

# British Trans Arctic Expedition

## A Medical Officer's Perspective



Dog sledge driven across the Arctic Ocean by CFHSHT HCol Ken Hedges as a member of the "British Trans Arctic Expedition" in 1968-69

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).



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.



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



Major (ret) Ken Hedges, MB, ChB, was the Canadian Forces Health Services Training Centres first Honorary Colonel and at 78 years old the only surviving member of the British Trans Arctic Expedition. He 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.

On 29 May 1969, navigator Allan Gill and I, two members of the four-man crossing party of the British Trans Arctic Expedition of 1968-1969, scaled the cliffs of Vesle Tavloya, a small offshore island in the Svalbard (Spitsbergen) archipelago. This landing, though brief completed the first crossing of the surface of the Arctic Ocean. Our dogsled journey had lasted 476 days and covered 6,000 km travelling from Point Barrow, Alaska via the North Pole.

Sixteen years earlier to the day, Lord John Hunt had led the first ascent of Mont Everest and just eleven years earlier Sir Vivian Fuchs had completed the first crossing of the Antarctic continent.

Throughout this trek we were supported by means of a series of seven long-range parachute drops undertaken by 435 Squadron RCAF. This included one drop of some seventy pallets which was to see us safely through a period of five months over-wintering on an ice floe during the darkness of the Arctic Winter at 86 degrees North.

The expedition undertook the first sequential measurements of sea ice thickness. This was to form a base-line for determining ominous changes which would herald a growing awareness of Climate warming. Indeed, the acceleration of this trend is such that our journey would be quite impossible today.