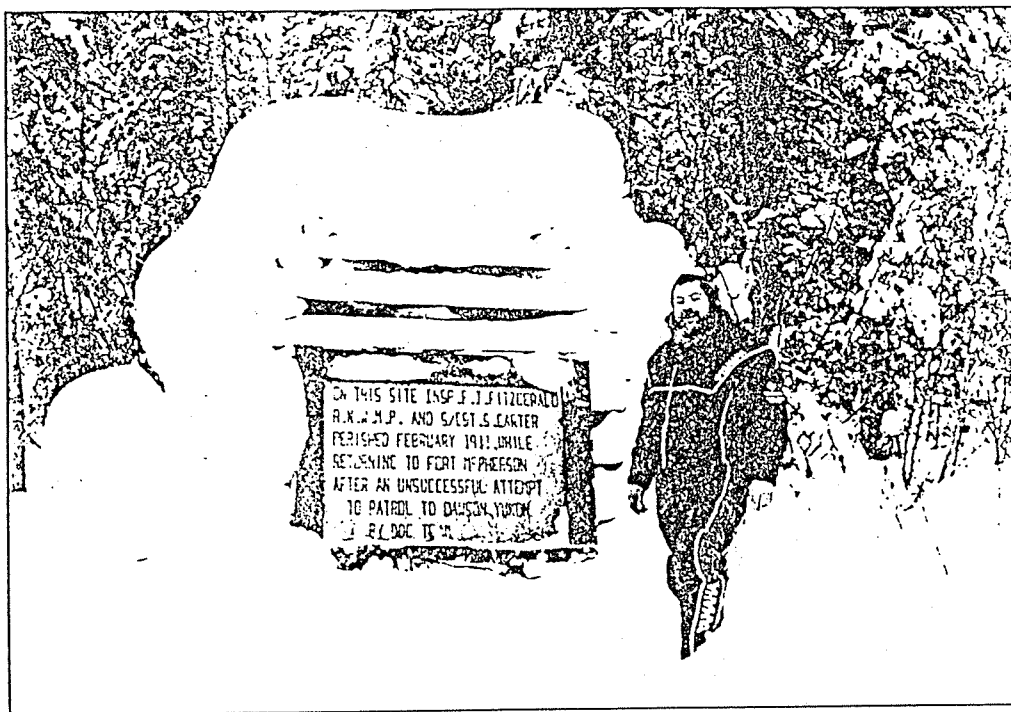


THE COMMEMORATIVE TRIP OF THE "LOST PATROL" OF 1910-1911

by Sgt. D.G. Pittendreigh



Sgt. D.G. Pittendreigh stands beside the plaque commemorating the deaths of Insp. F.J. Fitzgerald and S/Cst. S. Carter of the Lost Patrol. Sgt. Pittendreigh says about the picture, "I'm not really that fat — but I was warm."

On December 21, 1910, Inspector Francis J. Fitzgerald accompanied by Constables G. F. Kinney, R. O. H. Taylor and Special Constable Sam Carter, set out from Fort McPherson for Dawson, a distance of five hundred miles. The trip usually took a little over a month to complete by dog team. When two months had passed and Fitzgerald's party had failed to arrive in Dawson a search party headed by Corporal W.J. Dempster was sent out. On March 21, 1911, 30 miles from Fort McPherson

the emaciated bodies of Kinney and Taylor were found lying side by side. The next day the body of the guide was found, a handkerchief over his face, his hands, folded across his breast. Near-by lay Fitzgerald, also dead.

An inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the tragedy concluded that the calamity resulted from the small quantity of provisions taken, the want of an efficient guide, and the delay in searching for the lost trail. In the

history of the RCMP this patrol became known as the "Lost Patrol."

Seventy-five years later, on February 13, 1985, eleven Yukoners, two of them serving members of the RCMP, attempted to recreate the famous and ill-fated Fitzgerald Patrol. Sgt. Pittendreigh tells the story of their attempt. Ed.

On February 13, 1985, our group which included ten people, 47 dogs, four snow machines and approximately 3,500 lbs. of supplies left Whitehorse, Yukon, in a rented van to travel 700 miles to Fort McPherson, where we would begin the recreation of the Lost Patrol of 1910/11. At Dawson we picked up the eleventh member of our party plus seven more dogs. The temperature was a balmy -35°C, clear and sunny. Spirits were high as we had all spent a year of building, buying and planning to get ready for this first day. Little did we know that within 12 hours of starting out, "mother nature" and Canada's northern wilderness would show us, in no uncertain terms, just how severely man and machine could be tested. My diary account of our attempt is as follows.

February 13, 1985, 10:30 hrs. -40 C clear.

Finally get everyone together and loaded in the van. Depart Dawson City for Fort McPherson, N. W. T., via Dempster Highway.

February 14, 1985, 01:30 hrs. -40 C strong wind.

The rented van we are driving stalls in the middle of nowhere. Help comes after one and a half hours and we manage to limp 60 miles into Eagle Plains Lodge by 04:30 hrs. Some minor frostbite, but nothing serious.

At 09:00 hrs. up and ready to go but the highway is blocked up ahead. May take 24 hours to clear. Enjoy the hospitality of the lodge. Tie the dogs out on lines so they are not cramped up in their wee houses.

February 15, 1985, 14:00 hrs. -40°C strong wind.

The highway crew has opened the road for us but we only have an hour or so to get 30 miles up the road before the area drifts in again. Great panic loading everything, dogs included.

By 16:00 hrs. have made it through but now notice two dog boxes are open. No dogs inside. The weather is getting worse so we decide to press on. At 17:00 hrs. arrive at Fort McPherson and begin unloading and setting up camp. Find the two missing dogs. In our haste we doubled up some. Finally get camp set in a field beside the curling rink at 22:00 hrs. All equipment and people plus dogs are in good shape.

Map showing route of historic Lost Patrol with its leader Insp. Francis J. Fitzgerald. ➤



February 16, 1985, -40°C calm, clear.

Up early. Spend the day in Fort McPherson putting final touches on equipment. We have much more gear than we realized. Sleds are running about 350 to 400 lbs. each. Also have to buy some fish for dog food. Our lay-over in Eagle Plains costs us two days food.

February 17, 1985, Sunday -38°C calm.

Up early but don't clear town until 13:00 hrs. Realize now our group may be too big. Eleven people and 54 dogs are not easy to feed at -38°C. Agree to travel 20 to 25 miles first day to see how things are going to go. The snow machines lead the parade.

The people of Fort McPherson and Chief Johnny Charlie treat us fantastically. Receive a great deal of gentle advice and best wishes upon our departure.

At 17:00 hrs. stop snow machines and make camp 25 miles out (about one-half mile from the cairn erected where Insp. Fitzgerald and S/Cst. Carter died).

At 18:30 hrs. the first dog team comes in. Very tough sledding as the plastic runners do not seem to be working as well here as they did at home. By 20:30 hrs. last dog team is in. We are obviously going to have problems as

our loads are just too heavy. We are now about 125 miles from our first cache. Everyone fed and in bed by midnight. We had to camp on the river as the snow was four to five feet deep on the shore line. Cutting and hauling wood is a full-time job for three people.

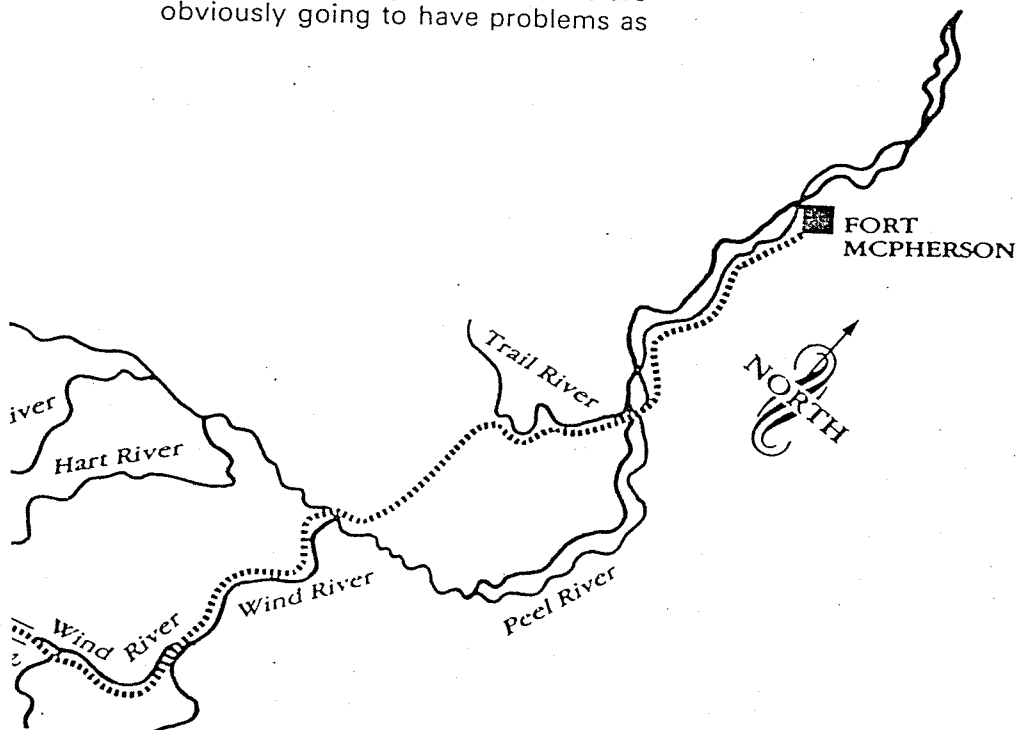
February 18, 1985, Monday -41°C calm.

Up early but don't clear camp before noon. Dogs take the lead. They will stop when tired. The snow machines are using twice the fuel we expected. No other problems.

At 16:30 hrs. make camp 14 miles out. The cold is starting to tell on everyone — man and beast. Again setting up camp is a major job. Very deep snow keeps us out in the open again. We hope the wind doesn't come up.

February 19, 1985, Tuesday -54°C calm.

No travel today. Simply too cold for anything but survival. Wood consumption is unbelievable. Likely use one to two cords per day for cooking and feeding all of us and the dogs. By 14:00 hrs. temperature has risen to -35°C. Perhaps a change in the weather is



coming. At 20:00 hrs. take stock of supplies and realize we are not going to make our first cache without more fuel and dog food. Some dogs have sore feet and some people are getting down. If we go on we will endanger human and beast. We agree to turn back. The snow machines will all go back and then regroup to try again. -40°C no change in weather.

February 20, 1985, Wednesday -42°C south wind.

Up early and dogs gone by 10:00 hrs. Hope to make 20 Mile Creek. Realize our last camp was near the cairn erected where Kinney and Taylor died. Is it an omen? The cold weather is now showing on everything. One snow machine is quite "sick". The tent is heavily coated in ice, causing dripping on the inside and most bedding is soaked. The dogs know we are heading home. At 20 Mile Creek a trapper has his cabin all warmed up for us with fresh tea ready. The teams should all be in by 17:00 hrs. or so. Two of us carry on into Fort McPherson via snow machine to commence arrangements for a truck to haul everything back home to Whitehorse.

February 21, 1985, Thursday -44°C clear.

Spent the day getting everyone in from 20 Miles Creek. A second snow machine is now in mechanical difficulty with a cracked carburetor. In five days we have used over 400 litres of fuel and travelled close to 200 miles (back and forth). We just can't believe how much fuel we used! The dogs are almost out of food so we purchase more.

February 22, 1985, Friday -34°C clear.

The chief found us an empty house to stay in. The mushers are preparing to load the truck for 16:00 hrs. One of the snow machines is "dead" and its own-

er is packing it in. Three of us have decided to try again — this time with three snow machines only. We'll leave as soon as we can get parts for the other "injured" machines. At 16:00 hrs. we say farewell to our friends as they sadly return to Whitehorse.

February 23 and 24, 1985, -30°C.

Weather has changed a bit. We change our sled styles to 12-foot toboggans. Much more compact now. Pick up another 400 litres of fuel and are now ready to go. The 24th is a Sunday. An old lady in town warns us not to go. She says Fitzgerald left on a Sunday and so did we on our first attempt. She says it is bad to begin on a Sunday. No argument, as it was already late afternoon.

February 25, 1985, Monday -34°C windy.

We depart Fort McPherson at 13:00 hrs. and have a beautiful run right to Trail River where we meet our Indian guide, Simon Snowshoe. Six hours travelling see us 75 miles down river. Spirits are high now as we are making good time. Simon tells us we have to climb a steep hill just 12 miles up Trail Creek. He, his two boys, and 13 dogs, will help there. After that it will just be five of us on snow machines. Simon has a camp 60 miles from the Peei River, so we should make it in one day. That puts us just 50 miles from our cache. Two of us are running out of time. We had planned to do the trip in 15 days. We have already used nine days.

February 26, 1985, Tuesday -23°C cloudy.

Up early and away by 09:30 hrs. Snow is very deep on river trail — at least four feet. It is also still very soft and powdery. Not much overflow. At 11:30 hrs. lunch at the base of our hill.



Boiling dog food up at -54°C used four to five cords of wood in three days.

It is a winding 800-foot climb in about half of a mile. Four to four and one-half feet of powder snow make it impossible to pull the toboggans by snow machine. The dogs haul everything up but it takes us five and one-half hours. It is now 18:00 hrs. Two of us decide to turn back. We just do not have enough time left to travel at such a slow pace. Today we only made 15 miles. Spirits are now very low. The hill it took five and one-half hours to climb only takes five minutes to descend. Simon Snowshoe, his two sons, and the last remaining member of our group continue on from here. Because my trip ends here, I have no notes of their trip forward. I learn later, however, that they spent nine more days travelling the last 50 miles to the first cache, and then returned home.

POSTSCRIPT

The trip as planned was not a success. Failure is never easy to accept but I do feel we had some success in bringing the entire thing together. Also we did not have any major injuries. Despite the cold, we did learn a great deal of appreciation for the North and "mother nature" and, personally, I learned a great deal about myself. On my return trip I paused to sit beside Fitzgerald's final resting place and found myself feeling very close to four men I will never meet. Their strength and endurance amazed me. I am not afraid to admit that all were one hell of a lot tougher men than me, both physically and mentally.

Will we do it again? I am not sure. Maybe someday. ■