



## **The Lost Patrol of R.N.W.M.P. Insp. F.J. Fitzgerald**

From 1904 to 1921, it was an annual Royal Northwest Mounted Police tradition to make a trip from Dawson City, Yukon to Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories, approximately 620 miles, to deliver mail and dispatches. In December 1910, the Commissioner of the Force, Aylesworth Bowen Perry, asked instead that the trip be made from Fort McPherson to Dawson. The trip was to be led by Inspector Francis Joseph Fitzgerald. Accompanying him were Constable Richard O'Hara Taylor, Constable George Francis Kinney and their guide, Special Constable Sam Carter. The four set out from McPherson on December 21, 1910 but they never made it to Dawson. The trip became known as "The Lost Patrol."

Fitzgerald and his men left Fort McPherson, with fifteen dogs, three sleds and enough food for thirty days. The men felt no need to question whether they would reach their destination or not. They successfully completed the first leg of the journey and hired native Esau George to lead them through the next section. When he had completed his part of the trip, Fitzgerald let George go, trusting in Carter to lead them successfully to their destination. Unfortunately, Carter had been on only one patrol, in the opposite direction, and would soon prove to be an inefficient guide. By January 12, 1911, the patrol was lost for Carter was unable to find Forrest Creek which would lead them to Dawson. The team unsuccessfully travelled up and down several streams in search of the correct one. With only four days of regular rations remaining, Fitzgerald made a notation in his journal: "My last hope is gone...I should not have taken Carter's word that he knew the way from the Little Wind River." The following day, the patrol reversed their trail in the hopes of returning to Fort McPherson.

The trip back to McPherson proved to be difficult. Weak from lack of food and exhaustion, the team were able to walk only a few miles a day, sometimes not at all due to inclement weather conditions. Starving, frostbitten

and ill, the patrol trekked on. Between January 19 and February 5, ten of the dogs were killed for food. February 5, 1911, day 47 of this fatal patrol, was the date of the last entry in Inspector Fitzgerald's diary.

In Dawson, the Fitzgerald patrol was more than a month late in reaching their destination. Anxiously, a relief patrol was sent to locate the Mounties. Accompanying Corporal William John Dempster were ex-Constable Frederick Turner, Constable Jerry Fyfe, and Charles Stewart, a Métis from Fort McPherson. They left Dawson on February 28, 1911. On March 21, the lost patrol was found, apparently on their way back to Fort McPherson. Kinney and Taylor were dead, side by side at an open camp, Kinney of starvation and Taylor of a fatal, self-inflicted bullet wound in his head. The next day, Fitzgerald and Carter were found. Having left the other two in search of help, they finally succumbed to the cold and hunger, just 40 kilometres away from Fort McPherson. They would never find help.

Why did this patrol fail? Although no single, conclusive answer can be given, several factors contributed. Although Carter had made the trip once, and convinced himself and Fitzgerald he was competent, he did not in fact know the route from Fort McPherson to Dawson. After becoming lost, the team spent much time attempting to find the proper stream to follow. With temperatures that winter between -45 and -62 degrees Fahrenheit, and food sources of limited supply and nutritional value, the patrol was doomed to fail. By the time they were missed at Dawson City, and a search party was sent out, it was too late.

Patrols were still made annually until 1921, but because of the fatal trip of 1910-11, measures were taken to ensure that this tragedy never occurred again. Future patrols always hired an aboriginal guide. Cabins and regular caches were established along the trail in case of food shortages. Most importantly, the Forrest Creek Trail was clearly marked so that it would not be missed again. These measures proved successful.

All four men were buried at Fort McPherson on March 28, 1911. In 1938, the graves were cemented over into one large tomb, with cement posts at the four corners connected by a chain. In the centre is a memorial to the Royal Northwest Mounted Police Patrol of 1910.

## **Death wins on arctic trail**

**(From the newspaper of the day)**

**By Whitehorse Star on April 21, 1911**

Dawson, April 17 - From the weird wilds within the Arctic Circle comes a story of hardship, starvation and death seldom equaled and which reads like fiction but is only too true.

The bodies of four members of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police which composed the winter patrol party which was to come to Dawson from Fort Macpherson, near the mouth of the Mackenzie river, where it empties into the Arctic ocean, and return, have been found, each member of the party embraced in the chill arms of relentless death and clothed in the pure white mantle of Arctic winter.

News of the gruesome discovery and of the taking the bodies to Fort Macpherson where they were buried, reached Dawson this morning on the return of the relief party which left here on February 18th to seek for the missing patrol, then fully six weeks overdue.

The story of the attempted journey which ended in death to every member of the party is as follows:

On December 22 Inspector Fitzgerald, in charge of the party, Constables Carter, Taylor and Kinney with an Indian guide left Fort Macpherson for Dawson, a distance of approximately 550 miles. They had three teams of five dogs each and expected to reach Dawson about the middle of January, having with them provisions sufficient to last from 23 to 25 days, the length of time it was supposed would be consumed in making the journey.

For some unknown reason the Indian guide was discharge and sent back before the range between the Peel and upper reaches of the Klondike river had been reached. Failing to find the pass through the Rocky mountains the party became lost and wandered around the head of Wind river until January 18 when, realizing that they had but ten pounds of flour and eight pounds of bacon left, they started on the back track to Fort Macpherson, a distance of 250 miles. Then, according to evidence found by the relief party, began a series of hardships unequaled in the annals of the North.

Fighting their way through snow several feet deep, slow progress was necessarily made. All their grub gone, the dogs were killed and eaten one by one until the last of the fifteen had gone to keep the life blood in circulation and when the last dog had been eaten the buckskin thongs of the dogs harness were eaten.

By the time the party had reached this terrible state they were within 35 miles of Fort Macpherson but Taylor and Kinney were in a dying condition, so they were left b Fitzgerald and Carter who pushed on, evidently hoping to reach the fort from which place relief would have been sent to their dying comrades. But ten miles nearer the Mecca of safety the two latter were overcome. Carter died first and his body showed that Fitzgerald had "laid out" his comrade in the snow, folded his hands peacefully across his breast and covered his face with a handkerchief.

Alone, the brave officer then attempted to continue the hopeless journey, but the death angel was dogging his footsteps and only a few hundred yards from where he had left the body of Carter, Inspector Fitzgerald gave up his life, having scratched on paper a crude will, leaving his earthly possessions to his aged mother who is living in Ireland. His body, like those of the others, was found on the trail covered with snow.

When the party failed to reach Dawson when expected, little worry was caused as it was confidently expected they would show up soon, the same trip between the two points having been made annually in midwinter for several previous years.

Not until the Indian guide who had started with the party and turned back, arrived in Dawson about the middle of February was it known for certain that the patrol had left Fort Macpherson for sure. The Indian had returned to the fort and several das later had left with other Indians, making the trip to Dawson in good time and was surprised to learn that the police had not arrived. It was then that the relief expedition was started out from Dawson, its members being Corporal Dempster, Constables Fife and Turner and Indian Charley Stewart.

The latter party made the trip on record time, being gone from Dawson but forty nine days, 53 days being the best time previously made on the round trip.

As the last record left by Inspector Fitzgerald was dated February 5th, the last survivor of the ill-fated party had been dead more than three weeks when the relief party left Dawson. The latter party found the mail with which the lost party had started. It consisted of a few letters from Hershel Island and from Fort Macpherson.

### **WOULDN'T TURN BACK - Postscript**

In later years speculation would be that Fitzgerald had simply missed the trail but, being a proud man, could not bring it upon himself to back track to Ft. McPherson. How would it look, he may have thought, an officer of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police having left on the annual Dawson City patrol, carrying the mail, suddenly arrives back at the starting point saying he can't find the trail?

Regardless, the amount of time lost looking for the trail and a misjudgment in the amount of food needed for the trip were a fatal combination. By the time Fitzgerald decided to turn back it was too late. After traveling nearly 1,000 km (620 miles) and spending 53 days on the trail fighting their way

through several feet of snow during one of the coldest winters on record, they died within 56 km (35 miles) of Fort McPherson.

The route of the Dempster Highway (named after Corporal William Dempster) today follows approximately the route that the Fitzgerald patrol would have followed had they not missed the pass through the Richardson Mountains and become lost.

The Northwest Mounted Police, and later the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, continued patrols along the same route until 1921, without the loss of another life.



**FITZGERALD, FRANCIS JOSEPH**, RNWMP officer and soldier; b. 12 April 1869 in Halifax, second son of John Fitzgerald, a telegraph company employee, and Elizabeth Pickles; d. on or about 14 Feb. 1911 beside the Peel River south of Fort McPherson, N.W.T.

Little is known of Frank Fitzgerald's early life. He served with the militia in Halifax before leaving his job there as a clerk in a store to enlist as a constable in the North-West Mounted Police on 19 Nov. 1888. Most of his next nine years were spent in the Maple Creek District (Sask.), where he found that the monotonous military routine of life at a police post failed to satisfy his adventurous spirit. During this period he did not distinguish himself in any way.

Fitzgerald's opportunity for advancement came in 1897 when he was selected to join a small party under the command of Inspector John Douglas Moodie, whose task was to chart an overland route from Edmonton to the Yukon gold-fields via northern British Columbia and the Pelly River, a region largely unknown to whites. The party left Edmonton in September 1897. Travelling on horseback and by dog sled and canoe over almost insurmountable obstacles, it reached its objective, Fort Selkirk on the Yukon River, in October 1898, having covered about 1,000 miles. During this epic journey, Fitzgerald exemplified those qualities necessary for survival in the north. He was resourceful and tough, both physically and mentally, characteristics that would further his police career. Moodie praised Fitzgerald's performance in his report to his superiors. As a result he was promoted corporal in 1899.

The following year Fitzgerald was given leave of absence, along with other members of the NWMP, to join the 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles, part of the force sent to fight in the South African War under the command of Lawrence William Herchmer. Once again his good service was brought to the attention of Commissioner Aylesworth Bowen Perry in Regina, and he was raised to sergeant after his return to Canada. He went to England in 1902 with the NWMP contingent for the coronation of Edward VII.

In the summer of 1903 Fitzgerald and a constable were sent to Herschel Island in the western Arctic to establish a police post following reports that the crews of the whaling ships that wintered there were demoralizing the native population. This isolated location was the most northerly station of the force (renamed the Royal North-West Mounted Police in 1904), and it was to be Fitzgerald's base for six years, during which time he became a highly experienced northern traveller. With tact he put a stop to whisky trading and collected customs, thereby asserting Canadian sovereignty under difficult conditions and to the entire satisfaction of his superiors. His only links with the outside world were the whaling ships that visited occasionally, police whaleboats from Fort McPherson in the Mackenzie delta, and a police patrol by dog sled from that post. Relieved in the summer of 1909, he went to Regina, but in July 1910 he returned to Fort McPherson.

While at Herschel, Fitzgerald established a marital relationship according to native custom, as did many other white men in the north. From his union with Lena Oonalina, an Inuit woman, a daughter was born in the summer of 1909. Fitzgerald had wanted to have the association legitimized by the local Church of England missionary, Charles Edward Whittaker, but was dissuaded from doing so by the commanding officer of the Mackenzie River District, Arthur Murray Jarvis. Meanwhile, unaware of this situation, Fitzgerald's superiors in Regina had secured his advancement to inspector on 1 Dec. 1909. It was a well-merited promotion, one based on outstanding service and not, as often was the case at the time, on patronage. However, in the opinion of white society, it was unacceptable for an officer of the RNWMP to have a liaison with a native woman, legitimate or otherwise. Had his superiors known of Fitzgerald's situation, they would never have recommended his promotion. Once they found out, they most likely would have demanded his resignation. It was his death that would save him from almost certain disgrace and keep his secret from becoming widely known until several years later.

In late 1910 Fitzgerald was selected for the contingent to be sent to George V's coronation. To get him out of the north in time, it was decided that he would head the annual patrol that winter from Fort McPherson to Dawson, a distance of some 470 miles. Given the competitive spirit within the police, Fitzgerald undoubtedly saw this trip as an opportunity to break the time record set by an earlier patrol. He therefore decided to lighten the load on his sleds by reducing food and equipment, confident that the quantities normally taken would not be needed.

On 21 Dec. 1910 Fitzgerald left Fort McPherson with constables George Francis Kinney and Richard O'Hara Taylor. They were accompanied by Samuel Carter, a former constable who was to

act as guide. Carter, however, had only travelled the route in the opposite direction, four years before. From the outset, the patrol was slowed by heavy snow and temperatures as low as minus 62 degrees. Worst of all, Carter was unable to find the route across the Richardson Mountains. Nine days were wasted searching for it. With supplies dwindling, Fitzgerald reluctantly had to admit defeat and return to Fort McPherson. The patrol now faced a desperate struggle. As food ran out, they began eating their dogs. In the last entry in his diary, on 5 February, Fitzgerald recorded that five were left and the men were so weak they could travel only a short distance. Within a few days all four died, three from starvation and exposure and one, Taylor, by suicide. Their emaciated bodies were found in March a few miles from the safety of Fort McPherson, where they were buried.

Fitzgerald was criticized for overconfidence, failing to take a native guide, reducing rations, and not turning back sooner when Carter was unable to find the trail. Time, however, has blurred these failings of the Lost Patrol, as it became known, and Fitzgerald and his men are largely remembered for their heroic struggle to survive. Following the tragedy, Commissioner Perry issued instructions for emergency caches of food to be left along the route from Dawson to Fort McPherson, and for all patrols by the police over routes unknown to them to be accompanied by experienced guides.



*Corporal (later Inspector)  
William John Duncan Dempster*

### **Insp. William Dempster (led the search party)**

The Dempster Highway in the Yukon was named after Inspector William John Duncan Dempster (# O.233) for his service in the north. Dempster served with the Force from 1897 until 1934 and spent over 36 years serving in the Yukon. He was considered a master of the wilderness.

**Photos of the area and the relief patrol led by then Cpl Dempster.**

