



A QUICK CHAT WITH...

Colonel Richard Butson

The much decorated, real life hero tells Joseph Frey how rescuing a comrade trapped head first, 30 metres down a polar crevasse and tending to the fighting wounds of 90 huskies was all in a day's work for a doctor with the British Antarctic Survey team back in 1946.

You have an impressive list of honours following your name, what are they?

Well I received my medical degree in Britain through studies at Cambridge University and University College Hospital in London. I was invested with the George Cross, the second highest honour for bravery after the Victoria Cross, for a rescue while in the Antarctic. I also received the Polar Medal. After emigrating to Canada, I joined the Canadian Army Reserve and was eventually awarded the Order of Military Merit and the Canadian Decoration.

Why did you leave for the Antarctic in 1946?

I heard that the Falkland Islands Dependency Survey, now the British Antarctic Survey, was looking for a medical officer to go on an expedition to the Antarctic Peninsula. I had done quite a lot of mountain climbing, including glacier travel and this part of the Antarctic was mountainous, so that interested me.

What was the significance of the expedition?

It was originally started in 1943 as a Royal Navy expedition to conduct observations on possible German U-boats that were using sub-Antarctic islands as submarine bases. After the war our expedition became the first peacetime expedition to be carried out by the British Antarctic Survey. We engaged in geographic, geological, paleontology and meteorological surveys.

Where there any other factors that drove this expedition?

There was an overriding political component to it. During the Second World War the Argentinians and Chileans laid claim to the Antarctic Peninsula. The British government had shown an interest in this region since the early 1900's and it wanted to establish its value. London wanted to make sure that Britain maintained its hegemony in this area.

Why did this expedition devote so much time to mapping?

When we arrived the last one thousand miles of the east coast of the Antarctic Peninsula had not yet been mapped, in fact it was Earth's last unmapped coastline. Shelf ice extending from 50 to 300 miles off the east coast of the Antarctic Peninsula had prevented ships from coming anywhere near it. During the course of our year and a half there we found routes up the glaciated valleys from the west coast of the Antarctic Peninsula across its mountains and down to the east coast. This enabled us to do a ground survey with surveyors using theodolites and accurate astronomical fixes, which were supplemented by aerial photographs of the coastline as we went along.

How were the exploratory journeys carried out?

There were two groups. An American group under the command of Finn Ronne which started at the northern end of the Antarctic Peninsula, they traveled south along the east coast for four hundred miles. We in the British expedition started from the southern portion of the east coast and headed north for six hundred miles until we hooked up with them. For the British group it was a round trip journey by dog sled and skis of at least 1,100 miles, maybe 1,200 miles. We took scientific samples every fifty miles. The surveyors were very good; primarily Royal Engineers and they made some excellent maps.

What were the main medical problems that you had to deal with?

Well there were a few accidents. There was a broken collar bone and a couple of ankle fractures and the occasional lacerations and a bit of frost bit, but very little of that because people looked after themselves.

I understand that you were also the expedition's veterinarian, how did this come about?

We had ninety husky dogs on the expedition; neither we nor the Americans could have pulled this expedition off without dogs. Why they were banned from the Antarctic five years ago is beyond me. But in any case, since I was the expedition's doctor I was given a one day crash course in canine medicine at the Royal Veterinary College in London. These hundred pound husky dogs fought constantly and I would have to suture their lacerations without anesthetic. Holding them down while suturing was a real challenge. More often than not, they would stand up and lick my face in appreciation, they showed real warmth.

What circumstances led to the awarding of the George Cross?

It was originally called the Albert Medal and it was awarded for my efforts in extricating a member of Ronne's expedition from a glacial crevasse. Ronne had sent two men up into the Antarctic Peninsula Mountains to take seismic and meteorological recordings. They were caught in a winter storm and their tent split open. Faced with freezing to death they decided to walk back to the base some 18 miles down the mountains. In the course of so doing one of them suddenly disappeared from view having fallen through a crevasse bridge. He had fallen 106 feet into a tapered crevasse.

What happened next?

We finally found him at night, in mid winter in a tiny hole on a vast glacier measuring ten by ten miles. There seemed to be some question as to what was to be done, so I volunteered to go down as a doctor with some experience in mountain climbing techniques, to first see if he was alive, to treat him and extricate him. I went down into the crevasse by myself and found him impossibly wedged partly head down in a tapered crevasse. It was so tight working around him that I had to take off most of my upper clothing. I could hear the glacier constantly moving and at one point it pinned me. After about an hours work I managed to get slings under his legs and the men on top of the glacier pulled him out.

How did your experiences in the Antarctic impact the rest of your life?

I think that the important thing is that one got an appreciation of how small man is in the universe and how important it is to have good relations with your fellow man. There was a considerable sense of camaraderie which has persisted to this day, all of us, the British and Americans, get together for annual reunions. The experience was something that certainly affected all of our lives and our actions ever since. Rubbing shoulders with others who had had very distinguished careers, one way or the other, has undoubtedly had an influence on me.

By Joseph Frey