

**“Cook was a gentlemen and a liar. Peary was neither.”**

Peter Freuchen (Danish Arctic Explorer)

## **Robert Peary**

Peary is recognized as being the first to reach the North Pole. His claim is probably the most debated exploring controversy in history. Peary's navigation methods, the distances covered and his ability to follow his return trail are the issues most often debated.

Peary's expedition consisted of 24 men: himself, Matthew Henson, 17 Greenland Inuit and 5 Americans. They departed from Cape Columbia, on the northern tip of Ellesmere Island, on February 28, 1909 with 133 dogs pulling 19 sleds. The North Pole party reached the pole on April 6, 1909, 38 days after leaving the Ellesmere Island coast. The North Pole party comprised of Robert Peary (52), Matthew Henson (42) and four Greenland Inuit dog drivers: Ootah (30), Eginwah (27), Seegloo (27) and Ooqueah (22).

## **The Arctic Ocean**

The sun first reaches northern Ellesmere Island in early March. By the third week of March, it never sets below the horizon. The window for expeditions to the North Pole is March, April and May.

Travel to the North Pole is entirely over the frozen Arctic Ocean. The standard route is from northern Ellesmere Island, with most expeditions departing from Ward Hunt Island (an abandoned Department of National Defense outpost).

Even though the Arctic Ocean is frozen, it does move. The prevailing drift is southeast, pushing the ice against Ellesmere Island and Greenland. As the ice is forced against the landmass, it buckles and heaves into pressure ridges. Further north, the drift creates cracks in the ice pans. These cracks separate and cause leads of open water, which eventually freeze, thin at first and thicker over time.

Travel through this unique environment is very challenging as one encounters numerous pressure ridges, which you have to climb over, as well as leads, which block your northward progress, forcing countless detours.

## **“In the Footsteps of Peary”**

In 2000, Paul Crowley and I embarked on an expedition to the North Pole to shed light on Peary's claim of reaching the pole. Of particular interest to us was Peary's travel style, his partnership with Greenland Inuit dog drivers, the use of Inuit dogs & light sleds, the number of days he took to reach the Pole and his ability to follow his return trail.

Paul and I departed from the edge of the Ward Hunt Ice Shelf (northern Ellesmere Island) on March 3. We each drove teams of six Canadian Inuit dogs, pulling sleds weighing at most 240 kilograms. We arrived at the North Pole on April 13, 2000. After two days at the Pole, we turned south and traveled back to 89° degrees of latitude.

Our expedition was the first to travel on the Arctic Ocean in a style that resembled Peary's. Our light sleds pulled by small teams of dogs allowed us to travel quickly and efficiently. During the first half of our expedition, we were ahead of Peary's schedule. The challenging ice conditions encountered through the 88° degree slowed our progress –the end result: we took four days longer than Peary. As for following our return trail back to 89°, not only were the dogs able to always stay on their old trail, their pace picked up substantially and our travel speed increased by at least 25%.

### **The Canadian Inuit Dog**

*"The Eskimo dog is distinguished by having kept one foot firmly in the wild. This explains his captivating personality. Loyal, intelligent, brave, persevering: possessed also of quasi-human peccadilloes like thieving, bullying and malingering, the Eskimo dog is part of the legend and literature of the North."*  
Quote from Scott and Amundsen by Roland Huntford.

The Canadian Inuit Dog is the last indigenous breed in North America. The Inuit has used these dogs during the last 2,000 years. They are the dogs that pulled Peary to the North Pole and Amundsen to the South Pole. They are strong, independent and very friendly.

The dogs were the key to our success. They gave 100% every single day, often through very difficult conditions. The challenges we put them through –cold temperatures, deep soft snow, pressure ridges, swims in the Arctic Ocean and pulling heavy sleds for 50 days– brought out the best in them. They are truly adapted to the Arctic environment. The Arctic is their home and it is here that they excel. Our teams were:

Lead team: Nixi, Henson, Nanooq, Apu, Stider, Siarniq.

Following team: Ernie, Mufasa, Simba, Thor, Pang, Thule.

### **Success**

After my return home, someone asked me what was the most rewarding aspect of the expedition. My answer: "Traveling with Paul".

Many expeditions, even the ones that reach their goals, are often tainted with

difficult personal dynamics and awkward human complexities. Paul and I were committed to strengthening our friendship through our participation in this expedition. There is no doubt that our objective was to reach the North Pole; but not at all cost. Of greater importance to us was our:

- Personal safety
- Friendship
- Working relationship
- Relationship with our dogs

We also wanted to:

- Have fun together
- Travel and camp in style
- Enjoy the beauty of the Arctic Ocean

How do we measure success? Is it Paul and I standing at 90° north on April 13? Yes it is, but there is more. An excerpt from my journal written shortly after arriving at the North Pole describes my views on success.

*We made it! I am at the North Pole. I feel kind of funny. I am not overwhelmed with emotions or feelings of joy and success. I feel content and relaxed. My thoughts turn to the more immediate rewards such as resting the dogs, writing in my journal, reading, sleeping-in tomorrow morning -followed by a leisurely breakfast.*

*As I wait for the dinner to cook, I reflect on how well Paul and I worked together: both of us climbing pressure ridges to discuss what route to take, helping each other with our sleds, sharing dogs back and forth, our strategic planning talks in the tent and celebrating our small successes along the way. I think of the laughter, the quick snacks at -50°C, the yummy dinners in a warm tent and the funny incidents along the way. I think of the dogs and how well we worked with them. Yes we did it in style and we had fun doing it together. That is very important to me. Success is not sitting at the North Pole but it is in how the journey unfolded; these are the memories I will cherish for years to come. This is my definition of success.*

### **Now that I am back . . .**

I've always believed that Peary, Henson, Ootah, Eginwah, Seegloo and Ooqueah reached the North Pole but after my experience on the Arctic Ocean, I've come to look to the Peary and Henson as a highly skilled and gifted explorers who were way ahead of their time. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that they were the first people to stand in close proximity of the Geographic North Pole.

Paul,  
May 2000