

THE BRITISH TRANS ARCTIC EXPEDITION (BTAE) 1968-1969

SUMMARY

By Dr Kenneth Hedges

On Easter Day, 6/7 April 1969, four men, Wally Herbert (Leader), Dr. 'Fritz' Koerner (Glaciologist, Ohio State University), Allan Gill (Navigator) and Major Ken Hedges (Regimental Medical Officer, 22 Special Air Service) with four teams of Greenland Inuit sled dogs, reached the North Pole during an expedition that would enter contemporary editions of the Guinness Book of Records as:

- The first crossing of the Arctic Ocean;
- The longest sustained dogsled journey on sea ice in the history of Polar exploration;
- The first undisputed expedition to reach the North Pole on foot:



Team members L-R Alan Gill, Ken Hedges, Fritz Koerner and Wally Herbert

*“We had reached and returned from the North Pole
but in doing so became unwittingly embroiled in a distasteful conflict
with earlier uncorroborated claims as to who got there and back first”* (Hedges)

The idea of crossing the ice-covered Arctic Ocean using relays of dog teams was first proposed to the Royal Geographical Society in 1909. The projected journey would have taken three years, a duration far beyond the capacity for survival given the inevitability of succumbing to scurvy in the absence of fresh meat. Then in 1933 anti-scorbutic vitamin C was synthesized allowing its later incorporation into Medical Research Council sledging rations. Post World War 2 advances in radio propagation and the advent of long-range aerial re-supply was to give new logistic impetus to the idea now revived by Herbert. His hard won battle for RGS approval resulted in the establishment of a committee of polar experts who would mount an expedition appointing Herbert as leader of the four-man crossing party.

International logistic support for the expedition came from four of the five circumpolar nations whose shorelines define the Arctic Ocean: **The USA** (Naval Arctic Research Laboratory, Point Barrow, Alaska); **Canada** (A series of seven long range parachute drops undertaken by the Royal Canadian Air Force staging via Resolute Bay, NWT and the US Air Force Base at Thule, NW Greenland); **Denmark** (Greenland) and **Norway** (Spitsbergen).

The “British Trans Arctic Expedition” covered an erratic route across 3,720 statute miles (5,987 kilometres) of sea ice from Alaska to Spitsbergen via the Geographic North Pole. (Their line of advance was shaped by the unpredictable movement of drifting sea ice, active pressure ridges, open water and the deflection of the Coriolis effect experienced maximally as the expedition drew close the axis of the North Pole. They survived a harsh climate of unremitting cold with disorienting periodic whiteouts, sea fog and near blizzard conditions, interrupted radio communication attributable to ionospheric activity and a period of five months overwintering on an ice floe during the darkness of the polar night at 86 degrees north).

A scientific program, conducted by Koerner, undertook the first manual survey of sea ice cover in the expedition’s transit of the Arctic Ocean by its long axis. His series of some 250 ice-core observations were to provide an historic benchmark against which today's predictions affecting the rate and extent of the melting polar ice cap and its potential impact on climate change can be measured.

Risks to safety and health resulted in a variety of musculoskeletal injuries including an incapacitating back injury. This was to stop the expedition in its tracks and compromise an entire planned sledging phase. Hypothermia posed a very real danger during the approach to the North Pole. The adverse effects of prolonged social isolation presented unique challenges. Dental issues, frostbite, snow-blindness with delayed cataract formation, half-rations, destruction of a tent by fire, a rabid Arctic fox and:

*“the loss of seven of our dogs
(a 17.5% attrition among the wonderful creatures upon which we relied for our progress and survival)
and confrontations with predatory Polar bears, when...
on eleven occasions, we were burdened with the grave decision of kill or be killed”* (Hedges).

On 29 May 1969, overcast skies obscured a Full Moon whose gravitational pull now reinforced prevailing ocean currents with strong spring tides as the disintegrating ice field was forced against a lee shore onto the granite cliffs of Vesle Tavleoya, an offshore island in the Svalbard (Spitsbergen) Archipelago.

“At 19:00 hrs GMT 29 May 1969

A landing was made by Allan Gill and Major Ken Hedges on a small rocky island at 80 degrees 49 minutes north, 20 degrees 23 minutes east after a scramble across three quarters of a mile of unstable ice and gyrating ice-pans. This landing, though brief, concludes the first crossing of the surface of the Arctic Ocean...” (Herbert)

The two men rejoined their companions on the ice floes and continued sledging until 10 June 1969 when, after 476 days covering almost 6,000 kilometres living and moving across sea ice, all four men with their dogs and equipment were recovered by helicopter from the Royal Navy’s ice patrol vessel, HMS “Endurance”, at the southern extent of the ice cap, marking the confluence of the Arctic Ocean with the warmer waters of the North Atlantic Drift Stream.

The journey was acclaimed by British Prime Minister Harold Wilson as...

“a feat of courage which ranks with any in polar history”

And, in the opinion of the Expedition’s Patron, H.R.H. Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh as...

“among the greatest triumphs of human skill and endurance.”

Canadian author Farley Mowatt reflected on the pioneering traverse of the Arctic Ocean:

“An epic journey and perhaps the last of its kind in the long history of polar passion.”

Seven weeks later, following an eleven day round trip, mankind achieved the enormous technological feat of successfully completing the first of six Moon landings.

At an investiture at Buckingham Palace, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother conferred the Polar Medal on Herbert and Hedges, the other two members of the crossing party having by then returned to N.



At 19:00 hrs GMT 29 May 1969 Sir Wally Herbert, Dr Roy ‘Fritz’ Koerner, Allan Gill and Maj (Dr) Ken Hedges and some forty dogs finally reached land after a 16-month, 3,620 mile journey over the top of the world, successfully completing an expedition that would be hailed as the ‘last great journey on Earth’ – the first crossing of the Arctic Ocean along its longest axis, and the first undisputed expedition to reach the North Pole on foot.

America. (Of over one thousand Polar Medals issued since its inception in 1904, only 73 have been awarded for service in the Arctic.):

*“Conferred on those who take an active part in an expedition
which made notable advances in the exploration of Polar Regions
and underwent the hazards and rigours to life and movement...
set by climatic conditions in excess of twelve months”*

Some thirty years after the British Trans Arctic Expedition, in the Millennial Honours List of the year 2000, Herbert received a knighthood in recognition of his very considerable, cumulative services to polar exploration. In the interim he had undertaken a definitive study of US Navy Captain Robert Peary’s claim to have reached the North Pole in 1909 and had developed a striking and unique artistic ability.

Addendum

Shortly after his return from the Arctic, Major Hedges was awarded a Mention in Despatches in the Operational Gallantry List for Northern Ireland. He subsequently returned for a second tour to serve as Senior Specialist in Army Health for Northern Ireland with a deployed troop strength of 18,000.

After migrating to Canada, Major Hedges served in the Canadian Reserve with 33 Service Battalion in Halifax.

Following his appointment as Deputy Chief Surgeon, St John Ambulance Brigade Canada, he was promoted to the rank of Commander in the Order of St John.

In 2010, on the recommendation of the Chief of the Defence Staff, Dr. Hedges was appointed by the Minister of National Defence as the first Honorary Colonel of Canadian Forces Health Services Training Centre.