

THE HUSKY—FRIEND AND FIGHTER

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Towards the end of 1959, South Africa sent its first Scientific Expedition to Antractica, and I was Medical Officer to this group.

We sailed from Cape Town on board the *Polarbjorn*, a 486 ton Norwegian sealer, on the evening of Thursday, 3rd December. Having fought our way through heavy pack ice, we arrived, 36 days later, at the ice-front.

Offloading of stores started immediately, and for weeks after the *Polarbjorn* had departed, we transported 165 tons of supplies by sledge from the depot at the icefront to our base, 22 miles inland. To transport 165 tons of supplies at the rate of 4 tons approximately per trip took us until the end of February.

Our team, consisting of ten members (the leader, four meteorologists, a radio operator, a radio technician, a geologist, a diesel mechanic and myself) took over the Norwegian base. A boat would, if it could get through the ice, relieve us a year later.

All heavy transportation was done by crawler tractors. The petrol-driven Canadian muskeg with its very wide rubber tracts, was the most comfortable and the fastest. The diesel tractor was a much slower vehicle and during the hottest part of the day it used to dig itself into the soft snow, which caused us to arrive late at our destination on many occasions. The lowering of temperatures during the night hardened the surface and made it more suitable for travel, but the diesoline used to cool to a jelly-like consistency making the tractor inoperative. Many a time this freezing of the diesoline made us unhitch and abandon one of the loaded sledges until a later date.

Temperatures of 20 degrees Centigrade below freezing point were frequent during these trips between the ice-front and our base. It was during these trips that Chris, our mechanic, met with many heartbreaking experiences with the jelly-like diesoline. Naturally, both he and the stalled tractor became the butt of our good-natured "insults" until he hit on the idea of running the tractor on illuminating paraffin which does not turn into jelly until temperatures of well below minus 30° Centigrade are experienced.

With the husky-drawn sledge, however, there were no fuel problems. This mode of travel is most reliable, has no starting troubles and needs no spare parts.

Huskies tread lightly on the snow and over hidden crevasses. These latter are sensed by the leader dog who immediately veers the team away from the danger area, hauling the sledge and its load to safety.

The Norwegian Expedition which we replaced, left behind for our use a team of ten huskies. Some were of the original pack brought from Greenland; the others were born out of them in Antarctica, a year to a year-and-a-half previously. One died of diabetes before the sledging trips started.

The remaining nine proved themselves worthy pioneers, hauling scientific equipment and personnel into the unknown mountainous interior of Queen Maud Land.

A well-bred husky weighs between 70 and 100 lb. In Antarctica, the dragload for a good dog is equal to his own weight. For some weeks before their arduous trips began, they were put on a mixture of vitamins which gave them so much vitality and endurance that

they hauled between the nine of them, a load of well over 1,000 lb. Whilst resting at base, each received 5 lb. of seal meat, the blubber and skin on alternate days.

During the summer, the huskies were chained out-of-doors to pegs firmly implanted in the snow. In winter, they were kept in an ice tunnel under the snow to protect them against the extremes of wind and cold. Here, in the underground tunnel, they were tied firmly apart because the slightest chance one might get to reach the tail or paw of a neighbour would set off a vicious fight. When one got loose, which occasionally did happen, he would roam through the pack, select an opponent, and the two would then have a furious set-to, all the others barking and whining in applause. Some were good friends though, and one would attack his mate only during a general skirmish. In such a brawl, the nearest was attacked, whether friend or foe.

Huskies are kind and loving to man. Like lap dogs, they like to be stroked and patted. They would strain on their chains to get near to you in order to nuzzle their noses into the warmth of your arm pit.

These dogs are inspanned in tandem, the leader right in front at the end of a 40-foot drag line. One on each side of him, each on its short rope or chain: the others followed in pairs at 8-foot intervals. To prevent the dogs from getting too close to each other during inspanning, the line was kept tight by fixing the back of the sledge and the end of the drag line with steel pegs onto the snow.

When everything was ready, the pegs were removed and the person at the brake of the sledge shouts, "trek!" One or two of the huskies would then look around to see if the command was really in earnest, and then with a series of severe jerks they would be off at a fast run. Very often, they regard the removal of the pegs as a sign for a scrap.

Allow me to quote from my diary:
"Wednesday, 3rd August, 1960.

Today was an historical one. Three major events occurred, viz. Vic's birthday; the first inspanning of the dogs since our arrival here, and our efforts to teach them Afrikaans terminology. I went outside with the intention of taking some photos, but many hands were necessary to maintain order.

I happened to be holding on to the brace of the leader dog, Oscar, when Hannes le Grange shouted, "trek!" and I released the brace. Oscar took the line of least resistance, shot back into the pack and started the rowdiest dog-fight imaginable. After considerable effort, this bundle of misguided energy was disentangled and dragged apart, and soon they set off like old-timers.

The two high-spirited imps at the rear, I like best; they are as friendly and mischievous as two small children. They could never be mean, and were great friends—these two, Knoll and Flap. Bamsie and Buster were immediately in front of them, then Leeu and Hiena, and then Oscar with Jonas and Turr.

Oscar's misdemeanour, however, caused him to forfeit his position of honour as squadron leader and also the position which tired least. Buster was promoted."



Above: A well-bred husky weighs between 70 and 100 lbs.

Right: Seals were shot along the way for dogmeat.



Every command has to be shouted, except one—"Hokaai!" (stop!). Even the slightest whisper of that word would bring the team to a dead stop. Their eagerness to relax was as natural as it is in humans.

Dogs do not strain at a drag rope, but start off at full force and pace, and should the sledge gliders be frozen to the snow and not move, then the whole team would stare back as if to say, "What's up? Foolish to forget the brake!"

Once started, they maintain a steady pace for 20-30 minutes after which they willingly respond to the whisper, "Hokaai". Then during the following ten minutes' rest, there are no fights, no arguments. Some pant, some dig with their front paws into the snow to loosen small pieces with which to quench their thirst. Then off again, and with 20-30 minute running periods they cover 20-30 miles per day.

Whilst on a trip, the huskies are left in the evenings still hitched to the drag rope, with a steel peg at each end to keep it taut. This last measure not only helps to keep the peace, but helps the driver to keep his dogs, for they love to run back home, and would leave you stranded many miles from base. Each dog is fed a cake of pummican and then lies down for his hours of rest. They lie with their backs to the wind which causes the snow to bank against their backs, and this snow owing to the air it contains forms a warm blanket insulating them against the blizzards.

During the summer the huskies were chained out-of-doors, and each received 5 lbs. of seal meat on alternate days.



Often, only two black holes will indicate the position of a husky's nose. He lies very quietly, and is not fed again until the storm has abated, because to break the snow-blanket would do more harm than the hunger. However, his wonderful ability to go into temporary hibernation until nature befriends him again saves his life during prolonged storm periods. He seems to like the cold, and never shivers. The colder it gets, the quieter he becomes, thus using his energy for higher internal combustion.

Despite the savage traits which they show on occasions, their love for man and their willingness to pull great loads in Nature's most rugged territory outweigh all their shortcomings. Owing to their reliability and the real company they afford, they will ever remain the Rolls-Royce of Antarctica.

After a strenuous haul there were no fights.

