



Almost exactly 100 years ago, Robert E. Peary travelled by dogsled to the North Pole. In 2005, Hugh Dale-Harris — the descendant of Ottawa pioneers — replicated the feat. Using equipment made according to Peary's design, Dale-Harris and his companions arrived at the Pole in record time

By Janet Uren



Northern exposure: (Clockwise from facing page) Taken at the beginning of the expedition, the photograph shows clearly just how tough travel was in an area called "the sheer zone," which is five to ten nautical miles from land. Moving pack ice pushing up against solid land-fast ice creates these huge pressure ridges. During this section of the expedition, travel was around five nautical miles a day; A frosted-up Hugh Dale-Harris remembers it being about -40 C on the day this shot was taken; Ernie the dog is retrieved after falling into the water. Dale-Harris notes that the dogs instinctively know to roll in the snow after being in the frigid water to get rid of excess water and dry off faster; The dogs in a rare quiet moment; Mushing during a blizzard

At the Still Point of the Turning World

IT WAS A STRANGE, STRANGE FEELING, Hugh Dale-Harris says, to be standing at the centre of a wasteland of snow and ice and to know he had arrived at the still point of the turning world. Not many people have made that journey. The first was Commander Robert E. Peary, who reported arriving at the North Pole on April 6, 1909. Ninety-six years later, on April 26, 2005, Dale-Harris and four companions came to the same place.

A native of Ottawa now residing in Thunder Bay, Dale-Harris has long been fascinated by Canada's North. Indeed, the love of wilderness is in his blood. He is directly descended from pioneers — Philemon Wright (founder of Hull in 1800) and Nicholas Sparks (first settler in Ottawa in 1821) — who came to Canada when it was still mostly impenetrable forest. Like them and like Robert Peary, he is drawn to the wild and empty corners of the map.

Peary's story is one of the great legends of the Arctic, and — though his claim is often disputed — he is almost certainly

the first man to have reached the North Pole. Before his 1909 journey, 756 people had died in previous attempts. Peary prevailed because he was receptive to the lessons of the North. He learned from the Inuit how to survive. He adopted caribou-skin clothing. He used the dogsled for transport, and what is more, he adapted the traditional Inuit sled for travel on Arctic pack ice. As a result, a little more than 37 days after leaving Ellesmere Island in 1909, Peary's sextant confirmed his position at 90 degrees north. Returning to the U.S., Peary faced counterclaims and accusations that he had mistaken his position or even misrepresented it. Though Congress formally recognized his achievement in 1911, the controversy has never completely died away.

In the 21st century, the North Pole is not nearly as isolated as it was in Peary's day. Every year a small but steady stream of trekkers heads for the earth's loneliest landmark. Most travel on skis and start their trek just 60 miles south of the Pole. Thus, they travel only the "last degree" of lati-

tude. Of the very few who have travelled the whole way from Ellesmere Island by dogsled, none has equalled Peary's fantastic speed.

THE 2005 EXPEDITION, using the same sleds as Peary, set out to replicate as much as possible the conditions of his journey. Like Peary, they planned to leave land at the northern edge of Ellesmere Island and to travel some 743 kilometres by dogsled. Their ambition was to equal or better the record of 37 days to the Pole that Peary claimed in 1909.

The inspiration for the journey came from Tom Avery, a 29-year-old British explorer and mountaineer and, in 2002, the youngest Briton ever to reach the South Pole. He recruited two mountaineering friends (Andrew Gerber of South Africa and George Wells, another Englishman) to accompany him and convinced a global investment bank, Barclays Capital, to sponsor the journey. Their purpose was

to put all doubts to rest and to show that, technically at least, Peary's achievement lay within the realm of possibility.

Avery contracted two northern experts to provide technical support. One of them was an American-born polar voyager and outfitter, Matty McNair of Iqaluit (capital of Nunavut on Baffin Island). She planned, outfitted, and guided the expedition, and she recruited Hugh Dale-Harris as co-leader. Among his responsibilities on the expedition was managing the dog teams.

Dale-Harris learned the ancient art of dogsledding in northwestern Ontario when working as an instructor with Outward Bound Canada. His first experience of the North came later, in the late 1990s when he taught in Iglulik for a year. There, thrust into close contact with the Inuit youth in his alternative classroom, the young teacher experienced both the magnificence and the hardship of modern-day Inuit life against a dark and stunning backdrop of Arctic winter. He fell in love with all things northern. "Canada is the ultimate wilderness,"



On the curve: Hugh Dale-Harris shown in his workshop shaping the runner for the sleds. The runners were fashioned after Peary's design. The crew strapped two runners together to ensure a parallel shape

he says, "and I learned to love Inuit culture because of the way it remains closely connected to that wilderness."

Some years later, in 2004, Dale-Harris returned to the North as part of an American expedition and travelled by dogsled 3,000 kilometres across the Arctic mainland, from Yellowknife to Pond Inlet. He was already an experienced dogsledder when the trip began. He had owned his own team for four years and managed some 40 dogs for Outward Bound. The five months he spent travelling with dogs took him to the next level.

As he worked to control a team of rambunctious sled dogs with only rudimentary tools at his command, Dale-Harris revelled in a life of quintessential simplicity and tradition. Virtually every day for five months, he woke and went to rouse his dogs as they slept curled up on the dog chain. Every morning he coaxed them, one after the other, into the traces. Every day, when the sled was ready, he called the dogs up and felt with satisfaction the powerful canine surge that snapped the sled free of inertia and sent it racing over the snow. For more than 150 days, he endured, day in and day out, one of the harshest environments on earth. He loved it.

Part of the joy of the journey was a stopover in Iglulik, where Dale-Harris reconnected with his former students. It was a reunion that confirmed his love of the North. Nevertheless, at the end of the expedition as he turned southward, he had a strong sense of leaving the High Arctic forever. "I had developed a skill, but I didn't really think I would use it again." With a partner and young child living in Thunder Bay, he had no plans to return to the North.

In fact, the North had not finished with Dale-Harris. Hardly had he settled in back at home than an e-mail arrived from Matty McNair, a former colleague from Outward Bound. She wrote that she needed an expert musher for the 2005 polar expedition. Dale-Harris packed his bags.

THE TEAM ASSEMBLED IN IQUALUIT. "We clicked," says Dale-Harris. "By the time we set out, we all had a very clear vision of what we wanted to do. We agreed that safety came first. After that, it was all about getting to the Pole and, finally, getting there in the specified time. The leadership was also clear. Matty was in charge of our day-to-day operations, and I was her co-guide."

Dale-Harris also encountered the rest of the team, consisting of 16 big, powerful dogs. During the next two weeks, he took the dogs out daily. Dogs are not machines, he is quick to point out: they are living creatures, and their effectiveness depends on their relationship to one another and to their driver. "You have to get to know the dogs," he explains, "to identify the clowns, pick out the stars, see how they work together."

During those two weeks in Iqaluit, Dale-Harris and the team also finished building two sleds along lines that Peary had devised. Peary's sled was adapted for rough terrain. An ordinary *kamotik* is around six metres long, with straight, flat runners that turn up slightly at the forward edge. Such a sled can carry an enormous load and can travel rapidly over relatively flat land. However, on the steep, broken pressure ridges of the frozen sea, it is heavy and unwieldy. When the sled tips over, it takes an enormous amount of strength and energy to get it going again.

Peary, after the bitter failure of two polar expeditions, came up with three important innovations for the *kamotik*. First, he shortened the sled to less than five metres. Second, he gave the runners a gentle curve (a rocker) from back to front and curled the tips sharply upward at front and back. Third, he confined the cross plates (where the gear is loaded) to the central 1.5 metres of the sled. In effect, this modified sled could operate on broken terrain like a solo canoe in a rock-filled rapid. When it jammed, it was possible to pivot it lightly around the obstacle. Just as importantly, when the sled plunged down a slope, the curved runners rode up over ledges of ice and snow instead of digging in. It was a lighter, more manoeuvrable sled and, on the pack ice at least, much faster than the ordinary *kamotik*.

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There were other similarities between the 1909 final assault party and the 2005 expedition, including the size and organization of the party. Peary and his assistant, Matthew Henson, were accompanied by four Inuit guides, some of whom raced ahead on snowshoes every day to find a campsite and set up shelter for the night. In 2005, it was Matty McNair who skied ahead, choosing a route and setting the pace.

In other respects, the 2005 expedition was very different. Peary wore furs and slept in snow houses. He navigated by dead reckoning, pinpointing his position by daily calculations with a sextant. Avery and his team wore bright synthetic clothing and slept in a large tent. The aptly named "emerald igloo" was specially made by Matty McNair. Designed from a tent by Canadian explorer Richard Weber, it was framed with



Pole position: A shot of the dogs travelling down a lead and heading northwest. While it was less direct than the usual route, which was straight north, this easy travel was a welcome break from the slow travel of the jumbled ice the adventurers were leaving

ski poles. As for navigation, the party charted its progress with a global positioning system. They had satellite phones to report their position in case of disaster.

Even with modern equipment, it was a hard trip. The weather was cold at first, with temperatures around -35 C, and some days they had to hole up from the weather. The terrain was nightmarish, with ridges rising as high as two storeys, especially near land, where the sea ice fractured into great ice walls. Sometimes progress slowed to a painful crawl, and they averaged only five kilometres a day at first. However, as the land receded, the weather improved and the crumpled ice became less tortuous. The sleds began to run and leap over the ice like the thoroughbreds they were designed to be.

"Really, nothing much has changed up there since 1909," Dale-Harris comments. "People, dogs, and the sun low on the horizon and so bright you can hardly see. The sea ice is fascinating, always changing. It's a lonely world." During the entire month-long journey, the travellers knew of only one other party in the area — a Korean team skiing doggedly northward — but they never saw them. Apart from that, the only sign of life was a seal spotted about 450 kilometres from the coast.

The growing warmth brought challenges of its own. Sometimes the ice was so thin and flexible that it felt as if they were striding over a waterbed. On the last day of their journey, they pushed cautiously across an area of perilously thin ice. McNair went across first on skis. The dogs balked, and then, as they crossed, some went through the ice. The dogs were pulled out, and the party kept going.

THEY GOT TO THE NORTH POLE, and they got there in time. The journey took just 36 days and 22 hours from Cape Columbia. They had bettered Peary's time by a full four hours.

"You know, there's nothing special about the geography around the North Pole per se," Dale-Harris muses, "except the whole process of getting there. We knew we were close. Matty took off her skis and wandered around with the GPS. The reading was 89'99". The dogs were waiting too, just looking at us. It was the same for Peary in his day. He moved back and forth with his sextant, taking readings. And then we found it! It was very bizarre — to know you were standing there at the point where the whole earth pivots."

Dale-Harris does not expect to see the North Pole again in his lifetime. "I was very lucky to be involved, and it was fantastic, but now I want something different. I am a parent now, and for me that is the most incredible, the most wonderful adventure of all."

At the same time, Hugh Dale-Harris knows now that he will never be entirely free of the North. His fascination with the landscape and the Inuit people remains, and he and his family have already returned to the North twice for educational projects Dale-Harris has been involved with. After all, he is the descendant of people who built roads and farms and railways in the wilderness. "I love thinking about that," he says, "about the pristine lakes and country that they saw in their day. And for me, the wilderness is still calling."

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