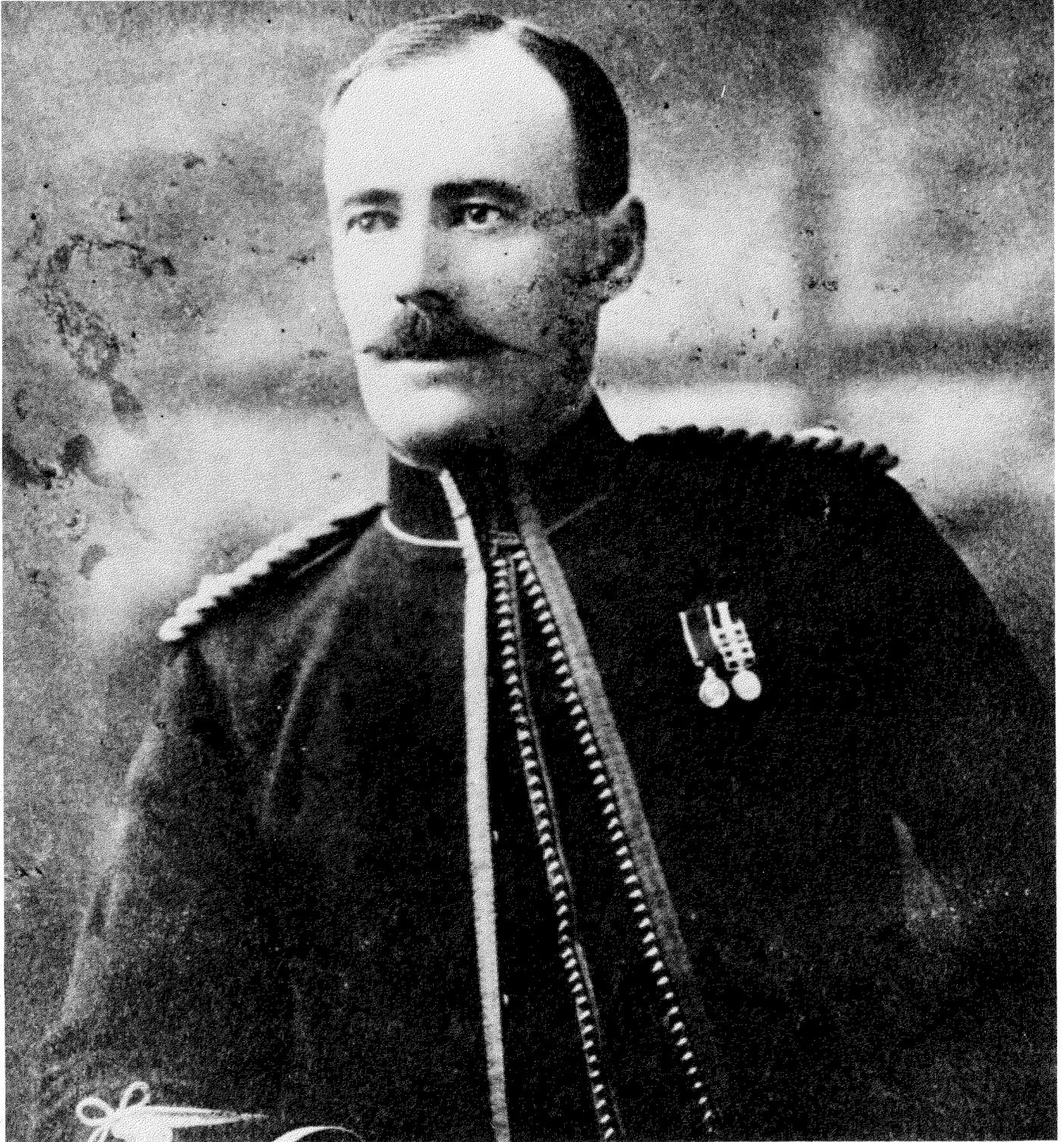


F.J. Fitzgerald (1869-1911)



Photograph courtesy of Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Francis Joseph Fitzgerald, veteran of 14 years' northern service with the North-West (later the Royal North-West) Mounted Police, and commander of the famous "Lost Patrol" of 1911, was born in Halifax on April 12th, 1869. In November 1888 he enlisted in the N.W.M.P. Except for a year's service in the Boer War as a sergeant with the Canadian Mounted Rifles, he spent the rest of his life with the Mounted Police, eventually rising to the rank of inspector. He served in the Yukon during the gold rush and was a member of the expedition of 1897-1898 that blazed an overland trail to the Yukon from Edmonton via Fort St. John, B.C., a journey that put Fitzgerald at the forefront of the force's most experienced men in northern patrolling.

In 1903 Fitzgerald, then a sergeant, was picked as second-in-command of the government expedition sent to the Western Arctic to demonstrate Canadian sovereignty and halt the alleged mistreatment of the Inuit there by American whaling crews wintering at Herschel Island. In the late summer of that year, he left his detachment at Fort McPherson and, accompanied by one constable and an interpreter, set out in an open whaleboat through the Mackenzie Delta and west along the coast of the Beaufort Sea on the 400 km trip to Herschel Island. Once there, he established a detachment, collected customs duties, and warned the crews against abusing the Inuit (though he reported that the stories of debauchery were much exaggerated). Although his detachment was woefully undersupplied because of government parsimony, he managed by a combination of tact and firmness to enforce what Canadian laws were applicable in such a remote region.

After several years in the North, Fitzgerald took an Inuit wife, Unalina, "after the fashion of the country." He wished to marry her, but his superior refused permission. Their daughter, Annie, crippled as a child, died in her teens at the mission school at Hay River.

What brought Fitzgerald to the attention of the world was an episode arising out of his service in the Western Arctic. Beginning in 1904, a mid-winter patrol was sent from Dawson to Fort McPherson and return, a distance of about 800 km each way over a variety of routes long used by the Kutchin Indians, to carry mail and show the flag in the region. It was no light duty; the trail followed a complex of rivers and creeks and went over some mountainous terrain. There was little game in the mountains, and in the flat, wide, treeless valleys, deeply covered in snow, it was easy for a novice to turn up a wrong creek; thus the patrol always took along an Indian guide. In 1905 Fitzgerald was a member of the patrol on the Dawson-Fort McPherson leg, but he had never been over the route the other way.

In 1910, in recognition of his northern service, he was selected as a member of the police contingent to attend the coronation of George V in London, and he was given the command of the patrol, which for that one time only was to leave from the Fort McPherson end. In December 1910 he came from his post at Herschel Island to Fort McPherson, and on the 21st he and three other men left for Dawson. None of the men had ever been over the trail in that direction; the guide, ex-Constable Carter, had, like Fitzgerald, been over it only from Dawson.

The police recorded the number of days the patrols took and published the figures in their annual reports. Though the

Mounted Police later were at pains to deny it, it seems evident that Fitzgerald was aiming at a new speed record for the patrol. It was possible to make the trip one way in as little as 14 days, and Fitzgerald took enough supplies for 30 days. On the other hand, it had once taken 56 days, and since the time depended a good deal on the weather, Fitzgerald was leaving himself no margin for error or misfortune. Unfortunately for him and his men, he was dogged with both.

From the beginning the weather was bad. The snow was unusually heavy, making trail breaking difficult. Within a week the men were lost and found the trail only because they fell in with some Kutchin families, who set them right. Fitzgerald could have hired one of the Kutchin men as a guide, but did not — perhaps he did not want to admit he needed one.

By January 2nd they had gone a third of the way and eaten nearly half their food. Then the weather got even worse; between the 3rd and the 9th of January the temperature averaged -46°C , in strong wind. On the 12th they realized they were badly lost; Carter, the guide, could not find the landmarks. They had nine days' food left, and with luck could have made it to Dawson, fallen in with some Indians, or gone back to Fort McPherson. But Fitzgerald would not admit defeat and spent seven more days looking for the trail. It was not until January 18th, with their food almost gone, that they started back to McPherson. The weather continued foul. Snowstorms had covered their tracks, and on January 23rd the thermometer touched -53°C on a windy day. By February 1st they had killed and eaten 8 of their 15 dogs. The last entry in Fitzgerald's diary was dated February 5th; on that day they were 115 km from Fort McPherson, but they had only five dogs left and were making only a few miles a day. The four men struggled on for another week. Between February 12th and 18th, 1911, all four died, three of starvation and one of suicide. On Fitzgerald's body was his will, scratched on paper with a piece of charcoal; it read: "All money in dispatch bag and bank, clothes, etc., I leave to my dearly beloved mother, Mrs. John Fitzgerald, Halifax. God bless all. F.J. Fitzgerald, R.N.W.M.P."

Though the Mounted Police were the targets of criticism when news of the tragedy became public, especially from the explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who said that if the patrol had followed his method of travelling light and living off the land the men would not have come to grief, the evidence shows that Fitzgerald succumbed to misfortune and bad judgement — a fatal combination in the North.

FURTHER READINGS

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