

THE ALBERTA DOCTORS'

DIGEST



AMA partners in 75th anniversary mercy flight

**Saluting unsung hero
Dr. Harold A. Hamman**

Agreement ratified

Doctors endorse new partnerships and directions
for health care

AMA partners in 75th anniversary of mercy flight



On the Peace River on the return flight, 1929.

"The Alberta Medical Association is proud to have been one of the sponsors of the recent tribute of the flight to deliver diphtheria antitoxin to Fort Vermilion, Alberta."

The celebrated mercy flight Of 75 years ago by Wop May and Vic Horner was recreated January 2, 2004. The Alberta Medical Association is proud to have been one of the sponsors of the recent tribute of the flight that delivered diphtheria antitoxin to Fort Vermilion, Alberta.

It was late 1928 when May received a call from Dr. Malcolm Bow, Alberta's deputy minister of health, about a reported outbreak of diphtheria discovered by Dr. Hamman in the settlement of Little Red River (80 kilometres east of Fort Vermilion). On January 2, 1929, May and his friend, Horner, headed north in the Avro "Avian" with the diphtheria antitoxin.

Their flight path took them first to McLennan, where they

spent the night, and then on to Peace River for refueling. They headed further north to Fort Vermilion, despite dangerously frigid weather and engine problems. The two pilots arrived safely with the antitoxin on January 3 and returned to Edmonton, January 6, to a cheering crowd of 10,000.

The flight was re-enacted this year by May's son, Denny, and Horner's son, Robert, and their spouses. They flew a Pilatus PC-12, provided courtesy of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (K Division, Air Section), north from the City Centre Airport in Edmonton (formerly called Blatchford Field) via McLennan (Donnelly Crossing airstrip) and Peace River to Fort Vermilion.

As the primary sponsor of the Event, the Western Chapter of the Aerophilatelic Society designed a matched pair of postal envelopes to commemorate the re-enactment. A limited run of 300 sets of envelopes were carried on the flight to Fort Vermilion and then back to Edmonton. They were postmarked with the newly released 49 cent Canadian flag stamp showing Edmonton's skyline.

► Of special interest to aviation enthusiasts, history buffs, philatelists and collectors of memorabilia, the covers are postmarked and backstamped to indicate points of departure and destination and they are signed by Denny and Robert.

Sets of envelopes are priced at CDN \$21, including first-class postage and handling. To place an order, contact Nino Chiovelli by phone at 780.475.9665 or email nchiovelli@telusplanet.net. ■



Commemorative Edmonton stamp used during mercy flight re-enactment, released to the public December 19, 2003.

Saluting Dr. Harold A. Hamman:

Unsung hero in averting diphtheria outbreak

By J. Robert Lampard, MD

January 2-6, 2004 marked the 75th anniversary of the Wop May-Vic Horner mercy flight to deliver diphtheria toxoid to Fort Vermilion, Alberta residents. The two pilots became well known for the 500-mile (one-way) flight from Edmonton in 1929. But there is a third hero in the story – Dr. Harold A. Hamman.

“Dr. Hamman was unwavering in his efforts to protect two towns from diphtheria.”

Dr. Hamman was unwavering in his efforts to protect two towns from diphtheria. He made five dogsled trips in twenty-five days and covered 300 miles to diagnose, treat, and vaccinate the inhabitants of Fort Vermilion and Little Red River (then a population of 200, and now called Mikwa). The towns were two dogsled-days apart.¹



Dr. Hamman's snow machine assembled on a Model A chassis (circa 1935) and his driver Alex Campbell. Note the Arctic bedroll mounted over the windscreen.

A 1923 University of Alberta-McGill medical graduate,² Dr. Hamman followed his father, Dr. Alfred Hamman of Taber,³ into the field of medicine. After graduation, young Dr. Hamman accepted a 1924 medical contract offer of \$700 from Indian Affairs and

\$2,000 from the Alberta government, plus whatever he could earn on a fee-for-service basis, to serve 900 area treaty Indians and Fort Vermilion residents on the lower Peace River.



His practice followed the river, extending 140 miles upstream – until Dr. Mary Percy Jackson arrived at Notikewin in 1929 – and 200 miles downstream to Hay River. Although there was a ten-bed hospital in the convent, Fort Vermilion did not have a pharmacy. Dr. Hamman became responsible for purchasing the drugs and securing payment, if he could.

Afraid of an epidemic

“About December 10, 1928, I had a letter from Little Red River asking me to come see Mr. Logan, the Hudson Bay Company manager,” recorded Dr. Hamman in his notes.⁴ “His wife had written describing an illness very suggestive of diphtheria. William Gray drove me downstream [by dog team] to Little Red River.”

Astutely, Dr. Hamman took the remaining 5,000 units of diphtheria toxoid with him.

“The case indeed was diphtheria and Mr. Logan was deathly ill. I gave him what antitoxin I had but it was old stuff. I was afraid of an epi-

demic and I wrote a telegram to Dr. Bow, Alberta's deputy minister of health, advising him of my plight and asking that a plane be sent to bring toxoid to protect the community, as well as more antitoxin.

“This message was carried to Fort Vermilion by Bobbie Gray [William's son]. Mr. Clarke arranged with Joe La Fleur and his son-in-law, William Lambert, to make the trip to Peace River [280 miles upstream] to send the wire to Dr. Bow.”

The dogsled trip took eleven days as they were delayed when Lambert fell in the river.⁵ “After this was done, Mr. Logan developed laryngeal diphtheria and died after a few days. His widow wanted him to be buried at Fort Vermilion and someone was sent to dig a grave.⁶

“I felt it devolved upon me to make sure I did not carry the disease in my clothes and I instructed Harry Clarke, the handyman, to arrange that both Mrs. Logan and I would bathe and he would supply us with whatever clothes he could out of new stock in the store. Our own clothes were burned.

“Next day we left for Fort Vermilion. Nearing the Fort we stopped by the cemetery, and the coffin was lowered into the grave. There was no ceremony. We went on to the Fort and found we were most unwelcome by many people, among them the Catholic Mission nuns and priests.

“I was afraid of an epidemic. . . .”

“Mrs. Logan was to stay at Clarke's home and I wanted to get back to Little Red River to try to do anything I could for the people in case the disease was rampant. Once again I undertook the trip to Little Red River.”

To get to Dr. Hamman, May and Horner left Edmonton on January 2, 1929 in their open cockpit, 75 hp Avro Avian.⁷ Dr. Bow had given them 500,000 units of toxoid at the airport.⁸ “The two flyers reached McLennan that night by following the railway lines at an elevation of 100-500 feet. They successfully landed on the Peace River. Later, the plane could not gain enough elevation to fly over the new Peace River bridge so May maneuvered under it. It was a harrowing three-hour flight at -30 to -45 degrees F.⁹

“It was about December 31 when we received, on the radio, a message from Dr. Bow that a plane was coming with supplies and would stop at Fort Vermilion before leaving for Red River,” Dr. Hamman noted. “By this time I felt the danger of an epidemic was slim so I wanted to intercept the plane's pilot at Fort Vermilion so that he wouldn't be subjected to a landing at Little Red River that was not now necessary.

“Bobbie and I again left for Fort Vermilion and traveled very long hours to get there. On arrival we saw a plane sitting on the river ice, near the Hudson Bay Company store, Wop May and Vic Horner



The Peace River railway station, late 1920s or early 1930s.

Enroute to Fort Vermilion, Wop May and Vic Horner flew under the Peace River bridge, in background, when they wouldn't gain the altitude to fly over it on that freezing day in early January 1929.

had arrived less than an hour before me. They delivered the parcel of antitoxin, etc. They had made the trip in an open cockpit plane at a temp of 30 below – a courageous and punishing expedition.”

The next day the courageous flyers headed back to Peace River using car gasoline instead of aircraft fuel, which made the plane sputter all the way. Two days later they flew to Edmonton only to arrive in the midst of a snowstorm but just thirteen minutes after their scheduled January 6 arrival.

A crowd of 10,000, almost 20% of the Edmonton population, was on hand to greet them. Twice that number lined the parade route, shortly afterwards, to honour them. Meanwhile, Dr. Hamman had headed back to Little Red River where he vaccinated everyone he could find who had not been immunized. He spent most of the winter inoculating residents and successfully aborted future outbreaks.

“[After] the plane left for Peace River and Edmonton, and I set out to protect people against the dis-

“Premier Peter Lougheed

commended Dr. Hamman. . . .”

ease, I continued to wonder from whence the disease had come. It seems Mrs. Logan had visited Quebec in the fall, and [her] nieces and nephews were sick with the disease.¹⁰

“Family members gave her the children’s clothing to be given to Indians in need. On her return to Little Red River, the trunk containing these clothes was not opened until 10 days before Bert Logan took ill.

“He had helped his wife unpack these items. This is how the disease must have struck him down. His

wife had previously been immunized.”

Salute Dr. Hamman

Frustrated by the slow method of transportation, Dr. Hamman bought a snow machine kit in 1933 that he assembled on a Model A chassis, with a cab added onto the back. He used this machine for the next fifteen years to travel up and down the Peace River in one-third the time that it took to travel by horse or dogsled.¹¹

By 1936, he purchased transmitting equipment and became a Ham operator to solve the two-way communication problem.

Dr. Hamman practised medicine in the north for almost twenty-five years until he developed TB in 1947 and recuperated at the Central Alberta (Baker Memorial) Sanatorium in Bowness. After his recovery, he joined the medical staff at the Baker facility where he practised until the 1970s. He died in 1987 at the age of 86.

In 1973, Premier Peter Lougheed commended Dr. Hamman for his actions in 1929. “The toughness that enabled you to withstand all of your adversities stood you in good stead, and you were determined to keep practising the art you knew best.”¹²

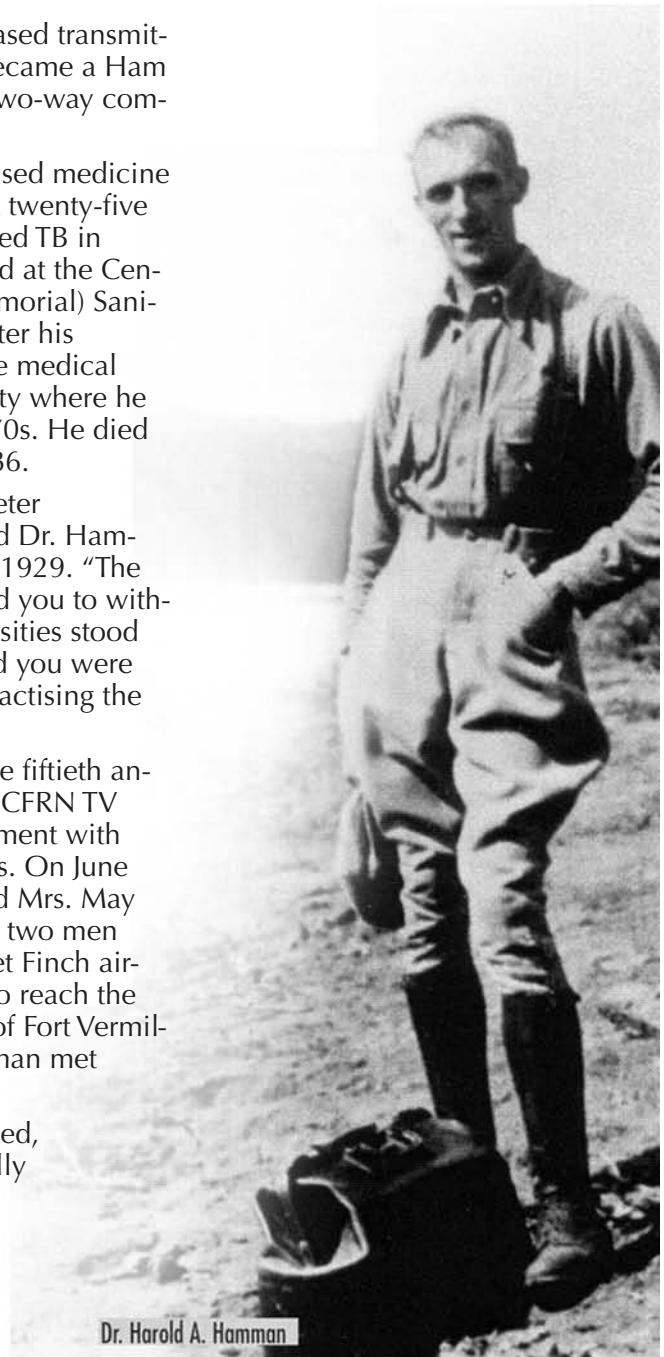
In recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of the flight, CFRN TV videotaped a re-enactment with May and Horner’s sons. On June 21, 1979, Dr. Bow and Mrs. May waved goodbye as the two men took off in a 1930 Fleet Finch aircraft from Edmonton to reach the historical destination of Fort Vermilion – where Dr. Hamman met them.

Dr. Hamman recalled, “When Wop May finally told me that he had sight in only one eye, I hardly believed him.

He had managed to always pass his medical test, and I was happy when he was piloting me.”¹³

The citizens of Fort Vermilion were happy as well. Fort Vermilion was granted a telegraph line by a unanimous vote in the House of Commons.¹⁴ For Edmonton, the event also had lasting economic implications with recognition as the aircraft gateway to the north.

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Dr. Harold A. Hamman



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