

Ice scream

The fascinating career of Dr. Richard Butson included descending deep into a hole in an antarctic glacier to rescue a fallen member of his mapping expedition

By JOSEPH FREY

In 1946 Dr. Richard Butson departed on a journey to the Antarctic, a journey that would map the last 1,600 km of uncharted coastline left on Earth. In the process he would be awarded Britain's George Cross, the second highest medal for bravery after the Victoria Cross.

Dr. Butson's parents moved to China from Britain, where his father started a civil engineering firm. Born in 1922 in the Chinese city of Hankow, Dr. Butson spent his early boyhood years in strife-torn China. "1920s China was politically unstable; I have vivid memories of perpetual fighting going on between Communists and Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang. On my way to school I would pass a place where they held public executions by way of beheading, and I saw several of them," says Dr. Butson.

Eager to have their son educated in England, Richard was sent to a boarding school by his parents when he was 10 years old. Fascinated by biological sciences, he pursued his medical education at Cambridge University followed by a stint at University College Hospital in London.

"On my way to school I would pass a place where they held public executions by way of beheading, and I saw several of them."

During the spring of 1940, Dr. Butson went to visit his parents in southern France. Shortly after arriving in France the Germans invaded the country. Herded aboard a British merchant ship in Marseilles to make their escape to Spain, the Butson's noticed that one of their traveling companions was Somerset Maugham. On route to Spain their ship came under attack by a German U-boat, whose torpedoes fortunately missed its target.

Completing his medical training in 1946, Dr. Butson volunteered to go to the Antarctic with the British Antarctic Survey. The expedition's objectives were to stake a claim to the region before Argentina did and to conduct surveys. The trip to the Antarctic was made aboard the Newfoundland ship, *Trepassey*.

Dr. Butson had signed up as the expedition's doctor and veterinarian. Since the members of the British expedition were primarily former military officers, they were in good physical health, with frostbite being the most common medical problem. So it ended up being the huskies who received most of Dr. Butson's medical attention. "I was given one day's training in veterinary medicine at the Royal Veterinary College in London. We had 90

huskies that always fought and I'd have to sew up their wounds without anesthetics. Holding down 100-lb (45 kg) huskies while suturing was challenging," says Dr. Butson.

Shortly after the British team settled in at Stonington Island, they were joined by an American expedition under the command of Finn Ronne. In an attempt to gather weather and seismic data Ronne sent two men out into the frigid mountains of the Antarctic Peninsula. Caught in the heavy July winds of an Antarctic winter their single-skinned tent soon tore open. Faced with the bleak prospect of freezing they started their trek back to Stonington.

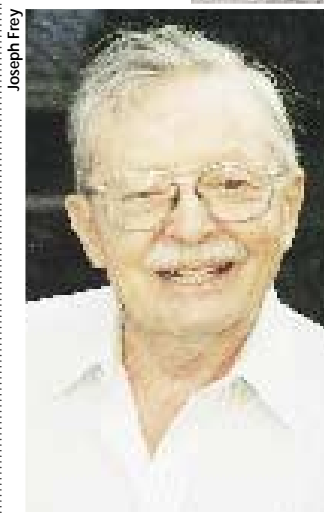
Descending 1,650 m down a mountain and trekking through

glacier-filled valleys, the Americans needed to cover 32 km in almost total darkness. They did not bother wearing their cross-country skis, which would have helped them cross unseen crevasses in the glaciers. And one of them, Pete Peterson, fell down a hole.

When Peterson's colleague returned to Stonington, the Americans and British pulled together a 12-man rescue team. Finding a small hole on a 16-by-16 km glacier in the darkness of an Antarctic winter was challenging.

Several hours had passed before the rescue team arrived at the hole. Dr. Butson, being a doctor with some alpine experience, volunteered to be lowered into the bowels of the glacier. Peering

see DOCTOR / Page 43



Dr. Butson these days (inset) is a retired army colonel and Hamilton surgeon. As a young doctor in 1946, he joined a mapping expedition crossing the Antarctic Peninsula.



Photo courtesy of the National Museums of Canada



Doctor earns bravery medal

from Page 42

down the hole, Dr. Butson could see that Peterson had fallen at least 10 storeys.

Dr. Butson was surprised to discover Peterson was still conscious and hadn't sustained multiple fractures. That said, Peterson's body was twisted and he was wedged head first into the tapered bottom of the crevasse. Dr. Butson had to remove his own heavy clothing before he could squeeze himself into a narrow space to attempt the rescue. All the while the crackling ice around Dr. Butson was moving, and at one point it pinned him.

Chipping away for more than an hour with his knife, Dr. Butson was finally in a position to tie a sling under Peterson's thighs. Up above the rescue crew started pulling on the rope, without much avail.

Suddenly Peterson's head popped out of the crevasse and he quickly ascended 13 m. During this process he did a somersault as he rose and ended head down again. Dr. Butson feared that Peterson would slip out of the sling. Fortunately he didn't and Dr. Butson was able to right him before

he was pulled out.

For this heroic act Dr. Butson was awarded the Albert Medal by King George VI at Buckingham Palace in 1949. In 1969 the Albert Medal was discontinued and its holders were awarded with the George Cross, which Dr. Butson received at an investiture presided over by Queen Elizabeth II in 1972.

Dr. Butson moved to Montreal in 1952 where he found employment as a surgeon at the Veterans' Hospital. Working there during the Korean War he treated Canadian soldiers who were rotated back to Canada from hospitals in Japan and Korea.

Offered a surgeon's position at St. Joseph's Hospital in 1953 he moved to Hamilton, Ont. While practising at St. Joseph's he taught medicine at McMaster University. Continuing his tradition of public service, in 1957 Dr. Butson joined the Canadian Forces Reserve as a medical officer. In the process he reorganized medical units within the Army Reserve and would end his military career at the rank of colonel.

Joseph Frey is a Toronto writer.