

THE POLAR MYSTERY

The controversial debate over who completed the first expedition to the North Pole still rages on today. But British explorer Tom Avery's record-breaking journey has helped to turn Polar history on its head

➔ The history of the North Pole will forever be frozen in mystery. Alongside the inspirational tales of heroism and bravery which echo through the early expeditions of explorers who set out to reach the end of the Earth in the first half of the Twentieth century, there lies a darker, more controversial side: whispers of lies, vanity and scandal. And it is into this whirlpool of deceit that young British explorer Tom Avery dared to lead in 2005. "I didn't know much about the North Pole's history, because all our great British heroes like Shackleton and Scott made their names in the South Pole," says Avery, 33, from London, who in 2002 himself became the youngest Briton to ski to the South Pole. "We still don't even know for sure who the first person to get to the North Pole was."

DISPUTED CLAIM

The great mystery began in 1909 when the American explorer Rear Admiral Robert Edwin Peary claimed to have become the first man to reach the North Pole by surface travel on April 6, using Eskimo dogs and sleds. He set out with 133 dogs, 19 sleds and 24 men, who helped to drive him close to the Pole before turning back, leaving Peary and a select few to complete the final push.

But his claim was soon disputed, largely because of the unlikely speed of his expedition. Peary's journey from Cape Columbia on Ellesmere Island in the Canadian Arctic to the North Pole took just 37 days. Even modern expeditions take around 60 days. In Peary's log books, as he approached the North Pole, his speeds strangely doubled. As a result, many historians believe that it was the late Brit, Sir Mallory Herbert, who made the first undisputed surface journey to the North Pole in April 1968.

UNSOLVABLE MYSTERY

Next month marks the centenary of Peary's disputed journey, dragging the debate into the spotlight again. Peary's claims can never be



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proven. The South Pole sits on the fixed landmass of the Antarctic continent, so the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen was able to leave a tent there as proof that he was the first man to reach it in 1911. But the North Pole sits in the middle of the frozen Arctic Ocean, on constantly shifting ice floes which float for up to 20 miles per day. "Unlike the South Pole where there is now a big barbers' pole, if you left something at the North Pole, within an hour it would just float south," says Avery. "It's like a giant conveyor belt."

But Avery became convinced that Peary could have reached the North Pole in 37 days. "Some thought he cheated and made it up and others believed him," says Avery. "But the more I read, the more I realised what an

amazing man he was. So I decided to recreate his trip to see if it could be done in 37 days."

And so, on March 20 2005, Avery set out on a dog-sledging journey to the North Pole along with his colleagues Hugh Dale-Harris, George Wells, Andrew Gerber and Matty McNair.

"We set off from the same place as Peary, used the same breed of dogs, built identical wooden sleds and navigated by watch, sun and wind," says Avery. "The only difference was that we got resupplied by air, instead of having an army of 24 men carrying supplies for us. But the task in hand was the same."

STARVATION DIET

Facing temperatures of minus 50 degrees – cold enough for Avery's breath to freeze his eyelids shut – the team often found their route to the Pole blocked by crumpled walls of ice called 'pressure ridges' and inky-black pools of water, known as 'leads'. During the 413 nautical mile journey, Wells fell into an open lead, Gerber suffered septic frostbite and Avery, weakened by the intense physical exertion which burned up to 10,000 calories a day, got so tired he fell asleep skiing. "We were effectively starving ourselves," says Avery.

Things got so bad that a delayed air resupply brought them to the brink of eating their dogs for food. But after 36 days and 22 hours of hardship, they reached the North Pole – four hours faster than Peary had allegedly done. "Every direction we looked was due South," said Avery. "It was an incredible moment."

So where does this leave the great polar mystery? "Having followed in their footsteps I am more convinced than ever that Peary was the first man to reach the North Pole," says Avery. "What we achieved doesn't prove that Peary did it. But we have finally shown that he could have. And for that, I think we've done the old guy a favour." ☺



Robert Edwin Peary

'To The End of the Earth' by Tom Avery is out soon, priced £18.99 (www.atlantic-books.co.uk). Tom is appearing at the Cruise Show on March 21-22 (www.cruiseshow.co.uk)