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## Hometown Hero - Qapik Attagutsiak, Arctic Bay, Nunavut

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From: [Parks Canada](#)

### Backgrounder

In July 2018, Parks Canada had the privilege of recording Qapik while she recounted memories of her life and how she and other members of Eastern Arctic communities experienced the Second World War. The details of her accounts were, up to that time, unknown, even to her own children. . She spoke of the despair following the tragic loss of most of their hunting dogs to illness; being terrified after warnings about a possible invasion and being told to shoot to kill or be killed; picking up tons of animal bones and deceased dog carcasses for the war industry. While research is ongoing, the outline above is based on Qapik's memories and other sources, and was an untold part of Canadian history.

### Qapik Attagutsiak and the Second World War (1939-1945): In Her Own Words

Qapik Attagutsiak described first hearing about the Second World War in 1940: "We heard about those in the World War; that maybe they will be deploying soldiers from airplanes [...]. Inuit are afraid to kill other humans. We were afraid that our husbands would be killed if they encountered anyone who had jumped from an airplane. We would think that they will never come back."

She explained: "The catholic priest told us about the World War. After the dogs were ill. This was the walrus hunting area used every year named Qaiqsunik [in Foxe Basin]. Although we were there specifically for hunting walrus, the dogs started to die off."

Qapik went on to explain collecting the remains of her hunting dogs: "When the sea ice broke, the dead dogs would float away on sea ice drifts." She added, "When we would get rid of the dog remains; we were informed that we must collect the bones as the army wants us Inuit to make something for smoke [there was no Inuktitut word for explosives.]. All we heard of was smoke, but we did not know what was happening. They sent us sacks. Our late grandfather Ullalaaq [Igloodik's leader at the time] was the one who packaged the remains. We younger people would bring the remains to him; our grandfather would package them into a mesh sack." She described them as being 125 lbs (57 kg) capacity bags.

She explained that their camp gathered walrus, seal and dog bones. Only adult members of her camp picked up bones, (there are several camps in a community), filling approximately three bags per day for a full week. "I gathered bones with them," described Qapik, "we were terrified beyond belief. [The bones] were bloody and even if they have meat on the bones, they did not mind that; we would bag them." She expressed being scared of the maggots on the smelly carcasses, adding: "I suppose that it was worth it just as long as we win." Other Eastern Arctic communities also gathered animal bones according to her. "I think that small camps did. I think that we all did this. People from Hall Beach, Akunnirmiut, Kapuavingmiut" were some of them, she added.

The Hudson's Bay Company had an existing shipping system for delivering supplies and building material to northern communities. The bags were loaded onto small boats or schooners as "returns." Then the vessels would rendezvous with, and transfer their cargo to, the large steamship RMS *Nascopie* which transported the cargo of animal remains, sailing south to industrial ports such as Montreal or Halifax.

When hostilities ended in Europe, Qapik explained that the priest, through an Inuk, said: "They made smoke out of the bones that we gathered and [the Allies] won. The Germans lost most of their people." Relieved, she stated: "we immediately stopped thinking about it."

### **Salvage and the Second World War**

Two days after Canada entered the Second World War on 10 September, 1939, Parliament passed the *Department of Munitions and Supply Act* to centralize and coordinate sourcing of raw materials and industrial production. Canadians, in particular women and children, were encouraged to collect bones, fats, metal, rags, paper and rubber products through public campaigns by the Department of National War Services. Canadian response to these patriotic appeals was very positive despite the unglamorous nature of the task. Throughout the course of the war, millions of pounds of fats and bones were collected. Bones were then transformed to make cordite (a smokeless propellant used in munitions), aircraft glue and fertilizer.

By picking up bones and carcasses as part of salvage efforts in the initial years of the war, Inuit joined their fellow Canadians in the south as an 'army of volunteers' supporting the war effort on the home front.

Qapik is the last known surviving person to have participated in this effort to collect bones in the Canadian Arctic during the Second World War.

### **Inuk Elder Qapik Attagutsiak**

Qapik Attagutsiak was born on 11 June 1920, at Siuraq, a place between Igluligaarjuk (Chesterfield Inlet) and Coral Harbour in the area of Ukkusiksalik in the Kivalliq region of the present-day territory of Nunavut. Her father, Quliktalik, was a skilled hunter and her mother,

Pakak, was a seamstress; both were leaders in their community.

Like all Inuit from her generation, and their ancestors, Qapik and her family had a nomadic lifestyle enabled by ingenuity and skills developed and perfected over thousands of years and passed on to succeeding generations in order to thrive in one of the harshest environments on Earth. They travelled great distances by dog team to harvest animals from the sea and on land to feed their family as well as their dogs, which were indispensable for hunting. The whole animal from a successful hunt was used with little to no waste, with the meat to eat, bones to make tools, sinew and skin for making watertight and cold-resistant clothing, as well as blankets, tents, and kayaks. Braving hazardous weather conditions while traveling to different encampments in the Eastern Arctic, she lived in a tent made of hides in the late spring and summer, a *qarmaq*, or sod house, in the fall (the porch walls were made with clear sheets of ice and a roof of hides because of a lack of snow on the ground), and an igloo in the winter and early spring during periods of hunting.

Qapik Attagutsiak started midwifery at the early age of 10 alongside her mother and became an independent midwife at age 18. She married Attagutsiak, a leader from Netsilik. They welcomed their first child in 1939, and had 13 more afterwards. Attagutsiak became one of the first members of the Canadian Rangers when they were founded in 1947. She adopted two more children following her husband's death in 1984, and now has more than 200 descendants. As a midwife for decades, she also helped deliver hundreds of babies and was instrumental in helping establish the Akausivik Inuit Family Health Team - Medical Centre in Ottawa, Ontario. She is a recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal.

As a very lucid, modest, fun-loving and renowned seamstress, Qapik actively teaches and shares her skills and knowledge, inspiring younger generations. Always staying busy, Qapik, who is turning 100 this year, still works daily, making and selling traditional clothing such as mitts and kamiks (mukluks). Most of the proceeds from her sewing go to help families in need in her community.

She still chooses to live in a modern version of a *qarmaq*. Life in the hut is dependent on traditional *qulliik* (seal oil lamps) for heat and cooking, and help demonstrate to many youth how they once lived. She still resides in tents during the summer months in a camp at nearby Victor Bay. She credits her good health to the discipline of what she eats, preferring traditional foods, staying active and laughing. She learned to play the button accordion and continues enjoying entertaining or what she calls "square dance music" adopted from traders. Nothing brings her more joy than daily visits by Inuk youth who seek her guidance as an Elder, which she says keep her young at heart.