

# High Tea in the High Arctic



By C/Supt. J.H. Reid (retired)

In the 1920s and 1930s in Canada, the RCMP was comprised of only a few thousand members striving to bring law and order to a nation of geographical enormity. In the southern areas, transportation was accomplished by horse, boat and car, while the Yukon and Northwest Territories relied on dogsled and boat — weather permitting. Patrols into the many isolated detachments and Eskimo camps were an arduous and often hazardous venture requiring many weeks of overland travel. It became very clear that a faster, more dependable mode of transport was essential if the Force was to become an effective police presence in the North.

In May 1937, the Air Section of the RCMP was born with the acquisition of four deHavilland Dragonfly aircraft. Since those humble beginnings, the Air Section has proven to be an indispensable asset in northern police work, and today modern turbine aircraft criss-cross the North, providing support service to detachment police personnel. Today the sight of an airborne police officer, in fixed wing or helicopter aircraft, is almost as common a sight as a police patrol car.

The early members of the Air Section were a hard working, adventuresome and tightly knit group of pioneers, enduring great hardships, risks, and isolation. But camaraderie and kinship prevailed over the years as evidenced by an event which happened in the late 1960s.

On a clear, cold day, an Otter on wheel skis departed Frobisher Bay with a mixed load of personnel, dogs, supplies, and komatik (dogsleds). Their destination was Spence Bay on Boothia Peninsula with stops at Pelly Bay in addition to detachment patrols enroute. The same day, an Otter departed Fort Smith heading for Pond Inlet on the northern tip of Baffin Island. One week later, the Frobisher Bay Otter was heading southward to home base after refuelling from 45 gallon drums at Spence Bay. At the same time, the Fort Smith Otter had finished a long week of patrols and was heading southbound from Pond Inlet. Overhearing a position fix request to the Shepard Bay radar, the pilot of the Fort Smith Otter realized that their comrades were nearby.

“Hey Jack, we’re only 10 miles apart, and I see you at two o’clock ... where are you going? ... how goes it? ... how’s the family?” Their idle chatter continued on the police frequency until one of the members made a seemingly impossible suggestion: “Why not have a cup of tea together and renew acquaintances?” Great laughter ensued since the nearest tea-room was 2,500 miles to the south. But soon a collective decision was made to land at a smooth spot on the barren lands near the Backs River and brew their own tea together.

After the dogs were fed, and members and dogs heeded the call of nature, a Primus stove was started and a big bucket of snow put on to boil. Tin mugs, sugar, dry milk and hardtack biscuits (Cartwheels) were passed around and a pound of Salada tea was added to the bucket. As the level of tea in the bucket went down, another shovel of snow was added to maintain the proper brew strength.

Eight burly RCMP members in their heavy Arctic gear huddled on the ice, north of the Arctic Circle, sipping tea and exchanging stories in the -35° temperatures. As the tethered dogs howled and the winds blew, the members renewed old friendships, exchanged news of family, transfers, recent trips, promotions, and savoured each other’s company. A poignant example of camaraderie and mutual respect among a close knit group of men who loved their chosen profession in the Canadian North.

After the “mug up” and after all had had their fill of tea, both aircrews continued onwards to their respective destinations, happy with having had a brief opportunity to renew old bonds and friendships. Perhaps years later some of these members had occasion to reminisce about their northern high tea when they found themselves surrounded by the soft music, dainty sandwiches and luxuries of a real tea room in the south. While enjoying such niceties, in the back of their minds would have to be the fonder memories of a strong cup of Salada tea from a bucket, among true friends and comrades, at -35° in the frozen barren lands. ❖