



Massey to the South Pole

AS THE COLDEST, windiest, driest and highest continent, Antarctica is the perfect setting for those looking for a challenge. So, when renowned New Zealand explorer Sir Edmund Hillary, the first man to conquer Mount Everest, was asked to join the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1955-58, he saw it as another grand adventure and chose Massey-Harris-Ferguson tractors to help get him there.

Led by Dr. Vivian Fuchs, the main objective of the British-led expedition was to be the first to travel overland in mechanized vehicles across the entire continent via the South Pole, gathering scientific data along the way. The main group would embark from the Weddell Sea coast of Antarctica (which is closest to South America), while a secondary New Zealand team, led by Hillary, would set out from the Ross Sea on the opposite side, establishing supply bases for the British team, but stopping short of the Pole. The two teams would meet up after the Brits had passed the Pole, with Hillary guiding them back along his path.

With more than 10 tons of fuel and supplies to carry, Hillary made an unlikely choice for his team's main transport: farm tractors, specifically three Ferguson TE20s. Given some modifications to better equip them for the extreme conditions, Hillary was confident his tractors were up for the challenge—and then some.

On October 14, 1957, Hillary's team cranked up its caravan of Fergusons and a support vehicle, pulling a

“Despite unsuitable conditions of soft snow and high altitudes our Fergusons performed magnificently and it was their extreme reliability that made our trip to the pole possible.”

—Telegram from Sir Edmund Hillary to Massey-Harris-Ferguson Farming Company

bunkhouse and several supply sleds. Even though it was the Antarctic summer, conditions were brutal. Over the next 82 days, they faced temperatures below -35° Celsius, winds above 50 knots and altitudes surpassing 10,000 feet.

Even in such extreme conditions, the Hillary team reached its destination on December 15. Once there, they learned the British team—which, incidentally, was using more high-tech snow vehicles—was significantly behind schedule and would not reach the New Zealanders for about another month. Hillary decided not to wait and continued on to the South Pole to meet the rest of the expedition there.

To great fanfare, Hillary's team reached the U.S. Pole Station on January 4, 1958. Before heading into the warmth of the station, he paused and later wrote, “I took a last glance at our tractor train ... our Fergusons had brought us over 1,250 miles of snow and ice, crevasse ... soft snow and blizzard to be the first vehicles to drive to the South Pole.”

— Laura Hardin