Gordon Bowra - obituary

Gordon Bowra was a surgeon whose ambition to find a 'life outside medicine' took him on an eventful expedition to the Antarctic

Gordon Bowra in the Antarctic Photo: MARTIN WINTERTON

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Gordon Bowra, who has died aged 77, climbed all but one of the peaks of the Tottanfjella mountain range in East Antarctica while serving as a medical officer with the British Antarctic Survey in 1963. On a separate expedition he survived a 30ft fall down a crevasse when moving ice caused a snow bridge to collapse.

His Antarctic adventure, which he undertook after obtaining an interview with the explorer Sir Vivian Fuchs, was, he later said, the high point of his life. Bowra was 27 when, in 1962, he sailed from Southampton in the two-masted diesel-powered Kista Dan. Having arrived in the Antarctic he was out of contact with the world for almost all of his two-year posting.

The Tottanfjella climbs were part of a six-month surveying expedition, 170 miles from base, undertaken between October 1963 and April 1964. It was 6,500ft up on one of the Tottanfjella peaks that Bowra and three companions picked up the first radio broadcast they had heard since arriving for their two-year posting on the polar continent — the broadcast brought them news of the assassination of President John F Kennedy.
The four climbers were among 24 scientists based in an artificially-lit, subterranean research station at Halley Bay on the edge of the Weddell Sea. All that could be seen of their base were the chimneys of their dug-in plywood huts protruding from the snowbound surface. Melt-water was generated by the heat in the huts, and trickled down through gaps in the structure, where it was guided into makeshift buckets (old food cans) by strategically placed lengths of string.

The party suffered constant headaches because of mild carbon monoxide poisoning from the coal fires that warmed the underground huts. “Day” and “night” were artificial concepts.

The terrain included glaciers and concealed crevasses. Supplies left on the surface would often vanish beneath windblown snow. The men trekked across the shifting ice by dog-drawn sledge, motor-toboggan and tractor, wary of sea-ice that could break up and carry a man away on a drifting floe.

A couple of Bowra’s colleagues suffered psychological problems, Bowra told an interviewer from the BAS in 2010, but most of his medical work turned out to be dentistry. He also gathered evidence for a paper — “Rectal temperature of the husky under severe winter conditions in the Antarctic” — published in the Journal of Zoology in 1966. This was an analysis of the sledge-dogs’ ability to adapt to their harsh surroundings.

The dogs’ skittish behaviour sometimes caused difficulties. Occasionally they would slip their harnesses or run off ahead, taking precious supplies with them. On one occasion, Bowra noted, the snow he was crossing “just dropped”, and he tumbled 30ft into a large crevasse. The BAS in Bowra’s time did lose several members: 23-year-old Neville Mann disappeared on an area of sea ice during a blizzard; and, shortly after Bowra left, three men died when a “Muskeg” tractor fell down a crevasse. When the news reached Britain, Bowra, by then in London working as a surgeon in the casualty department at St George’s Hospital, Hyde Park Corner, was deluged with inquiries from
Bowra and the members of his BAS team were, in 1971, awarded the Polar Medal.

Gordon Trevor Bowra was born in London on June 28 1936, the son of a quantity surveyor with the National Coal Board. During the war the family were evacuated to Ashtead in Surrey, yet Gordon’s primary school (empty at the time) was hit by a V2 rocket in 1944. After Epsom College, he trained at St George’s Hospital, Tooting.

It was while he was working at St Mary’s Hospital, Eastbourne, that he saw a documentary about the BAS; eager to find “life outside medicine” he immediately applied to join. Sir Vivian Fuchs advised him to “go away and do something” first; so Bowra applied to every shipping agent in Leadenhall Street in the City of London, eventually enlisting as ship’s surgeon on the cargo ship City of Pretoria, plying between Britain and Beira, Mozambique.

Bowra’s later medical career saw him work as a GP in Chiswick, south-west London; as a researcher at Boots; medical officer for ICI Mond Division in Cheshire; and, finally, for the Health and Safety Executive.

He is survived by his wife, Wendy, and their three daughters.

Gordon Bowra, born June 28 1936, died February 18 2014

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