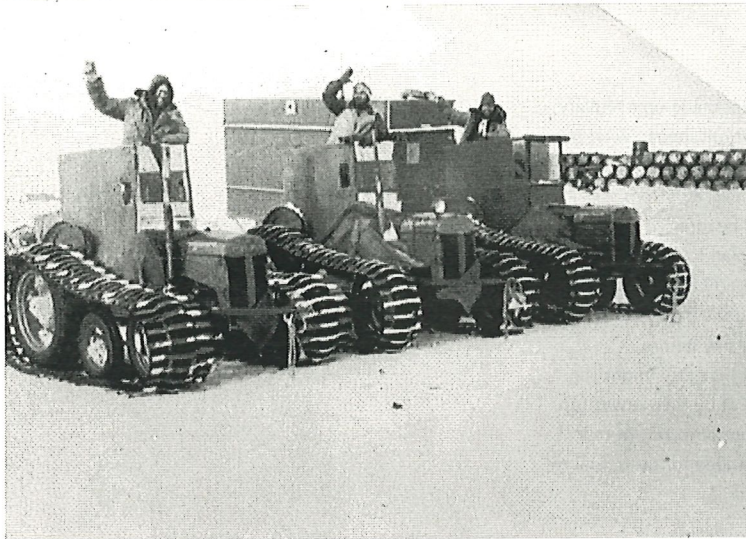


Arrival at the Pole by tractor



Sir Edmund Hillary, Derek Wright and Murray Ellis arriving at the South Pole in their Ferguson tractors on 20 January 1958.

Sir Edmund Hillary leads New Zealand party to the Pole



Dogs vs Tractors on Antarctica

On 4 January 1958 Sir Edmund Hillary and his New Zealand party reached the South Pole. They were the first to do so overland since Scott in 1912, and the first to reach it in motor vehicles. The party set out for the Pole after laying food and fuel depots for the British crossing party of the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition (TAE). It was an arduous journey - long hours were spent battling through sastrugi (wind-eroded snow ridges), soft snow and dangerous crevasses. But what is often remembered is Hillary's determination to proceed with the journey

without the express permission of the TAE, and against the instructions of the committee coordinating New Zealand's contribution.

Discussions with Sir Vivian Fuchs and the Ross Sea Committee

In July 1955, just a month after being appointed to lead the New Zealand component of the TAE, Hillary raised the idea of carrying on to the Pole with the expedition's overall commander, British explorer Dr Vivian Fuchs. At this time neither Fuchs nor the Ross Sea Committee, which was coordinating New Zealand's contribution, raised any objection. But in a series of phone calls and telegrams in early 1957 the Executive of the Ross Sea Committee cautioned Hillary against continuing on to the Pole without Fuchs' express permission. They also knocked back his ambitious plans for the New Zealand parties over the spring and summer. Hillary was surprised, but had not sought the Committee's permission for activities and so did not see their response as an obstacle. In his autobiography, *Nothing venture, nothing win*, he commented:

I continued as though the exchange of messages had never occurred ... It was becoming clear to me that a supporting role was not my particular strength. Once we had done all that was asked of us - and a good bit more - I could see no reason why we shouldn't be organising a few interesting challenges for ourselves.

Party sets out to lay food and fuel depots

The journey was still firmly in Hillary's mind when the southern party set out from Scott Base on 11 November 1957 to lay food and fuel depots. In November, as the party neared the site of Depot 480, they received another surprising message from the Ross Sea Committee. This time the full committee had met and indicated that they would give their support to the Pole journey following approval from London. Hillary later claimed to have misread the message - taking it that formal approval had already been given.

MCH 2009k

page
125

New Year. As the depot neared completion Hillary advised Fuchs and the Committee that his party intended pressing further south to mark a path through the crevassed areas.



Edmund Hillary

Dash to the Pole begins

At 8.30 p.m. on 20 December the party, at this point made up of Hillary, Murray Ellis, Peter Mulgrew, Jim Bates and Derek Wright, began what has been described as the final 'dash to the pole'. When they stopped at 6 a.m. on 21 December Hillary received yet another message from the Committee insisting they stay at Depot 700. Again he ignored their request. But he did alert Fuchs and noted that his plan to continue to the

Pole could be abandoned if Fuchs needed their assistance. On 24 December the party received a reassuring Christmas message from Fuchs in which he approved of them marking the path further south. Hillary responded with further news of their progress, then waited another day before proceeding further south. It wasn't until 28 December that Fuchs, concerned that his party might run out of fuel, asked Hillary to abandon the bid for the Pole and lay another depot. But by then it was too late. Hillary replied that they had insufficient food or fuel to lay an additional depot or to return to Depot 700 and await his arrival, which had been significantly delayed. Hillary arranged for more fuel to be taken to Depot 700 and then continued the journey south.

Ferguson tractors

The party completed their journey to the Pole in three converted Ferguson tractors with 'windshields but no roofs'. Hillary's official biographer, Alexa Johnston, has likened the journey to driving 'across Antarctica in convertibles'. Two sledges and a caboose – essentially a caravan on skis – containing bunks, cooking and radio facilities, also survived the journey to the Pole.

Arrival at the Pole

After 14 days battling through sastrugi, soft snow and crevasses, the party finally sighted the South Pole at 8 p.m. on 3 January 1958. They were exhausted, having slept for only a few hours at a time since leaving Scott Base. So after sending off the code word 'Rhubarb' to indicate they had the Pole in sight, they went to sleep. They completed the final part of the journey the next morning, arriving at the South Pole station at 12.30 p.m.

As the party was being congratulated on reaching the Pole, the media abroad began to question whether Hillary's decision had put the entire expedition at risk. Speculation of a rift between Fuchs and Hillary only increased after news reached the media that Hillary, concerned that Fuchs' party was running well behind schedule, had suggested he abandon the crossing and return the following year. But when Fuchs met Hillary at the South Pole on 20 January there was no evidence of animosity between the pair –

Fuchs' first words to Hillary were 'Damned glad to see you, Ed'. In the days that followed Fuchs called on Hillary's knowledge of the terrain between the Pole and Scott Base to bring the crossing to a safe conclusion. Fuchs' party arrived at Scott Base on 2 March 1958, having completed the first successful trans-Antarctic crossing.

In an interview with *Time* magazine in 2003, Hillary compared his experience in the Antarctic to his experience climbing Everest:

Oh, no [it wasn't harder than Everest]. It was different in many different ways. The problems of snow and ice were similar, but on a big mountain like Everest, there were more immediate dangers – the possibility of avalanche or falling off the mountain or going down a crevasse. In the Antarctic, the temperatures on the whole were colder, the distances were vast and it was a much longer sort of business, really. So in our trip to the South Pole, we were under constant tension, for long, long periods. For hours we'd be under great tension. Whereas on a big mountain it would be for short periods.

Further information

Books

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- David L. Harrowfield, *Call of the Ice: Fifty years of New Zealand in Antarctica*, David Bateman Ltd, Auckland, 2007
- Alexa Johnston, *Sir Edmund Hillary: an extraordinary life*, Penguin Books, Auckland, 2006
- A S Helm and I H Miller. *Antarctica*, R. E. Owen, Government Printer, Wellington, 1964

- Commonwealth Trans–Antarctic Expedition (Wikipedia)
- The Trans–Antarctic Expedition (50th anniversary of Scott Base)
- Sir Edmund Hillary (Time magazine)
- Explorer Hillary arrives at South Pole (BBC)

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