

# The Great Race of Mercy

In the winter of 1925, the small city of Nome, Alaska faced a dangerous disease outbreak. The medicine they needed was located hundreds of miles away. Teams of sled dogs and their mushers saved the city by transporting the medicine 674 miles through snow and ice. Their heroic effort is known as the “Great Race of Mercy.”

Nome is located near the Arctic Circle. This area of Alaska experiences long freezing winters and short summers. During the early part of the 20th century, only dog sleds could reach Nome during the winter months. Airplanes had difficulty flying in the harsh weather conditions. Sled dogs would travel the 938-mile Iditarod Trail between Seward, Alaska and Nome to deliver supplies. They would also travel over 600 miles between the city of Nenana, Alaska and Nome to deliver the mail.

During the winter of 1925, children in Nome began to fall ill with a disease called diphtheria. Diphtheria is a bacterial infection that makes it difficult to breathe and swallow. The bacteria produce a toxin that damages the nose and throat. The toxin can also damage the heart, the kidneys, and the brain. Diphtheria is a very contagious disease. This means it spreads easily from person to person.

Although Nome had diphtheria antitoxin to treat the disease, the supply had expired. It was no longer usable. The city faced the possibility of a devastating and deadly outbreak of the disease. Radio telegrams were sent across Alaska and as far away as Washington, D.C. asking for help. A supply of antitoxin was located in Anchorage, Alaska, hundreds of miles away from Nome.

A train brought the supply of antitoxin as far as Nenana. It was there that the “Great Race of Mercy” truly began. The first team of sled dogs and their musher, or sled driver, named “Wild Bill” Shannon, left Nenana on January 27, 1925. Multiple teams of sled dogs then relayed the antitoxin through the rugged Alaska Interior. Sled dogs also carried the antitoxin over frozen parts of the Bering Sea.

The dogs and their mushers braved sub-zero temperatures and whiteout conditions on their difficult journey. A dog named Balto helped lead the final sled into Nome on February 2, 1925. The supply of antitoxin had traveled over 600 miles in just a few days.

Balto became a celebrity for his important role in transporting the antitoxin. There is a statue of him in Central Park in New York City. It is dedicated to all of the sled dogs that made the famous relay run. Their bravery and incredible spirit helped save the people of Nome, Alaska.

## Questions

1. Why is diphtheria a dangerous disease?
  
2. What is a “contagious” disease?
  
3. What role did Balto play in the Great Race of Mercy?
  
4. The dogs and their mushers faced extreme weather and had a difficult journey, but they saved many lives. Do you think the danger was worth it? Why or why not?