**The Iditarod Trail**

The tall man was Emil von Behring, grey with fatigue when he closed the door behind him and leaned against it.

“It works...I’m sure of it now,” he said to the only one awake of two remaining correspondents. The other snored on, oblivious, and missing one of the world’s greatest moments. His colleague patted his pockets for his pad and fumbled for his pencil. What pharmaceutical giant would welcome this news and set about planning its distribution? Von Behring would ultimately receive the Nobel Prize for his persistence, but in 1900, diphtheria was still rampant and awaiting his discovery. By 1925, Behring’s serum was in common use. In most civilised towns and cities.

Nome, in Alaska, along the frozen Behring Sea coast was referred to as the “biggest gold-pan in the world” and attracted those intent on untold wealth and those destined to die a miserable death in unimaginable conditions. And amazingly, in this frozen landscape, there were children, bright as flowers against the snow and ice. But Nome was not well prepared when the flowers wilted and died, choking on their own obstructed airways.

Pfizer had secured the world rights to Behring’s serum and in their austere but impressive board-room, the question was how, before snowmobiles and negotiable roads, the precious vaccine could be transported to the Northern-most point on any map of North America. A strongly accented voice claimed attention when Norwegian ‘Sepp’ Seppala said, during a lull. “ der same vay Nome get everything else dey need. By dog-sled!”

“It’s nearly 600 miles away!” objected someone.

“So? You got maybe better idea?” and that was that. Seppala was a master sledder and the aircraft of the day could not make the journey, their unsophisticated instruments unequal to the task in the prevailing blizzards and the port was iced in. Only dogs could make this possible.

Mushers were caught up in the challenge and 20 teams were eventually found whom Seppala deemed capable. Men and teams that routinely challenged Nature on less demanding tasks. Ampoules of vaccination serum were gathered in Anchorage and railed to the end of the line in Nenana and the chosen mushers

checked sleds, dogs and equipment with a critical eye. Siberian huskies predominated in teams, imported from their own harsh homeland.

Teams varied from 6 dogs to many more, but a crucial consideration was the weight of food for the teams, men and dogs, both to be tested to the utmost limit. At that time, Alaska was a forbidding, comfortless and dangerous prospect, probing for any weakness in man and beast alike.

As teams left, there was little fanfare, no cheering crowds, only families and close friends, aware that they were witnesses to something remarkable. It was not a hunt, a quest for wood or furs. The sleds were stripped of all unnecessary weight, runners smoothed and waxed and all bindings and harnesses repaired or re-stitched for the task ahead.

Mushers spent even longer with their dogs than usual, minutely studying them for any signs that might spell danger on the long haul ahead. And being dogs, that eternally optimistic creature that has thrown his life and his all into worshipping his human, their clamouring and joyous bounding made any slight physical defect seem negligible.

In those days, Alaska was still home to every wild species that inhabited the frozen wastes and the silent, brooding forests. Bears - even the occasional snow-bear, prowling far from the sea, competed with cougars and wolves for prey and intrusion into their kingdom was to court disaster for the unwary. Rifles were always to hand and sledders ran together for safety as much as possible, with the dogs as much a magnet as protection or sounders of the alarm.

Hills and mountains forced detours, adding miles, and the many frozen rivers deceived one, particularly when the combined weight of a team, sled and man were too much for the ice to support in a crossing that showed where deer and other lighter animals had gained the far bank.

In a ragged succession, the teams set off, soon separated in time and distance by faster dogs, better sleds and choices of route. In that trackless wilderness, experience and instinct counted for much - the difference between dead ends, unexpected obstacles and smooth running that soon stretched the teams further and further apart.

One of the factors, apart from the skill of drivers, was the innate qualities and intelligence of a lead dog. He, and sometimes he alone, determined the best

route for a clean run for that day, detouring around fallen timber, dangerous slopes and rocky outcrops that could smash a sled. And the other dogs followed him, yielding to his presence and confidence. Just as long as they could also feel the joy that only sled dogs know - to pull until they could no more, and exhaustion - or death, played a hand.

12 year old Togo was Seppala's lead dog, born to his position and the praise that came with it. He would strut to his harness, laid out with the others along the snow, and sit there, waiting for it to be fastened, eyes on the far distance, old for his task, but wise in the ways of the trail. His musher would always pause a moment longer over him, cradling his head in mittened hands, murmuring a few quiet words that would reduce the dog to a squirming, adoring puppy.

Positioned along the route, other teams took over in relays of thirty to fifty miles, the team so relieved yapping out it's exhaustion in their wake, wreathed in the steam of their exhalations in the frigid air, as the fresh team receded into the far distance.

The world loves heroes - and dogs - and telegraphs and telephones crackled with commentaries in a dozen languages on this incredible rescue dash, the wealthy and the worker alike, pausing in their activities to listen slack-mouthed, to its progress, crying out involuntarily as though the straining teams could hear them and derive strength from the listening world. As though millions were actually witness to the trials of each day.

And out there, in the rhythmic cadence of their stride, the dogs were said to pull as never before, through blizzards and wastelands, weaving between standing timber as though each was a bead on the same string, slitted eyes on the plunging haunches of the dog before it, ears cocked back for the occasional shouts of their musher. We will never know what passed for thought in those frost-rimed canine heads, but their instincts and drive made the incredible five day expedition possible and after over one hundred hours, Nome was almost in sight.

There followed one of the great injustices of Life - in this poor scribe's mind at any rate. Togo was replaced for the last stage by a much younger lead dog - Balto, 3 years old and built like a horse, who went on to lead the team of Gunnar Kaasen, another Norwegian musher, so it was Balto who led the team that burst into Nome to great excitement and relief from the townspeople. And it was Balto, to whom a larger than life statue was erected in New York's Central Park where it

stands today, still visited by millions of admirers who have thrilled to the story of the great serum run.

Some considerable time later, a similar statue to Togo was cast and mounted, but no greater tribute can be found than the annual Iditarod Sled Dog Race, the course varied out of necessity, with impressive prizes from eager sponsors, national honours for the winners and thousands of spectators descending on vantage points or glued to television monitors.

A far cry from that distant trial of man and dogs, with modern teams numbering up to sixteen hand-picked dogs, now that they can all be fed and their energy sustained over this incredible distance with indestructible, lighter sleds and rigid rules protecting the dogs, no less enthusiastic or gallant than Togo's harness-mates, on that far-off day when life or death hung in the balance.

Neighbours of mine keep a husky, penned forever in their tiny suburban yard, surrounded by walls, no doubt well-fed and watered, but never exercised and for me, it's a trial to pass their house and see a questing nose or a single blue eye, at the few gaps in its prison. It invites no petting and a few words of greeting do nothing to convince it that someone understands, that someone knows the torment of its unfulfilled breeding and instincts. It used to howl, wolf-like, in the long nights, perhaps listening for an answer. It doesn't do that much these days but I long to hear it again. One day it will be silent and I will know it has found peace in some white-clad place where the sky meets the horizon.

This story is for that lonely descendant of noble dogs that found fulfilment in their service to lesser beings.