

WE MOVE ANYTHING, ANYWHERE,

On a frontier where every man is a jack-of-all-trades, Tom Lamb is king—a man who flies, traps, ranches where the experts said it couldn't be done, and who will move anything by land, water or air, including twelve beavers to Argentina, for an ex-dictator's lady

They say that when the CNR train pauses at Hudson Bay Junction on the way to Manitoba's northern outposts—Churchill and The Pas and Flin Flon—a Mountie comes through the cars to throw the weaklings off.

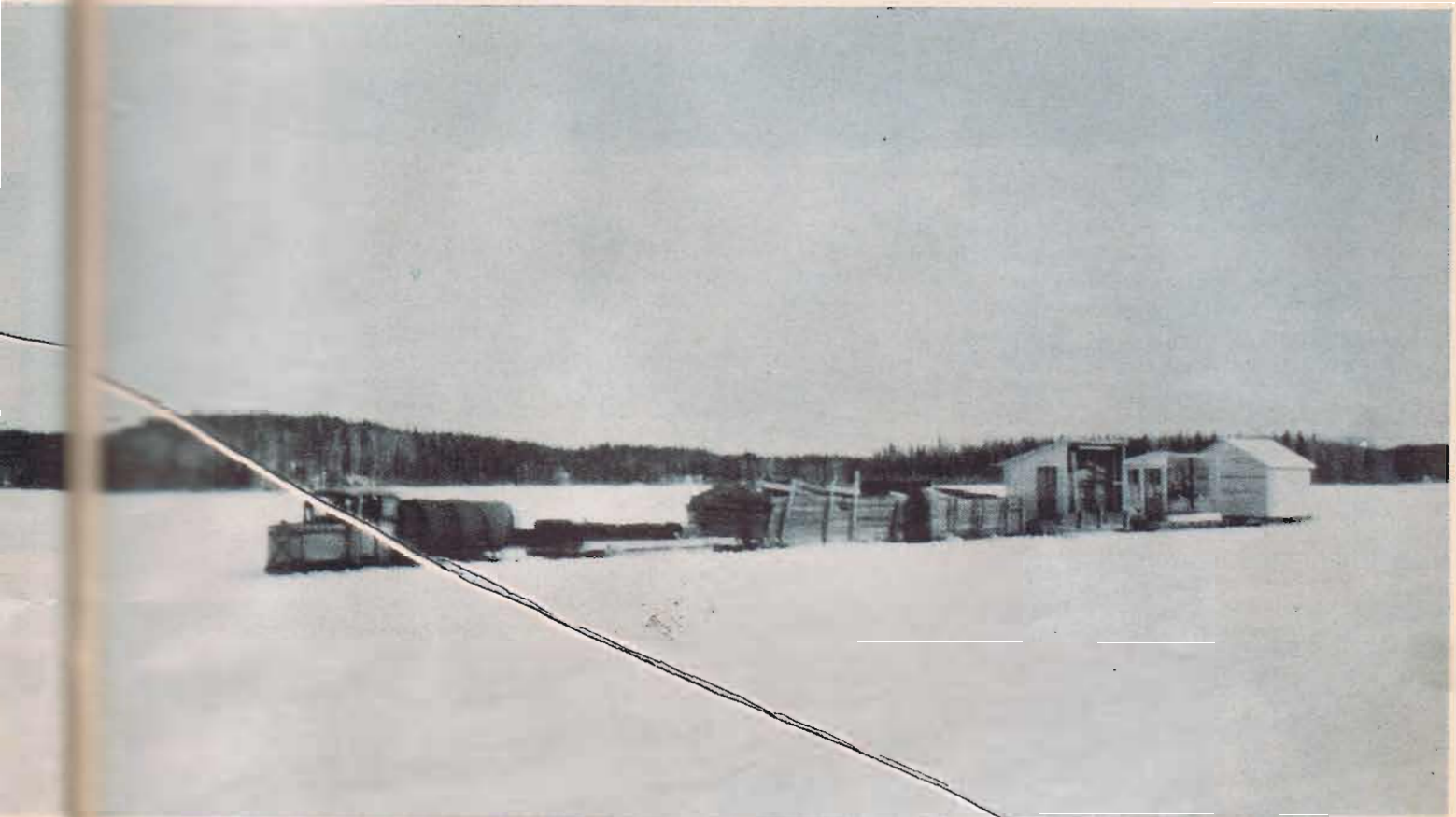
It isn't true. Up there they let nature weed out the weaklings. And when the weeding and the pruning are all finished, what's left is men like—or almost as good as—Tom Lamb.

Lamb is a frontiersman in a world that fortunately never runs short of men or frontiers.

His special frontier is the Manitoba North Country, a region of torrential rivers and uncounted lakes, where

winter comes booming down from the Barrens too early, and remains when the rest of the country has already been blessed by spring. Here the Indian goes out from the trading posts warily, unless he can use boats or canoes. The Eskimo clings to the salt-water shores. The white man, in his jeep, ventures only a dozen miles from the rail lines, and the military man tries to airlift his entire station with him. But Tom Lamb goes everywhere.

Lamb's business consists of doing those things which men have traditionally done on the Canadian frontier since the seventeenth century: hunting, trapping, fishing, building in the forest, trading with the Indians,



Cat trains do the heavy hauling during winter months, operate in twos or threes as protection in case of breakdowns.

ANY TIME

by DAVID LANDMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR



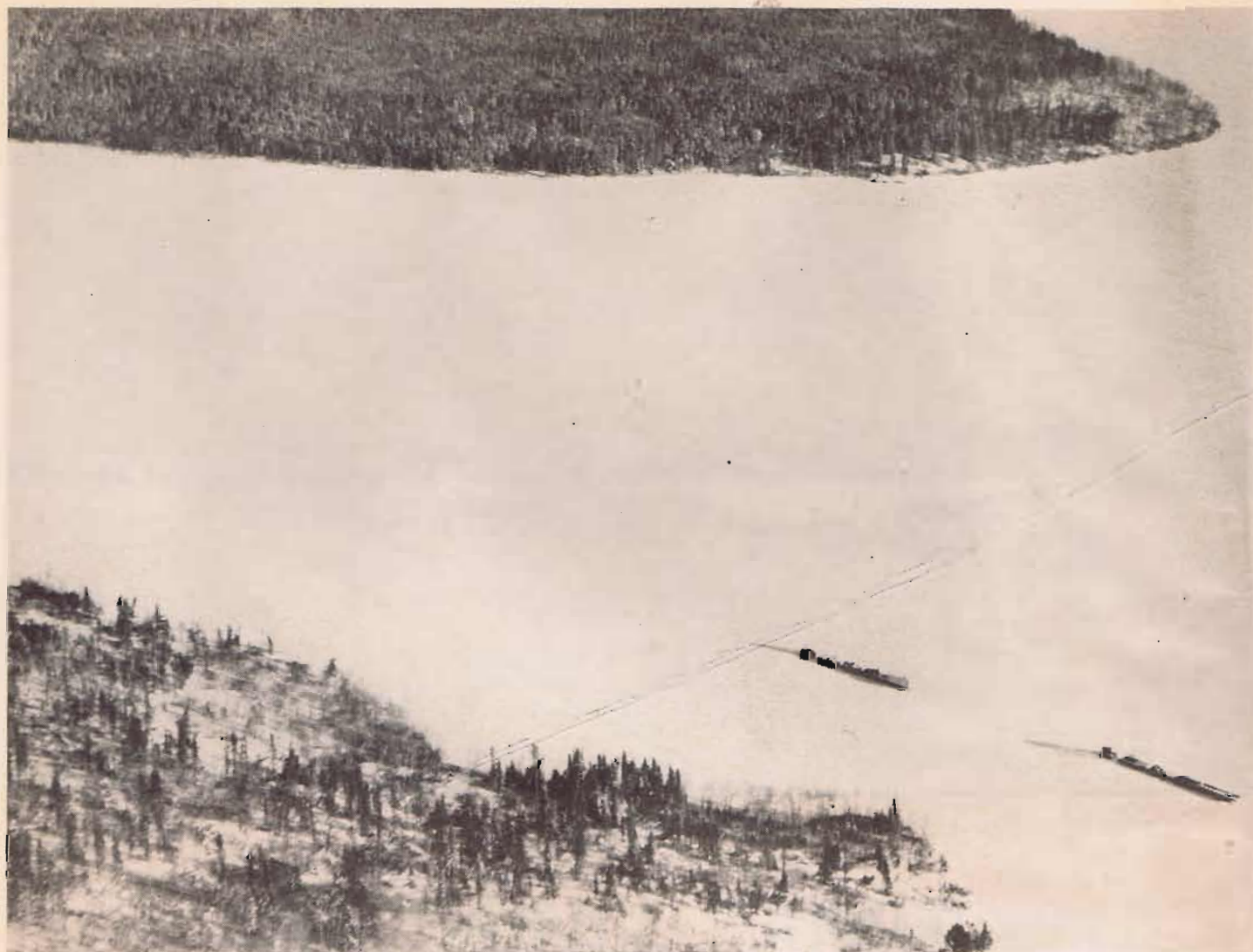
Big cat tractors are the work horses for Tom Lamb (right).

breaking land to the plow, a little prospecting and a little grubstaking.

Lamb does all these, remuneratively and well. And since this is the year 1959, he does them with modern planes and draglines and dozers, diesel-powered launches and short-wave radios, yet with the traditional qualities of guts and go.

Is a woman sick at the trading post up beyond Reindeer Lake? It is not so bad a blizzard that Tom Lamb won't fly the doctor in. Does the government need 4,000 yards of gravel to build a hospital, at a site so remote it can be reached only by boat or plane? He will find some gravel and bring it there. Is there a boom market in New York for fresh muskrat glands? He will supply them.

Tom Lamb is no howling Goliath; he is a Paul Bunyan who whispers. He stands only five feet nine. His face is ruddy and roundish and pleasant, usually softened by a quiet smile. He talks softly, with a slight lisp that comes from a lifetime of speaking Cree, an Indian tongue that imitates the soft lapping of ripples against a canoe.



A swing heads along the route where Lamb dove in freezing waters to recover body of a driver whose car plunged through ice.

In the North an airport is any postage-stamp area—water, ice, snow—that is big enough to land on.

Lamb Airways is well set for flyers. Five of Tom's six sons, including Greg (below), are qualified pilots.



the bridge at The Pas and run 510 miles to tidewater.

Trains with ore-concentrate came back across the bridge and head for the smelter in Alberta. Autos cross the same bridge getting up to Flin Flon. Boats ply the river from breakup to freezeup. Float planes and ski planes use the river, too, and wheel planes keep the regular airport busy.

In the midst of all this coming and going is Tom Lamb. Is water transport your problem? Tom's got a cabin cruiser, diesel tug, open and covered barges, and a houseboat hotel for hunters.

Need trucks for hauling on or off the roads? Tom's got 'em.

Planes? Lamb Airways has nine.

Tractors? Tom loves them. The sound of a caterpillar tractor thundering down a frozen lake with four thumping, pounding sleighs of cargo—this is music for Tom's ears. And if there is some special challenge in the haul—a time limit, or an impossible piece of terrain—Tom likes it that much the better.

One winter, Tom was simultaneously hauling supplies by tractor train to the muskrat ranches at Moose Lake and across the provincial border in Saskatchewan; he was bringing grub in, and whitefish 150 miles out for the commercial fishermen on Stevenson Lake; his D-6 cats were making regular ten-day circuits to supply the Hudson's Bay Company posts and the rival independent traders in a 5,000-square-mile area north of Wabowden.

Tom rode herd on the whole operation, either from his ski-equipped plane, or from a fast, agile snowmobile, called a Bombardier. When one of Tom's drivers wandered off the proper trail and dropped his D-6 through the ice to the bottom of the Burntwood River, Tom personally took charge

of the salvage operation. He knew that, as long as the tractor was beneath the fast-moving water, it was safe. But the moment the cat popped out into the ten-below-zero air, everything that had water in it or on it would freeze and probably burst. He organized ten men, armed them with wrenches, screwdrivers, blowtorches and dry rags. He gave everybody a specific assignment, as if they were in the assault party storming ashore on Omaha Beach. They hooked a cable to the sunken vehicle, and when everyone was ready, Tom signalled another tractor: *Pull her out!*

As the cat popped out of the water and lurched onto the riverbank, men swarmed all over it, drying and wiping and unplugging and draining, so fast that nothing had time to freeze. They refilled the fuel tank and crankcase, and that evening they drove the tractor off to Wabowden again, under its own power.

It was Tom Lamb's tractors that tried the Tavani Haul, an it-couldn't-be-done trek over the salt ice of Hudson Bay, which the North Country men are still talking about. International Nickel Company was doing some pretty serious prospecting in the Northwest Territories at that time, and in March, the Inco officials decided they were going to need an extra forty-five tons of diamond-drill gear and supplies for the brief Barrenland summer. They sent the stuff by rail to Churchill. They asked Lamb to take it from there—to Tavani, a settlement almost halfway to the Arctic Circle.

Lamb pulled twelve of his best men off other jobs, fitted them out with four D-6 cats, a dozen sleighs, cabooses for eating and sleeping. He hired a room at the Churchill Hotel for the duration of the job, and each morning he headed north in his Norseman ski plane, to find the tractors and help guide them up the ice.

They got a late start because the cargo

got to Churchill late; they disabled a tractor temporarily with a broken crankcase; they ran into a blizzard which stopped the expedition dead for ten days, and the salt ice (which is never very good for tractor work) got worse as the days slipped by. On the eighteenth of April they were still ninety miles from the destination, and it looked as if the spring thaw would cut off their return.

Lamb set down the Norseman on the ice beside the throbbing tractors. "Drop your loads over there on the shore and get on back to Churchill," he told them.

The tractor men dumped their cargo and fled. It was a six-day race to beat the breakup, which was bound to come first at the mouth of the great Churchill River. One tractor stripped its forward gears so that the swing boss had to drive the final ninety miles backwards, looking over his shoulder. But they made it. Tom shuttled the cargo the rest of the way to Tavani by plane. The North Country rumor was that Lamb's fee for the feat was \$40,000.

Like many frontiersmen, Tom Lamb has always been interested in furs. But he doesn't just walk a trapline. Tom introduced rat ranching (muskrat, that is) to the North Country, and his workings covered 54,000 acres at Moose Lake, 320,000 acres in Saskatchewan Province. He grubstaked the trappers in his area, bought and transported their furs. He marketed 40,000 pelts at from two-fifty to five dollars in the good years, and once he lost \$75,000 in just two months when an epidemic of tularemia wiped out his stock. But currently, the market for muskrat isn't what it used to be.

"Too many automobiles for the ladies to ride to the theater in," says Tom.

So Tom has a new project—ranching. Except for the little settlement in the Carrot River Valley, nobody does much of what you could call agriculture this far north, within a hundred miles of The Pas. They can give you a hatful of reasons why not, too: too cold, winter too long, soil wrong, not enough feed.

But, according to Tom Lamb, there's darn little that can't be done, if you think things out. Tom first told me about ranching in 1954. He was clearing hundreds of acres then, and planting broom grass and alfalfa.

"Don't know whether there's any money in cattle," he admitted, "but we all like good Herefords. With shelter from the wind, Herefords can live outside in open sheds at fifty below zero, and can come through the winter fat as pigs."

The first spring, Tom's herd had thirty baby calves, so there must have been something to his theories. Since 1957, Lamb has been shipping beef to market and winning prizes at the Brandon Fair with his unfreezeable Herefords. Ranching is one more impossible thing that Tom Lamb can do.

He's been flying since the old Vedette flying boats came to the bush, been flying his own planes since he bought his first Stinson Reliant in 1935. With five of the six Lamb sons as licensed flyers, Lamb Airways is pretty well fixed for pilots.

Over the years, there have been times when Tom has had to make landings on one ski, and once he had to pancake a



"That's fine, Mr. Dooley. Next month we'll work on the other arm."

plane into heavy bush ("light trees tear the wings off"). But for all his mercy missions and his almost daily bush and Barrens flying, he considers himself a conservative and cautious pilot.

"If you make a mistake out here, it's a long walk to where they sell splints and band-aids."

In Churchill, Lamb has been in the habit of using the military airfield, almost since it was built. There was one security sergeant, whose reputation for being troublesome extended for hundreds of miles, who told Tom he'd have to have entry papers, and he'd have to pay a landing fee each time he used the field, "just for form."

Tom Lamb's mildness doesn't stretch that far. "If you don't want me to use your airport," Tom said, "I'll just fly in a dozer and scrape off a piece of the Churchill River and use that. But the next time one of your planes is in trouble over The Pas, don't come circling around my airport with your wheels hanging down. Fly off somewhere else and get a landing permit."

The staff sergeant mumbled, but there was no more talk of fees and papers.

When I was up in the North Country for ARGOSY, one winter, riding with the tractor trains on their 150-mile run to the new Lynn Lake mine site, I asked a bushy-bearded cat skinner what Tom Lamb was up to.

"The usual," the man said. "Freighting and flying."

Then he thought a moment. "No. Tom did come up here and help us at the beginning of the year. It was a tough assignment."

It was only the sixth of January when the first swing of that season took its 100-ton load of mine machinery from Sherridon up to Lynn Lake. Planes couldn't carry that much weight and bulk, and the railroad hadn't been built yet. Ernie Wright, boss of the outfit, laid out a good trail across twenty frozen lakes and a dozen rivers, and marked the route and packed it down with a snowmobile and a D-2 cat. Test holes bored with the auger showed there was between twelve and fifteen inches of ice, which was plenty.

The trip out went fine.

Coming back empty, two days later, rattling down North Granville Lake at dawn, the lead tractor, Number Thirty, suddenly dropped out of sight through the ice. "One minute, there was this Allis-Chalmers racking along with its string of sleighs; next minute there was an empty sleigh with a broken drawbar, and in front of it a big hole. Jack Sutherland was down there."

The other train of the swing stopped quick and the boys piled off and started fishing and probing. They even scraped at the snow cover, hoping someone might see Jack under the ice, and they could break through and let him up.

No dice. Their buddy either hit his head or got trapped where they couldn't see him, or got tangled up in the tractor. Jack had had it.

Another swing came by, and while one cat hightailed back to Sherridon to summon help, the rest of the men kept at the search. Ernie Wright came in the snowmobile in a hurry, and by the vehicles' headlights, the grappling parties worked straight through the night. They brought

up a couple of empty sleighs. They located the sunken tractor and pulled that out, but no driver. They wanted to find Jack, partly because of the man's family, partly for Jack's sake. Partly because nobody wants to spend the whole winter being reminded that "this is the place Sutherland got his, and he's still down there!"

So after a while, Wright did what almost anybody does in the North when they've got what looks like an unsolvable problem. He radioed to The Pas: "Is Tom Lamb around?"

Lamb showed up next day in his ski-equipped Norseman—a quiet, pink-cheeked, grizzle-haired man in caribou parka, flight pants and moccasins. For a while he watched and listened as the grappling crews worked emptily. Then he went back to the plane and unloaded a piece of equipment no cat skinner ever used before—a rubber diving suit, complete with helmet and lead shoes, pump and air hose.

"You sure you know what you're doing, Tom?" somebody asked.

All that Lamb said was, "You want to find this boy, don't you?"

He went to the snowmobile that was serving as a headquarters, stripped down to his long johns, pulled on an extra layer, and wriggled into the diving suit.

Outside, Lamb and the fellow from his outfit who'd come with him in the plane talked quietly together. They checked the pump and the hose and the line. A couple of men helped set the helmet on. Then Lamb clomped along the ice to the edge, and eased down into the black, chill water, twenty-two feet deep.

The men on the windswept, frozen lake watched and wondered, and there isn't one who's sure exactly how long Lamb was down in the half-dark, under the ice.

They watched the fellow from The Pas pay out the hose and rope, with the sureness of an angler and the tenderness of a mother. They saw the lines run off east as if Tom was trying to cross the lake. Then the lines swung around south as if Tom was going to walk down to Sherridon on the lake bottom. Now he started working back, and the man took up the slack.

It was cold on the lake, thirty below zero. One spectator started stomping, trying to stir up some circulation in his feet, till the waiting, nervous men around him shouted, "God damn it, cut that out!"—as if jumping might somehow damage lake ice fourteen inches thick. Two men started arguing about how cold flowing water can get without freezing. A cat skinner who used to be in Lamb's outfit was trying to count how many times Tom Lamb had been a grandfather.

There! Lamb jerked the rope, the "pull" signal.

The line tender began hauling. Either Lamb had tied onto something, or he was stuck on something and in trouble. Volunteer hands took over an the rope. The man from The Pas attended to the air hose.

Minutes later, Sutherland's body was on the ice, and Tom was in the kitchen caboose, beside the coal stove, taking alternate slugs of cook Tim McGinnis's hot coffee and warming whiskey. After he got the chill out, Lamb flew back to The Pas. There would be some new North Country crisis that needed his attention. • • •



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