

Woman survives gruesome polar bear attack

With ice melting more, northerners worry about encounters with scavenging beasts

This story contains some graphic detail.

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For years, Alice Annanack watched with dread as polar bears ventured farther and farther south after the spring thaws, scavenging for food close to her village of Kangiqsualujuaq, Nunavik.

Last month, Annanack and her husband, Tommy Baron, trekked to a campground close to the shores of Ungava Bay. At about 10:30 p.m. on July 23, with the sun in the Far North still high in the sky, Annanack stepped outside her cabin for a stroll.

Within seconds, a young polar bear — its white fur muddied from foraging for scraps — pounced on the 57-year-old mother of three, clawing at her back and biting into the top of her head.

She yelled out to her husband, but the screams only seemed to infuriate the bear as it continued chewing through her scalp, digging its sharp teeth to within two millimetres of piercing through her skull and into her brain. She tried to fight, covering her head with her right hand.

But the bear crunched into her hand — breaking the bones, severing the tendons and slicing into the muscle.

Baron raced outside their cabin with a .22 long rifle and took aim, but he couldn't get a clear shot. The bear's head was moving furiously over his wife's head, and he didn't want to risk shooting his wife by mistake.

He aimed instead at the animal's hind legs and pulled the trigger. Nothing. The rifle had jammed.

Baron ran into the cabin for a second hunting rifle as the bear clawed his wife's back to within a centimetre of her spine, dragging her toward the bushes.

"I refuse to be killed by you," Annanack thought to herself, wrestling the bear. "Jesus," she prayed, "help me."

Baron returned with a smaller rifle, steadying himself before pulling the trigger. He aimed at the hind legs.

A shot echoed in the wilderness as the bear slumped to the ground. Baron fired a second shot into its head, kill-



▶ THE ATTACK IN HER WORDS

Watch a video by Allen McInnis of Alice Annanack talking about being attacked by a polar bear and her subsequent surgery at montrealgazette.com/videos

ing the beast instantly.

Baron carried his wife into the cabin as she bled profusely. No one was answering the two-way radios that night. He urged her to stay awake, to sit up, as he dressed her wounds with wet rags to staunch the bleeding.

Doctors will tell you that head and hand wounds are among the most painful. Annanack stayed up that night with no painkillers, and in the morning, they radioed for help. A nurse and other villagers canoed up to the remote campground.

A helicopter later transported her to the town of Kuujuaq, the largest Inuit community in northern Quebec. The following day, a plane flew her to Montreal, where she underwent emergency surgery at the Montreal General Hospital by a Harvard-trained plastic surgeon with sub-specialties in micro-surgery as well as hand surgery.

The surgeon, Lucie Lessard, peered over Annanack's head in the operating room. Her scalp dangled in flaps around the crown of her head, revealing tissue that had turned blue from a lack of blood supply.

Lessard could also glimpse what looked like drill holes, but were actually the polar bear's teeth marks, in the bone of Annanack's skull.

The Montreal General's Level One trauma team had already stabilized Annanack. For the next six hours, Lessard operated on the woman, hoping to save that dying tissue on the top of her head.

Lessard, chief of plastic



PHOTOS ALLEN MCINNIS/THE GAZETTE

Alice Annanack was mauled by a polar bear in Nunavik. Her husband, Tommy Baron, shot the animal before it could kill her.



THE GAZETTE

surgery at the McGill University Health Centre, was being assisted by an anesthetist, nurses and three surgical residents, Ali Izadpanah, Chadwick Wu and Thomas Constantinescu.

When Wu, who obtained his medical degree in San Francisco, learned a polar bear victim had been wheeled into the OR, his first thought was: Had this woman been to a zoo?

Lessard ordered complete silence as she sat in front of a microscope to view Annanack's head, reconnecting a severed temporal artery to re-establish blood and oxygen flow to the bluish tissue. The micro sutures Lessard used to stitch the artery were thinner than a human hair.

Lessard reattached the scalp flaps to Annanack's head before turning her attention to the hand. Slowly,



Dr. Lucie Lessard operated on Alice Annanack's seriously injured head, arm and back at the Montreal General Hospital.

delicately, Lessard repaired the broken bones in the hand as well as the tendon and muscle tissue damage.

Lessard saved the back for last, since it posed the least immediate danger to Annanack's life, although the bear's bites were within a centimetre of having paralyzed her. The operation was over, and Annanack was given antibiotics to guard against a bacterium that bears carry that can cause infections in human bones.

Wednesday, less than a month later, Annanack was recovering on the 19th floor of the Montreal General, staring out the window at the green

treetops of Mount Royal. Lessard dropped by to check on her. To the surgeon's surprise, Annanack's thick black hair had grown back quickly, almost covering the stitches criss-crossing her head.

Annanack was asked how she felt.

"I'm okay, but I'm not feeling my best," she said softly.

Lessard reminded Annanack just how strong she was to have survived the attack, to have shown so much courage.

"You did a great job on me," Annanack told her surgeon. "I don't know what would have happened if I didn't come here."

As part of the mission of the MUHC, the hospital network treats the Inuit of Nunavik, a source of pride for Lessard.

They spoke a little about life in Nunavik and about global warming.

"The ice is melting faster these days," Annanack said, "and when the ice is too far out from the shore, the polar bears go hunting on the land."

To Annanack's knowledge, her injuries are the first time a polar bear has attacked a human in the Kangiqsualujuaq area, although there have been a few close calls.

Lessard turned to leave; she had other patients to see. The two women smiled at each other.

Annanack is expected to regain most of the movement in her hand with the help of physiotherapy.

Once in the hallway, Lessard paused and reflected on the operation, one so technically challenging and unusual that it will be written up for a medical journal.

"Sometimes, you're so busy that you don't get to feel any satisfaction," Lessard said.

"But yes, I guess we are satisfied with the outcome."

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