

W.J.D. Dempster (1876-1964)

William John Duncan Dempster, veteran of 37 years' northern service with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, was born in Wales on October 21, 1876. Emigrating to Canada as a young man, he joined the N.W.M.P. in 1897 and the next year was posted to the Yukon, where he spent the rest of his career.

Between 1898 and 1934, Dempster served in a dozen different Yukon communities, but his name received national attention in connection with the famous "Lost Patrol" of 1910-1911. Beginning in 1904, the Mounted Police sent a mid-winter patrol from Dawson to Fort McPherson in the Mackenzie Delta and return, a distance of about 800 km each way, to carry the mail



Dempster's Patrol preparing to leave Dawson in search of the Lost Patrol, February 27, 1911. Public Archives Canada/C 3070.



Inspector Dempster. R.C.M.P. Photo no. 4313.

and emphasize Canada's sovereignty over the region. The route was a most arduous one, following a complicated series of rivers and creeks and flat, treeless valleys, as well as some mountainous terrain. Dempster joined these patrols in 1907-1908.

The patrol of 1910-1911, of which Dempster was not a member, was commanded by Inspector F.J. Fitzgerald. This patrol travelled the familiar route in reverse, from Fort McPherson. Lacking a knowledgeable guide, Fitzgerald became lost, and in the late winter of 1911 he and the other three members of the patrol died on the trail.

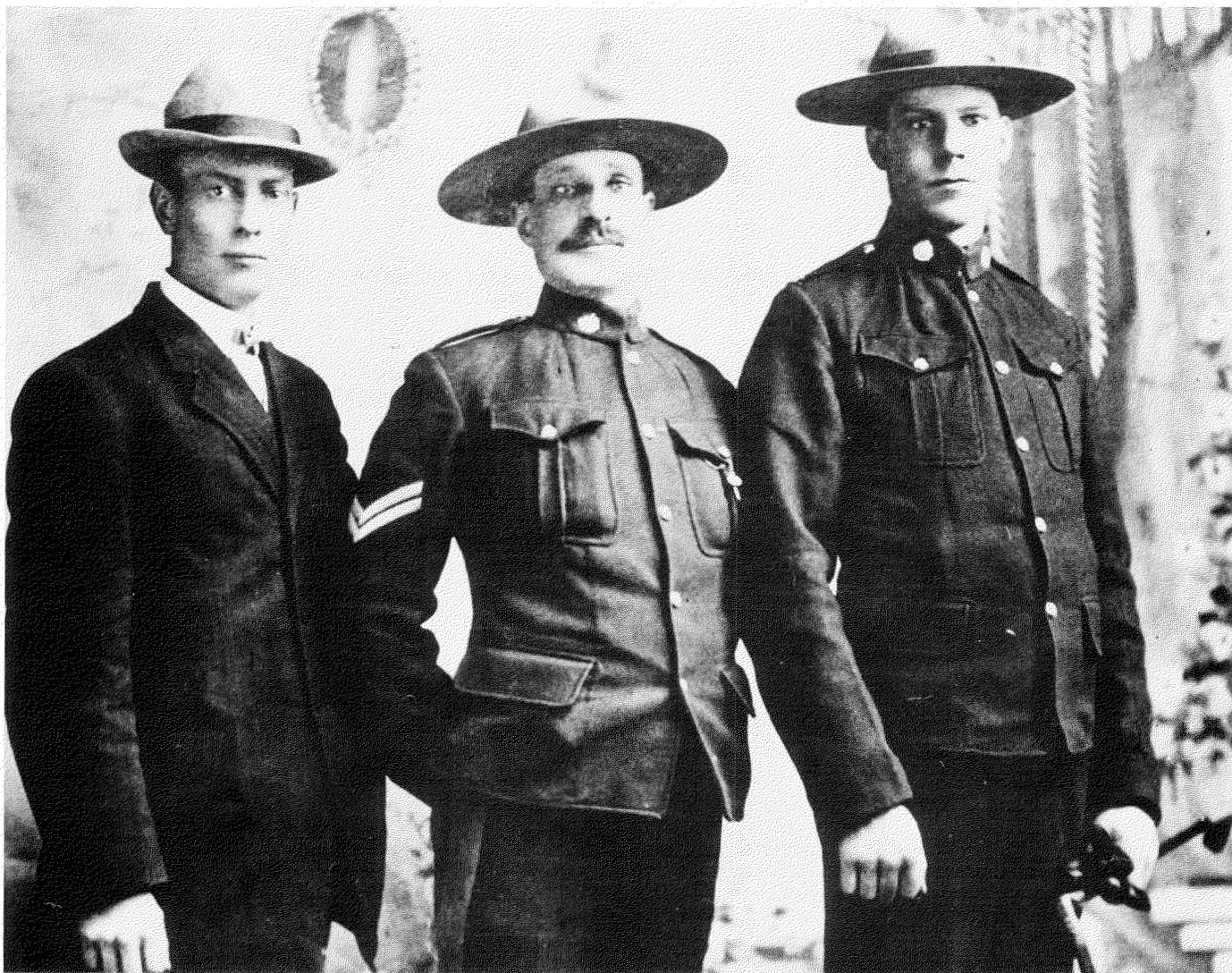
When Fitzgerald did not arrive at Dawson as expected,

Dempster, then a corporal, was sent out with two other members of the force and an Indian guide to find and rescue the patrol. In viciously cold weather (the wind chill factor falling on occasion to -80°F) he headed toward Fort McPherson. When he set out he believed that nothing serious could have happened to a man as experienced in northern work as Fitzgerald was, but as he covered the trail he began to discover ominous signs of trouble — old campsites that indicated that Fitzgerald had lost his way, an abandoned dog harness and other gear, and "the paws of a dog cut off at the knee joint, also a shoulder blade which had been cooked and the flesh evidently eaten." On March 21 and 22 he discovered the bodies.

After this disaster Dempster was ordered to make the route safe for future patrols, and thus he spent much of the winter of 1912-1913 establishing supply caches, building shelter cabins, and blazing the trail by making "lobsticks" — trees stripped bare except for their top branches and two branches sticking out lower down, to make them evident as trail markers — something that might have saved Fitzgerald's life had it been done earlier.



R.N.W.M.P. Patrol of 1909-1910. Public Archives Canada/Neg. no. PA 29622.



Corporal Dempster, center. Courtesy of R.C.M.P.

It was ironic that Fitzgerald's name became better known in southern Canada than Dempster's, for it was Dempster who set the record for fastest patrol over the route — 19 days in connection with the Lost Patrol, and later, in 1920, 14 days over the same ground. But unlike Fitzgerald, Dempster avoided the publicity associated with disasters, for he did not take unnecessary chances in an attempt to set records, and he was not too proud to employ Indian guides or admit the fact on the rare occasions when he lost his way.

A less well-known but equally important patrol carried out by Dempster was in connection with the Canadian government's wish to locate a route from the Porcupine River to Dawson that did not go through the United States. In 1917 he was ordered to find such a route. Travelling through the heart of the formidable Ogilvie mountain range, a region that had been little explored, he made the trip in less than three weeks. Indians his party met along the route expressed surprise when it appeared, claiming that "this trail has never been travelled over by white men or Indians, although different parts are travelled by different Indians." But despite the relative ease with which Dempster accomplished this mission, the difficulty of the terrain precluded the trail's further use, and no more patrols were sent in that direction.

In 1926 Dempster married Catherine Smith of Sydney, Nova Scotia, and the couple had a son and a daughter. When he retired in 1934 with the rank of inspector, he was the most widely known and respected Mounted Policeman in the North and was generally held to be the best trail man in the Yukon. Before he died on October 25, 1964, at the age of 88, he had the satisfaction of knowing that the new road from Dawson to Aklavik was to be named, in his honour, the Dempster Highway.

FURTHER READINGS

- MORRISON, W.R. 1985. *Showing the Flag: The Mounted Police and Canadian Sovereignty in the North, 1894-1925*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- NORTH, DICK. 1978. *The Lost Patrol*. Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Company.

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