

*Blizzard conditions on Alaska's Arctic coast bury sleds and tents in no time!*



RETRACING

STORY AND IMAGES BY JOE HENDERSON

part 3

# LEEFFINGWELL

# MANY PEOPLE HAVE ACCOMPLISHED GREAT THINGS BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T KNOW THEY COULDN'T.



This quote describes Ernest deKoven Leffingwell, the great explorer/scientist (1875-1971) whom mapped much of Alaska's arctic. His exploration and contributions to geological science were admirable, to say the least! He never publicized his adventures or sought glory and riches. He just had relentless energy and a brilliant scientific mind. But the question is: why he would spend seven years of his life performing this daunting task in a frozen wilderness?

I have spent the past three winters re-tracing Leffingwell's footsteps with my team of 22 Alaskan malamutes. The team and I traveled through the same river canyons Leffingwell had, struggled up the same mountain passes and camped where he had 100 years ago. The hardships Leffingwell endured were fresh on my mind when the cold arctic wind stung my cheeks as we crossed the Sagavanirktok River leaving Deadhorse, Alaska.

After a few days of tough traveling on the tundra, the dogs set their big paws on the smooth ice of the Beaufort Sea. We mushed several miles out on the sea taking advantage of the smooth ice and a stout wind at our backs that pushed us along. As darkness settled on us, we headed inland. However, along with darkness, a blizzard found us and blinded our view of the shore, where we had planned to camp for the night. Also between the shoreline and us was a barrage of head-high, knee-busting, paw-piercing icebergs. I am sure Mother Nature has a sense of humor, but I couldn't find it in myself to

From inside of the tent, the sound of the wind was deafening. The blizzard was having her way shaking and hammering the canvas, but I managed to get the wood stove burning. The aroma of boiling coffee and caribou steaks sizzling in a skillet soon filled the air. In the midst of an outright savage environment, the tent was no longer a piece of cold, grey-white canvas, but was transformed into a comfortable, warm and hospitable abode. It's strange how the simple things in life, like food and shelter are taken for granted. But these particular things become a little more noticeable in the arctic, and they suddenly become exceptionally important, cherished and savored when your life immediately depends on them.

The following morning brought an unusual silence. The wind had died and the malamutes' lively morning howl sounded muffled. After a blizzard, the snow has a way of inconveniently covering everything in hard snowdrifts. Getting out of a tent enveloped in this solid white matter can be interesting. Greeted with a wall of hard packed snow after unzipping the tent door, I punched an opening through the snowdrift with my fist towards the top of the door, wiggled out, and slid down the drift. I am sure the dogs were quite impressed as they watched me squeeze out of that hole like a contortionist in a circus. Standing up I scanned the landscape to get an idea of where we were. Nothing looked familiar. There were no landmarks or hills, just flat terrain with wheat brown grass protruding

was standing on Leffingwell's cabin doorsteps.

I have to take back the hundred times I cussed the skin blistering wind, and be thankful she drove us off course, causing us to find the cabin where Leffingwell started his Historic expeditions. What a coincidence we found our way through a cursed blizzard, over 50 miles of sea ice, and through a pinnacle barrier of icebergs, to a cabin on an island built 100 years ago.

As I stood on Leffingwell's old doorsteps, it gave me a new perspective in the magnitude of his expedition. I am sure Leffingwell felt quite small in comparison to the vast arctic and he must have known how easy it was to get lost like so many other explorers. I remember an article in the Kansas City Star newspaper dated September 6, 1907 stating that Leffingwell and two other members of his party had left the ship in February with 60 days' provisions for the supposed continent north of Alaska's arctic coast. They have been gone for 70 days. One of their dog teams had returned but it's feared the three men had met death in the frozen north.

Lost arctic explorers was the theme of the day in the early 1900's, but to everyone's surprise Leffingwell and his party fared relatively well and wasn't lost at all. Leffingwell's expedition (Anglo-American Polar Expedition) sailed from San Francisco on May 22 1906, in a sealing schooner named the Duchess of Bedford. The expedition's purpose was to verify land be-

laugh about the barricade of ice. We had no choice, we had to get to land and wait out the windstorm that was salivating to get to us. So the dogs went right to work busting their way over the jumbled and twisted ice.

After a duel between the team and nature's little devilish joke, we come to a halt on the beach next to a large driftwood log lying perpendicular to the wind. It looked like a good place to dig-in for the night. I pulled the tent out of the sled, set it up alongside the log and fed the dogs. Afterwards, the blizzard came in full blast, throwing dry sandy snow over the log and against the side of the tent. It was time to get out of the winds way and crawl into my "home."

through the snow out of the tundra.

On the horizon I noticed a strange object, something that didn't belong. It resembled a boat. Why would a boat would be lying out in the middle of the tundra, I thought. Curiosity grabbed me and I headed off in a trot toward this "boat." Getting closer I realized it was the remnants of a cabin, one for which I have been searching for two years. But, the cabin I had been looking for was on an island; surely the wind didn't push us offshore so far that we landed on an island. How could I have made such a complete navigational blunder! Taking a closer look at the old structure, and the few walls that were standing, I realized this was it; I

lieved to exist north of Alaska's arctic coast. Leffingwell was especially interested in geology of the arctic and was quoted in the Kansas City Star, "My special work will be the study of geology of the country, which exists there, I am practically certain. Whalers and Eskimos driven out of their course by storms have reported that a body of land was there. It must be for the most part a desolate country of wastes of bare rock, with little vegetation growing."

Because of strong head winds and currents, the ship stopped near Flaxman Island off Alaska's north shore. There Leffingwell, Capt. Einar Mikkelsen and 8 others of their party wintered. In the summer of 1907, the ship was unsea-

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*Joe's expedition team in front of one of Leffingwell's triangulation stations from the early 1900's.*



Leffingwell Expedition, continued from page 9

worthy to continue, so the expedition ended and the crew went home by a whaling vessel. Leffingwell and his partner Mikkelson stayed and salvaged material from the wrecked ship and built their cabin. Mikkelson went back to civilization that fall and Leffingwell remained. One of the things that Leffingwell had salvaged from the ship that I recognized from old photos was a large steel water tank. And there it lay beside the dilapidated cabin. Along with the steel water tank was lumber, dogsled runners, and other ship material neatly stacked as if Leffingwell had every intention to come back and resume his explorations.

I often wonder what drove Leffingwell. Was it ambition? If so, why didn't he publicize his work and adventures? According to his granddaughter, Terry Grebens, Leffingwell hardly talked about his expedition. It's an interesting question. Maybe, the answer lies within the arctic element itself. An element that can't be grasped, packaged and sold in stores.

Maybe the answer lies in the valleys full of migrating caribou, or in the night skies brightened with reddish, purple northern lights, or in the lakes filled with those tasty arctic char. Or maybe the answer is in the exhilarating feeling of freedom to explore this vast country with a team of malamutes. In any case, the arctic has many hidden treasures, and I am sure Leffingwell had a big spot in his heart especially caused by Peary, Cook, Stefansson, and Amundsen, I was the forgotten man." But, Leffingwell is remembered every time we look at a map or research the geology of Alaska's arctic. Of course, a map does not even come close to exemplifying the hardships he endured.

After a coffee break at the triangulation tower, we continued to travel East on the Beaufort Sea ice for several more days until we arrived at Kaktovik, also known as Barter Island. Kaktovik is an Inupiat village with a population of about 300 folks, has all the conveniences of the modern world; electricity phones, internet, two hotels and a post office. It was also my supply depot for the winter and there was a pile of dogfood waiting for me there. I didn't have time to take in the sights of Kaktovik, since I wanted to venture to some areas along the coast that Leffingwell had explored. So, I loaded the sleds with a one-month supply of dogfood, a few groceries and directed the team back to the Beaufort Sea coast.

It was now February; the time of the year, when Mother Nature gathers her armies to strike her victims. The temperature can drop to 70 below. The wind might scour the tundra at teeth chattering 80 mph winds, and the dry snow blowing across the ice will feel like a sandblaster against your cheeks. However, February is also the month when the Northern Lights show their best-dressed colors and dance

exuberantly across the arctic sky. The colors green, purple, and red are so close and clear it seems you can drink them. Personally, I believe it's another one of nature's tricks to lure her victims to the arctic then devour them. February definitely lived up to her reputation last year. That entire month I traveled against a prevailing wind with no break whatsoever just blizzard after blizzard after blizzard. The constant wind had blown the tundra free of snow causing the dogs to struggle over tussocks, gravel and brush. Nonetheless, I had the opportunity to explore some fascinating country and historic sights along Alaska's arctic coast.

During the 1800's whales became scarce on the western coast of Alaska. In order to satisfy the world's thirst for whale oil used for lighting and machines, the whaling fleet ventured north along Alaska's arctic coast in search of their prey. The sea ice captured several whaling ships when the early winters set in, causing many whalers to endure the long winters in the arctic. They built cabins from ship lumber or driftwood lying on the beaches. Many of the dwellings were quite crude to say the least, but the remnants of these ruins capture the spirit and history of the whale men's hardy and adventuresome lives.

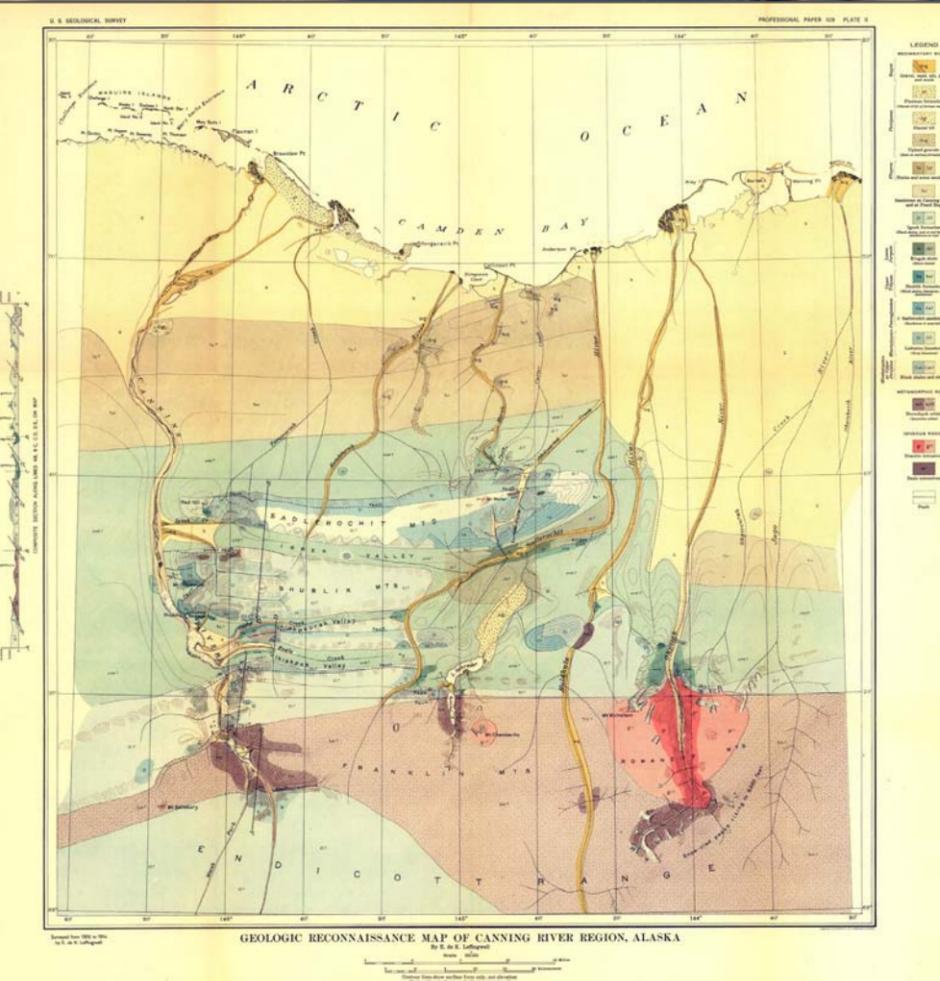
As March came near, I planned to go back to Kaktovik for supplies and pick up a client, whom wished to join me on a trip. My plan was simple; I would camp 6 miles from the village, pick up our client in the morning then head back out. Simple plan, right? Well, like all well thought out plans, they can go awry. Over the years, I've learned to always listen to my gut instincts when making plans, and this time my instincts were not whispering to me but, hollering! But, I did not listen.

That night as I set up camp six miles from Kaktovik, the Northern Lights were jetting across the sky in a smoke twirling display of green and rich purple. All the while, I had a nagging question in my mind; should we have continued to the village? Well, a dirty trick was about to unfold and the culprit was none other than Mother Nature herself. I have been in many blizzards, some beyond words of description and human comprehension. The windstorm that hit us that night definitely scored high on the blizzard scale.

Around midnight she sprung her trap, and unchained a monster wind that literally buried us, but that didn't satisfy her. So she threw in a mixture of thick wet snow that was like cement, just to make sure we were completely buried for a damn long time!

I remember digging out of my tent that first morning and trying to stand up in the blasting wind. With my vision nearly obliterated from the stinging snow, I could only see a few dogs. One was my wheel dog curled up on a high

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Opposite page top: The remnants of the cabin Leffingwell built out of his ice-locked expedition ship, the Dutchess of Bedford.

Middle right: Howdy experiences his first season on the Leffingwell expedition.

Lower right: Leffingwell's cabin is an awe-inspiring break in the arctic landscape.

Lower left: Geological map of the northeastern Brooks Range and Arctic coast published by Leffingwell in USGS Professional Report 109.

drift of snow next to the tent. Under that drift were my sleds and supplies. The storm pounded us with 65 mph gusts for three days and nights. Finally, the wind and snow wore themselves out and crawled back into hiding to devise another trap for her victims.

After the storm, I went to work digging out the tent and sleds. It took 7 hours of shoveling to get out of that pile of snow, and under an hour for the team to arrive in Kaktovik.

One of my clients, Tim, has joined me several times in the arctic. Last winter Tim chose a 21-day expedition with me into the Brooks Range. Tim is biologist from Main Bay Hatchery, located at Prince William Sound, Alaska. He's great with the dogs, has an explorers heart and a passion for the arctic. At Kaktovik, we loaded the sleds with a 24 day supply of dogfood and groceries, and hit the trail.

After sledding several days along the coast, we turned the team south and headed towards the mountains. As we crossed the tundra, thick fog rolled in with light snow lowering the visibility. It's strange traveling in foggy white-out conditions without landmarks to gauge progress. It seemed as if we were going nowhere, like walking on a treadmill in a cloud. As the days went by, we thought we would never exit this "cloud" when suddenly one morning the fog lifted and the mountains appeared in their fullness. What an elevated feeling! It was as

if Mother Nature had laid down her arsenal of weapons and called an armistice. The country opened up her door for us to enter and explore.

The jagged mountains towered over me and Tim. The valleys lay wide open with spiraling flumes of steam rising above the river ice from warm springs. We spotted a herd of musk oxen, several moose and thousands of ptarmigan browsing on the willows. The valley was rich in other wildlife; we saw signs of wolves, foxes, wolverines and mink. Of all the arctic valleys to explore, Tim and I found a jewel.

Everyday we traveled and explored. Every night we pitched camp, brewed coffee, and fried steaks over the sounds of fire crackling in our stoves. In the midst of the sweet aroma of willow smoke in our tents, Tim and I exchanged tales and talked about that day and country yet to explore. Every morning we awoke by the malamutes' perfect symphony of howls, then felt the invigorating 40 below fresh air on our faces as we prepared for the day.

I asked Tim why he comes to the arctic. His reply was short but meaningful. He said, "We do only the essentials to survive, nothing more, nothing less. There are no phones, e-mails or distractions." It's true. We travel every day: some days are long, some are short, but we do only the essential chores that are required. We have time to think, reflect and enjoy life in

the present. There are no worries of tomorrow because we know that tomorrow, we'll awake again by the sounds of dogs' morning song, then travel and explore another day.

There's no doubt Leffingwell's scientific contributions were astronomical. Nevertheless,

I wonder if Leffingwell were alive today, and asked why he dedicated so much of his life exploring the frozen arctic, that his answer might be similar to Tim's answer.

Leffingwell covered more ground than seems humanly possible. Lord willing every winter, the malamutes and I will continue retracing the arctic explorer's trail and making tracks across the wind blown tundra. Just as Leffingwell had, we will watch the Northern Lights shoot across the sky, hear the malamutes howl, enjoy the taste and smell of arctic char roasting over a crackling fire and experience a freedom that only the arctic can provide.

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*Joe Henderson has been working with Alaskan Malamutes for 25 years. He and his team spend most of the winter dogsledding alone in the arctic and end each season offering clients remote expeditions throughout Alaska.*

*For more information, please visit Joe's website at:*  
[www.alaskanarcticexpedition.com](http://www.alaskanarcticexpedition.com)