

Running with huskies

JOHN HOGG



Husky dogs, and the expeditioners who worked with them, were key to the success of the early Australian Antarctic programme, during its pioneering exploration of Antarctica in the 1950s and 60s.

From the humble toe-hold stations at Mawson, Davis and Wilkes, two-sled dog teams hauled four men, their supplies and equipment, across thousand of kilometres of unmapped polar ice, to see what was there. They had no satellites, no aerial photography and little knowledge of what lay beyond the horizon of the ice cap.

In the winter months, the continent expanded with the sea ice, allowing sledging parties to visit otherwise inaccessible places and discover the wealth of Antarctic wildlife and wilderness. On a good surface a dog team might, in a day, cover 50 km over sea ice or 30 km on the plateau, with 'doggers' running, pushing, hauling, towed along on skis, or occasionally riding the sled.

However, technological advances such as satellite imagery and fast, reliable mechanical transport, led to a decline in the need for deep-field exploration and the support of dog teams. Dogs were withdrawn from Davis and Wilkes/Casey in the 60s and 70s, but they remained at Mawson until the early 90s; being the safest method of sea ice transport for the annual census of emperor penguins at Taylor Glacier, Fold Island and Kloa rookery, some 500 km west of the station.

Dog-running was a demanding task, but few 'dogmen' had any experience of working dogs. The role was additional to the expeditioner's prime job and, over the years, was performed by tradesmen, scientists, doctors, cooks and radio operators. With up to 30 dogs on station at a time, the feeding, watering, health care, training, breeding and culling of the teams could easily consume more hours per week than the dogman's normal job.

Dogs were fed pemmican – a mix of meat meal, bone meal, fat and cereal in a compressed block – and table scraps, supplemented by seal meat which the doggers and their assistants killed and butchered at haul-outs along the coast (taking seals ceased in 1980).

Dog runners often selected running mates based on their appearance from behind.

Sleds, lashings, harnesses, traces, and other dog gear also required constant maintenance. The extremely dry air caused hickory sleds to become brittle, and the rawhide lashings that held them together needed regular adjustment or replacement. Nails and screws were not used, as flexibility was paramount when moving over sastrugi, rafted ice, or other rough terrain.

Harnesses were sewn on station from canvas webbing. It was not unusual for a dog to chew or even eat its harness or any other chewable item (including the rawhide sled lashings). In 1977 'Deefa' underwent surgery to remove a bowel blockage; several centimetres of handmade harness were removed.

Injuries were not uncommon, both on and off station. Dog societies are hierarchical and fights would occasionally break out in which the lead dog would inflict some swift discipline on laggards or potential rivals, and various members of the team would take the chance to settle old scores. It might take four humans a couple of minutes to quell a serious affray, during which a dog could suffer serious injury and loss of spirit. The best way to break up a fight was to grab the dog by its collar and tail and throw it out of the mêlée. Once removed, a sensible dog would stay out, but some of the more spirited would dash back in at the first opportunity to continue the fun.

Overwhelmingly, those who ran with the dogs become misty eyed and excited when asked to recall their experiences. Dogs and humans developed a close bond through shared experience and close inter-dependence. The dogs, like their human masters, varied in their response to leadership and management. Some responded well to singing, laughter and high spirits, some to the crack of the whip and the language of the bullocky. Some were niggardly opportunists. Some were stalwart workers.

Dog runners quickly got to know an individual's name and temperament and preferred running mates purely from the appearance from behind – fluffy hindquarters, tail curled to the left or the right, pigeon toed, one ear up or down. Usually, simply shouting a dog's name would be enough to egg it on to straighten its trace and pull its weight. Dogs and humans worked as colleagues, team-mates, partners, competitors and friends, and enjoyed a slobbery embrace and wrestle to de-ice their fur at the end of a long day's sledging, rejoicing in the fatigue and the spectacular surroundings.

A husky contributed effectively for about eight years before the effects of hard work and the climate began to erode its stamina and resilience. Few dogs celebrated their 10th birthday. When the day came, the dogman would take the dog out on the sea-ice with a pemmican block and the Smith and Wesson .38 revolver, and only one returned. In later years dogs were euthanased by the station doctor.



Huskies were used at Mawson until 1993, as the safest method of sea ice transport for the annual census of emperor penguins at Taylor Glacier, Fold Island and Kloa rookery, 500 km away.

Stories abound of huskies' abilities to detect crevasses or thin sea-ice, and to navigate. Lead dogs were known for their uncanny ability to set a pace and direction. 'Dan', leader of the 'Kelly Gang', led a sledging party for an hour in total darkness right to the snow ramp of the Taylor Glacier campsite, despite the frantic protestations of the dog runners that he was heading too far west.

With the decline in the use of the huskies for official high-profile field work, and the development of the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty at the start of the 90s, the future of sled dogs in Antarctica looked grim. The Protocol took the position that high-level environmental protection allowed no place for 'introduced species', and that there was an unacceptable risk that dogs may harbour diseases which could infect seals.

In 1992 and 1993 the dogs at Mawson were returned to Australia and quarantined in a purpose-built enclosure at the Antarctic Division headquarters in Kingston, Tasmania. Dogs over six years old were pensioned off and adopted by Australian families, while the younger dogs were flown to Minnesota in the United States, where they joined the dog teams at the Ely Outward Bound School. The last of the Mawson huskies brought to Australia died in 2001, but their bloodline continues in the wilds of North America.

—TOM MAGGS
Manager, Environmental Policy and Protection, AAD



Dog running was a demanding task that required excellent physical fitness. Doggers would run, push or haul the sled, occasionally ride it, or sometimes get towed along on skis.



Mawson's huskies were sent to Australia on the *Aurora Australis* in 1992 and 1993 as a result of the Environmental Protocol. The last husky in Australia died in 2001.