It's that feeling you get inside when you see a whale. You're excited, and you start smiling.

Chapter 1 The Case Study: The Grays of October and Operation Breakout

"What has happened here is nothing short of phenomenal" wrote one reporter from Barrow; "[it is] a story that has undeniable human interest." So what is it, this story of three whales? A story acknowledged as one of the top media events of its decade; a story of a three-week rescue effort with estimated costs exceeding $1 million; a story of cards and letters and donations of nickels and dimes sent in from children around the world; a story of Americans and Soviets working side by side; a story of technology and human muscle together battling Arctic ice; a story of people and whales and what united them in a place hostile to both for a remarkable moment in time.

To begin the story we need to take a mental journey to the last American frontier: the state of Alaska. Also known as "The Great Land," Alaska is home to more caribou than people, half of the world's glaciers (one of which is larger than the state of Rhode Island) and half of its active volcanoes, more than three million lakes (each larger than twenty acres), and North America's highest mountain (Mount McKinley, or Denali, "The Great One"). Its coastal waters host ten species of great whales, and its southern forests hold the vast majority of the U.S. bald eagle population. My own brief visit to con-

duct this research brought sightings of humpback whales, bald eagles, beluga whales, and puffins; roadside encounters with moose and dall sheep; the awe-inspiring sounds of a ponderously moving glacier; and even a meeting from a helicopter with a polar bear at the edge of the Arctic Ocean.

Alaska is a land in which the often uneasy relationship between humankind and nature is brought into sharp relief. The initial discovery of its fur-bearing wildlife by Russian explorers and hunters in 1741 was soon followed by the devastation of its seal and sea lion populations, and the potential for re-enacting this environmentally disastrous precedent remains to this day; where great natural bounty exists, there also lies the potential for great destruction in the name of "resource development," and Alaska perhaps symbolizes above all the importance of the fine line balancing these two sets of concerns. It is difficult even to think of Alaska without bringing to mind environmental controversies: the Exxon–Valdez oil spill of 1989, the perennial debate over opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for oil and natural gas development, the wolf kills of the early 1990s, and the ongoing issue of subsistence hunting of endangered bowhead whales by native Eskimos on the Arctic coast. These and similar questions loom large among diverse peoples living in the midst of natural beauty and bounty and enacting in our own age the struggle, lost in too many other times and places, to balance the needs of humanity with the values of wildlife and wilderness.[1]

On our journey of the imagination we fly into the state's largest city, Anchorage, home to half of the state's population of approximately half a million. We wing our way through the Interior toward Fairbanks, a city with roots in the state's mining and gold rush history where researchers today explore wonders of a less tangible variety as they are revealed in the Northern Lights. And finally we head to the far north, across the oil and natural gas fields of the North Slope and into the village of Barrow, the northernmost U.S. settlement and the nation's largest Eskimo community. Sitting at the edge of the Arctic Ocean—which in this vicinity is ice-covered approximately nine months of the year—and with an annual precipitation of less than five inches, the Barrow area is an arctic desert; average temperatures range from twenty degrees (Fahrenheit) below zero in January (with wind chill reaching eighty below) to forty degrees in July, and for sixty-six days in winter the sun never rises above the horizon (the sun does not dip below the horizon for a similar period during summer, hence the name "Land of the Midnight Sun").

The people who call this remote land their own are the Inupiat (often referred to as Inuits). Their Eskimo ancestors settled the village around 2200 B.C. after crossing the Bering Land Bridge. They hunted marine mammals such as

seals and whales from twenty-foot, seal-skin-covered, lightweight wooden-frame boats called *umiaks*, and they traveled inland on foot and by dog sled to hunt caribou, birds, and fish; clothing was made from animal skins, and their partially buried houses were constructed of bone, sod, and wood. Barrow has remained under continuous settlement by the Inupiat Eskimos for over four thousand years. Today its people struggle to balance the forces of modernization with the desire to keep alive the traditions and societal values that grew out of their historically subsistence lifestyle.

Perched along the coast just twelve miles southwest of Point Barrow, the northernmost geographic point of land in the United States, the village of Barrow served as a major supply point for commercial whaling ships in the mid-1800s. More recently, it has been the seat of government for the eighty-eight-thousand-square-mile North Slope Borough (the world's largest municipality, in geographic area) since its incorporation in 1972 following the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). ANCSA gave Alaska's native people control of over forty million acres of their traditionally claimed lands, including much of the North Slope, and as a result, taxation of the oil development on these lands is now the source of much of the Borough's income. Barrow's population of around approximately 3,500 is two-thirds Inupiat, and its blend of living tradition and modern services has made the village an increasingly popular tourist site. Barrow is perhaps best known in the Lower 48 as the site of the 1935 plane crash that took the lives of Will Rogers and Wiley Post, but among the people of the region it is an important center for conferences and other activities related to native rights issues.

Although it is an oversimplification to reduce the uniqueness and complexity of any people to one trait or activity, if there is a single defining characteristic of the Inupiat culture of Barrow it is the annual hunt of the bowhead whale (the *agviq* in Inupiaq); the village's symbol is a pair of bowhead rib bones rising from the shore and forming an arch at the edge of the Arctic Ocean, and in many ways the spring hunt is still the center of village life. Found only in the circumpolar waters of the Northern Hemisphere, bowhead whales (*Balaena mysticetus*) migrate northeast in the spring from the Bering Sea to the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas (to the west and east of Point Barrow, respectively) and then return in the fall, passing close to Alaska's Arctic Coast in open leads in the ice near shore during both phases of their journey. Although protected by the International Whaling Commission's moratorium on whaling, by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and by the Endangered Species Act, the endangered bowheads are still hunted by the Inupiat people of Barrow and other Arctic Coast villages by special exemption for aboriginal

hunters; in an attempt to balance the threat to the bowhead population with the "extinction" of Inupiat culture, of which the bowhead hunt is an integral part, a variable number of "strikes" are granted to the natives each year. A season with ten to fifteen whales "taken" is considered successful.

This now closely regulated practice carries on the substance and in many ways the form of subsistence hunting probably established by Eskimos of northwest Alaska before 1000 A.D. Although the traditional harpoon of wood, bone, and slate has been widely replaced by whaling guns and iron harpoons, whaling crews still camp on the ice for weeks awaiting the passage of the bowheads and then paddle out to confront them in the traditional *umiaks*, depending heavily on traditional knowledge of the whales and the environment for a successful hunt. The practice is surrounded by a set of rituals embodying the attitude of respect, which is believed to be the prerequisite for the whale's "giving itself" to the hunters. Killing a whale and successfully bringing the carcass to shore are communal efforts, and many villagers come out to help butcher the whale's body; the meat, blubber, bone, and baleen are shared among members of the community. One whale often feeds an entire village and all of its parts are used for food, handicrafts, or household items. Respect and leadership accrue to the man responsible for the kill. A successful hunt is a time of community-wide celebration and of respectful thanksgiving to the whales for giving themselves for the life of the village; a successful season culminates with the *Nalukataq*, or feast of celebration, which includes traditional dancing and the blanket toss.[2]

This discussion of the bowhead hunt as practiced by the Barrow Eskimos highlights several aspects of contemporary Inupiat society and thus helps to establish the context in which the whale rescue occurred: a time and a place marked by rapid and intense societal change that brings questions of cultural identity into sharp relief; by political and environmental controversy that increasingly draws the attention of an often belligerent outside world; and by an ancient, yet timeless, perspective on the greatest of marine mammals that encompasses, without internal incoherence, both brutal killing and respectful honoring. With this necessarily brief and general background in mind, then, let us turn our attention to the whale rescue itself, beginning with a brief introduction to the animals at the very center of the event: the gray whales.

The gray whale, *Eschrichtius robustus*, is one of about eighty species of cetaceans—whales, dolphins, and porpoises—still inhabiting our world's oceans. Like all cetaceans, gray whales are warmblooded, air-breathing mammals that give birth to live young. Now found only in the Pacific Ocean along the coast of North America, gray whales once inhabited the Atlantic Ocean as

well, along both the European and the American coasts; a small remnant of the Korean population may still exist. Hunted nearly to extinction twice, once between 1850 and 1880 and again early in this century, the gray whale population gained full protection in 1946. Protection from commercial whaling has since been strengthened through the International Whaling Commission's moratorium and through the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Under these regimes the gray whales have experienced a remarkable recovery, increasing at an average annual rate of 2.5 percent and currently numbering around twenty-two thousand (likely a historic high). During the summer of 1994, the gray whale became the first marine mammal to be "de-listed," to have its status downgraded from "endangered" to "threatened," in the history of the Endangered Species Act.

As their population has grown, the whales have expanded their feeding range further into the Arctic Ocean and in recent years have occasionally been found venturing into the unpredictably ice-filled waters of the Beaufort Sea to the east of Point Barrow. Unlike bowheads, grays are not adapted to ice conditions and are unlikely to survive if they remain in the polar waters as winter approaches; they lack the cartilage that bowheads have on the top of the head to break through thick ice from beneath, and since they generally need to surface about every five minutes to breathe (compared with the bowhead's thirty minutes) they cannot remain submerged long enough to traverse much distance beneath the ice.

Gray whales come to feed in the Arctic Ocean as the midway point in their annual migration; their round trip from Baja California to the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas and back is roughly a ten-thousand-mile journey, the longest migration route of any mammal in the world. Watchers from the shore regularly spot them traveling north from February to June and south again from October to February; the species is easily identified because they swim within a few miles of the coastline, because of their mottled gray color with lighter colored areas where barnacles attach to their skin, and because they lack the distinctive dorsal fins of most whale species. The whales feed on the rich floor of the Arctic Ocean during the summer months and calve in the warmer waters of southern California's lagoons during the winter; they eat very little if anything during the migration, surviving on fat reserves from the summer's feeding. (During the five-month feeding period they consume approximately sixty-seven tons of food and regain up to 30 percent of their thirty-five-ton average body weight.) As "baleen" rather than "toothed" whales, grays sieve vast amounts of water and sediment through keratin plates suspended in their mouths, filtering out the amphipods and other

small bottom-dwelling animals on which the whales feed as they swim on their sides, parallel to the sea floor. Grays are not thought to form lasting social bonds; females mate with multiple males (usually between Thanksgiving and Christmas), and they and their young migrate in slower-moving groups separate from the males. With a gestation period of thirteen months, grays make their first migration even before they are born, *in utero*.

Although Russia regularly takes around 170 gray whales annually in accordance with the exemption for aboriginal peoples and periodically shares a small number of its allotted strikes with Alaska's coastal natives, grays are rarely hunted by the Inupiat Eskimos of Barrow. Sought as a food source only when the much-preferred bowheads are unavailable, gray whales are less desirable because of their heavily barnacled skin and relatively thin layer of blubber. They also fight more fiercely when harpooned than do the slower-moving bowheads and are thus more dangerous to hunt. The ferociousness of mother grays, in fact, earned the species the nickname "devilfish" from early whalers; females with calves are extremely protective and belligerent, and they have been known to attack whaling vessels that threaten the calves and to attempt to capsize research ships that approach too closely.

With this background on Barrow, its people and their traditional bowhead hunt, and the gray whale species in general, we are now prepared to take a look at the October 1988 whale rescue itself and to begin answering the question with which we began: "So what *is* the story of three gray whales?"

Barrow Discovers Three Gray Whales

> "We were out there just trying to talk to them to see if they were all right."
>
> "The first reaction was to blaze away with the camera, thinking we'd probably never see anything like this again and they certainly would go away soon."

It was with the practice of bowhead hunting that the rescue of the gray whales actually began. On Friday, October 7, 1988, Roy Ahmaogak of Barrow was exploring the ice-covered Beaufort Sea off the Plover Islands to the northeast of the village in search of signs of bowheads when he spotted whale spouts in the distance. Moving as close to the whales as he could on the thin ice, he discovered not bowheads but rather three young gray whales sharing two ten-by-twenty-foot holes in the ice about a hundred yards offshore, where the water depth was around forty-five feet. The whales tended to surface for periods of about three to four minutes, blowing around twenty times, between longer six-minute periods of sounding (diving and remaining below the surface).