

Undertaking such a journey is both hazardous and very expensive. I was delighted when the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust appointed me as a Fellow for 2018: the grant was a part of my expenditure on the expedition.

By happy coincidence, the Trust was involved in more ways than one...

The expedition was led by another Churchill Fellow, the explorer Felicity Aston, and followed her equally unconventional expedition to the *South* Pole. In 2008 Felicity had been awarded a Churchill Fellowship to travel to seven Commonwealth countries to select team members for the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition of 2009. Five of the women were the first from their respective countries to ski to the South Pole.

### **The Churchill flag**

There is another incidental by-product of my Fellowship that will leave a long-lasting legacy.

I asked for a Trust flag to take to the North Pole, only to find that none existed. To the rescue came yet another Churchill Fellow.

Clifford Newton ran the family business of Newton Newton Flag & Banner Makers of Lincolnshire; and for his Fellowship in 1984 he visited manufacturers in 19 states of America.

At very short notice his company created a Trust flag and delivered it in time for me to take to the North Pole. I understand the Trust now plans to send the flag with other Fellows to all corners of the globe.



**Churchill Fellows all...**

**Flagmaker Clifford Newton with that flag before it left on its epic journey...**



**...and at the North Pole with Misba Khan (left) and expedition leader Felicity Aston**

## INTRODUCTION

People have been exploring the Arctic region for more than two thousand years, in the process discovering the North West Passage linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and the North East Passage across the top of Russia.

So appropriately in the centenary of the Representation of the People Act an explorer called Felicity Aston advertised for women to ski to the North Pole. I thought this would be ideal for my daughter, who is taking A level geography, but the organisers were keen to hear from women in their 40s and 50s and my daughter suggested I apply. What I offered was years of experience walking and climbing in challenging locations including Kilimanjaro and the Atlas Mountains, and an insatiable desire to explore many other equally fascinating places. I was confident that I could ski to the North Pole. My confidence was seriously misplaced...

I couldn't read a map; I had never slept in a tent or even put one up; and I couldn't ski. However, such skills can be learned and the team was chosen on compatibility rather than experience. We had to be fluent in English with reliable internet skills, confident swimmers, and be able to commit time and effort to a demanding training schedule – and to fundraising. Infinitely more important was the ability to work as a team, passing on one's skills and learning from others, and supporting each other through difficult times. There were to be many of those...

Nearly a thousand women applied for the expedition and nine were chosen, from the UK, France, Sweden and Slovenia in Europe, and from Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. Only two or three were outdoor specialists: the others included a scientist, a journalist, a community worker and a businesswoman. I myself am a finance officer and a voluntary Chaplain; I am the oldest team member by several years. These women were not just mixed race but mixed *cultures*; and we also faced language and social barriers.



## THE CHALLENGE

Mention polar exploration and most people think of the *South Pole*, where explorers slog across a vast, icy plain, dodging crevasses and penguins, to fetch up at a fully-equipped and permanently-manned international science station. The North Pole is nothing like that.

For a start it is not in the middle of a continent - it is in the middle of an ocean. The sea supports huge areas of constantly-shifting ice and the occasional polar bear...



While we were able to avoid the open water there was no getting round the ice boulder fields. Pressure ridges of ice rubble can turn progress into a permanent obstacle course. This is very dangerous terrain with deep holes between huge boulders.





Shifting ice presents another problem. We might invest much time and energy skiing and dragging heavy sledges due north up to 20 km in a day, only for the ice to carry us gently halfway back to our starting point – or due east or west - as we slept!

And polar bears are a constant threat.

## PREPARATION

On paper, covering 80km in seven days might seem like a stroll in the park. In reality manoeuvring heavy, fully-laden sledges across boulder-strewn ice fields makes the target very missable.

I had assumed that trekking through some of the world's wildest places would prepare me for the polar challenge. But then in September 2016 we went to Iceland...

There Felicity put us through five days of intensive lessons, covering expedition food and clothing, map-reading, and the effects of extreme cold on the body. The women from the hot countries of the Middle East were now getting use to temperatures as low as -18C. Some of these countries had never had snow.

Then it was out of the classroom and on to the Langjokull Glacier...



...to learn how to set up tents and haul heavy sledges on its icy, undulating surface.

In sharp contrast, we then moved on to Oman for ten days, and instead of ice pulled our sledges across shifting desert sand. Now it was the turn of the Middle Eastern ladies to smile, as we Europeans melted at 35C – not far below the highest temperature recorded in England in the past 100 years.

I knew after these expeditions that I wasn't fully fit for the polar challenge, so I increased my exercise regime and also took to dragging a heavy tyre around a local park. This had its lighter moments: people would look at me in pity and suggest, "Why don't you just roll it along, love." But once they knew what I was doing they invariably wanted to take selfies!

I also knew I had to prepare mentally and for this I could rely on my faith, which is central to everything I do: it governs my values, lifestyle, relationships with my family and friends, and my mental, emotional and spiritual well-being. While some people use yoga to rejuvenate the body and mind, for me as a Muslim daily prayers are as important as physical training. Prayer enhances my concentration and reduces stress.

And while we were all preparing for our journey of a lifetime, up in the Arctic Circle gangs of men were making it possible by creating a landing strip in the middle of nowhere...



Ice Camp Barneo was first established by Russia in 2002, at about 89°N, partly as a scientific station but mostly as a jumping-off point for groups like ours. It attracts around a thousand people a year, a fraction of the 20,000 or so who head for the South Pole. However, Barneo has to be rebuilt from scratch every year because constantly-shifting ice and strong winds send it drifting away from the pole at about half-a-mile an hour. Felicity described this mammoth task succinctly...

*"They first send two helicopters across the lonely Arctic Ocean from central Siberia. They fly to around 87 degrees before running out of fuel and landing on the ice. A plane will be called in to make a fuel drop to the helicopters so that they can continue to a spot around 89 degrees. They will choose the best spot before calling in the plane a second time, this time to drop tractors so that they can clear a runway. It's an impressive operation!"*

**Finally we were all fit, mentally and physically. It was time to go...**

## THE EXPEDITION



First stop on the way to the North Pole is Longyearbyen, capital of the Svalbard archipelago of Norway and home to reindeer, whales in the local fjord, lots of snowmobiles, the Northern Lights...and polar bears.

In fact, polar bears are a constant threat. Nobody leaves the town without being armed, and during all their time on the ice the team kept polar bear watch every night from around midnight until 7am, with each member on duty for 90 minutes.

Longyearbyen is also the jumping-off point for the floating base camp of Barneo...





This was where reality kicked in. Nothing really prepared me for a temperature of *minus 38!* I had had no sleep for 24 hours and I was about to ski for the next 10 hours, helping to drag a heavy sledge across a boulder-strewn ice field.

Across the world, friends and relatives – and complete strangers – followed the expedition on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The online diary charted our progress...

#### **April 15: No sleep...no problem**

The team flew through the night to the Arctic Ocean. It was both spectacular and terrifying to see on arrival! After landing at 0600 the team got straight to business. Today they skied 10 km of their journey to the North Pole despite not sleeping last night. Tents were pitched around 2000 by an exhausted but very proud team. As the team rests the ice will continue to move them along, and while pitching their tents the team moved exactly sideways to their destination. Let us hope that a change in direction overnight is a gain towards the pole. The weather is beautiful up on the Arctic sea ice and the temperature is -38 degrees. This has been a very good first day #NorthPole2018

#### **April 16: Ice, ice baby...**

Day 2 was a tough day for the team. They gave it their all and travelled 9.5 km today. The shifting ice and the chunks of blue ice have provided a stunningly beautiful backdrop on their journey to fulfil their life ambitions...



#### **April 18: Minus cold degrees**

A 4 km gain on the pole while you sleep?! Yes, please! Shame that the drifting ice most likely was the cause of the large ice rubble patch the team couldn't traverse today and had to do a long ski around, to the south. You win some, you lose some! The team crossed their first lead today (a large fracture within an expanse of sea ice) which was a pretty spectacular experience for them all...





We are totally acclimatised now and there is no mention of the weather until pressed when they agreed it was a bit windier today and a little warmer.

#### **April 19: Over half way**

It was a sunny, balmy  $-24^{\circ}\text{C}$  on the sea ice yesterday. The team have a daily target of around 10 km gain on the pole daily and they smashed it making a gain of 12 - 13 km today. They made such good progress because the terrain today was very flat and so they had some easy skiing with the only hurdle an ice boulder field which required a lot of scrambling over and around. The ice fields are tricky to traverse, if it's even possible to traverse them, but they are made up of stunning blue chunks of ice so they are really beautiful to be around even if they do make the day a bit trickier.

## April 19: Rubble maze



Today was really tough with 7 km progress to the pole. But the long day skiing around and then portaging through a really huge pressure ridge of ice rubble was one of the most morale boosting and team building experiences of the trip so far. It was such hard work but everyone got involved dragging, lifting and moving every last sledge and set of skis and poles. The terrain was dangerous with big holes between boulders and the crossing was long, but the team ended it with high fives and hugs and a huge sense of achievement. One of the most hotly discussed topics in their lives currently is who has what rations remaining and what is their price for a swap! Bartering for favourite meals is now a daily occurrence, with chicken tikka being as rare as hens' teeth and beef stew fetching a high price. Felicity scored a macaroni cheese tonight and was very happy with her lot. As for lunch - it doesn't really exist as a meal. The team have large snack bags which they graze on throughout the day. In there they have sweets, marzipan, dates and dried fruit as well as Oreos. It's every small child's dream meal!

## April 21: Getting close

Tough skiing today! It was only -9 degrees (so warm!) but that meant soggy and slushy snow to ski through. For the first day of the entire trip the drift of the sea ice wasn't helping the team along and every inch of gain towards the pole was due to their own efforts. There were a few exciting crossings over open leads and generally it has been a long and tiring day. But they are pushing on for a few more hours as they are getting closer to the pole and they are excited to get to their destination.

By this time, they were asking themselves: *would the North Pole be where it's supposed to be?* Because the earth wobbles on its axis the pole doesn't actually stay in one place – it moves about by a few metres or so...



Luckily it was there so...

**April 22: TOP OF THE WORLD!**

The team arrived safely at the North Pole just before 1900 on 21st April 2018. Having skied just over 80 km the previous 7 days and with a particularly gruelling last leg the team arrived tired but in good spirits. They were met by their sponsor Eugene Kaspersky who flew out by helicopter to meet and celebrate with them at the top of the world. The team have now flown to Barneo ice camp which is 45 km from the pole and tomorrow they will fly back to Longyearbyen.



## THE LEGACY

This expedition formed bridges between cultures. I would like to show others that people of diverse abilities, ages and backgrounds can work together to strengthen themselves and each other.

This expedition also greatly increased my confidence and belief in myself and my abilities.

The polar adventure has shown me that as an ordinary woman, and with the correct training, can tackle extreme challenges and cope with a completely unfamiliar environment. I have learned many new skills, from the sublime to the ridiculous – from skiing and navigating in a wilderness to using a toilet in a blizzard! Meanwhile, new-found abilities in IT have impacted on both my home and working life

As for the wider environmental aspects of the adventure, I now understand the importance of wilderness areas like the Arctic and Antarctic, and the impact of human activities on them.

Now I want to pass on my new knowledge and new skills to others, especially within my own community. I believe that ethnic minorities can contribute greatly to the wider society. In particular, being adventurous is not encouraged for Muslim girls, but I can show them that there really are no barriers or borders to self-improvement, that religion was not compromised in any way, but expeditions/outdoors has strengthened my belief, and sharing this with a diverse team is positive learning that breaks down barriers.

I believe that schools could and should play a vital role in encouraging young people to get out and do things. Students should be given time and encouragement to explore the world. In fact, both local schools and organisations should work together. The outdoors helps in learning, creating, growing and empowering people from their own experiences.

The same is true for older people. As the oldest member of the North Pole team I can assure older women that age is not a barrier to progress. Play to your strengths, hone your abilities, and you can reach your full potential. You never know where it might take you!

My adventure started with Sunday afternoon strolls which in turn sparked a passion for extreme walking. I now urge people to get outdoors: walk with the family or join a local hiking group who are invariably friendly and welcoming and willing to share their knowledge and experience. It may not lead to the North Pole, but physical activity offers many health rewards besides improving mental wellbeing.

Finally, let us not forget the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust flag. As a legacy of my Fellowship I hope it will travel to many fascinating and far-flung destinations.