



**Major (ret'd) Ken Hedges
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On Easter Sunday 1969, Major Ken Hedges (MB ChB 1962) reached the North Pole as part of a team who became the first group ever to cross the surface of the Arctic Ocean.

It was an expedition so perilous that its patron, HRH Prince Philip, described it as “among the greatest triumphs of human skill and endurance.”

The British Trans-Arctic Expedition, conceived and led by the late Sir Wally Herbert, covered a hazardous route of 5,800 kilometres from the north shore of Alaska to Spitzbergen in Norway, via the North Pole. The journey took 476 days. The team also included Allan Gill and glaciologist Dr Fitzroy Koerner, who jointly braved whiteouts and near-blizzard conditions, unpredictable drifting sea ice, predatory polar bears and five months of total darkness.

Their incredible journey was recorded by the Guinness Book of Records not only as the first crossing of the Arctic Ocean, but also as the first undisputed expedition to reach the North Pole on foot and the longest sustained dogsled journey on sea ice in the history of Polar exploration. Dr Fitzroy Koerner also undertook the first physical survey of sea ice cover of the Arctic Ocean and his observations provided a benchmark against which today’s predictions about the rate and extent of the melting polar ice cap can now be measured.

Ken was selected to join the party in 1967, five years after graduating from the University of Liverpool with a medical degree, which was followed by postgraduate studies at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. He then joined the SAS, where he was deployed on four operational tours, qualifying as a military parachutist and diver, all of which were to provide valuable lessons in resilience for the extreme conditions and social isolation which lay ahead.

“We left base camp on February 21, 1968,” said Ken. “Immediately we entered a dangerous zone separating the land-fast ice from the pack ice. Throughout this period, in temperatures of minus 30C, we had to maintain a

round-the-clock watch. Several times we raised the alarm as a wall of pressuring ice grumbled in the darkness. Soon we learned our first lesson: our mobility was our best guarantee of survival.”

Each man was equipped with a sledge and a team of 10 dogs purchased from Inuit hunters in Greenland. They travelled relentlessly for 134 days through ice-cold melt pools until the terrain became practically impassable, forcing them to stop and set up camp in the dead centre of the Arctic Ocean. On February 24, 1969, the team were breakfasting in their hut for the last time before resuming their journey.

“Suddenly the whole hut began to shake, “said Ken. “We heard the staccato cracking and groaning of our ice floe as it broke up. A wide fissure appeared just five metres from where we stood. We had perched safely on that same floe, summer and winter, for 235 days.”

But it was the next leg of the journey that proved to be the most physically gruelling. For six weeks the team was exposed for 14 hours a day to an average temperature of minus 40C until they finally reached the North Pole on 6 April 1969. From then on the weather began to improve, and on 29 May of the same year, Ken and Allan scrambled over churning ice across a kilometre of surging tidal currents to successfully conclude the first crossing of the Arctic.

On their return to the UK, all four team members were named ‘Men of the year’ and elected Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society. Shortly afterwards, Ken was named an honorary member of the University of Liverpool Medical Students’ Society, and in 1970 he was presented with the Polar Medal by HM Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother at Buckingham Palace.

Now living in Canada, Ken is one of only two Canadians to wear both the black ribbon of a Commander in the Order of St John and the white ribbon of the Polar Medal and, at the age of 78, continues to regale audiences with stories of his intrepid adventures in the High Arctic.