

THE ALCAN 5000 WINTER RALLY

By Phil Berg

“Always carry a can of dog food in your car,” advised arctic rescuer Allan Errington. “If you have good food in your car, you’ll eat it when you don’t need it. But you probably won’t eat the dog food unless you’re really starving.”

This was not the sort of briefing one expects to hear before beginning a road rally. Most road-rally driver meetings are endlessly boring and full of trivial details—such as what kind of watch is keeping time for the event, or what type of grease was on the rallymaster’s speedometer cable when he measured the course. But the Alcan 5000 Winter Rally is no ordinary event. Far from it. Created by Jerry Hines, a longtime rallymaster best known for his course work on Brock Yates’s One Lap of America rallies, the Alcan is a 6275-mile, twelve-day drive from Seattle to the Arctic Circle and back. In February.

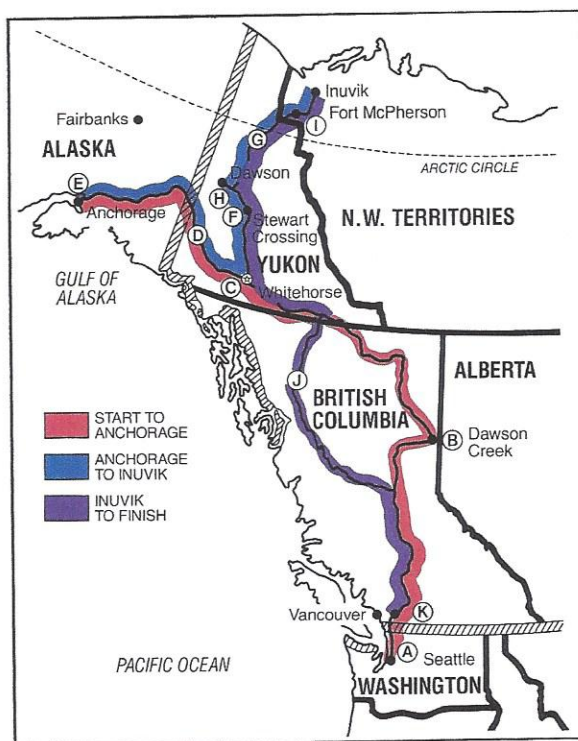
I wasn’t very troubled by Errington’s warnings. Neither was my co-driver, Everett Smith—a survivor of the ill-fated *Car and Driver* One Lap of America entry a few years ago. Then again, neither of us had ever driven to the Arctic in winter.

“When the thermometer drops into moon temperatures,” continued Errington, a veteran of more than 60 arctic rescues and a master on surviving in subzero weather, “it’s said that human flesh will freeze in 30 seconds. But that’s a myth. I’ve never seen any circumstance where the early stages of frostbite occur quicker than 45 seconds.”

Errington then shared the story of a fellow arctic adventurer who spilled gasoline on his hand in –50-degree weather. Because the fuel stayed liquid, he foolishly surmised that it must have been at least 32 degrees—hardly harmful. But the

Left to right: Team members Everett Smith, the author, and Jack Christensen.





It was 40 degrees at the start in Seattle (A), but by Dawson Creek (B) the mercury had dropped below zero. Whitehorse (C) marked the start of an all-nighter through Beaver Creek (D), where we broke a spring. We got a day's rest in Anchorage (E). We found "the Subaru Valdez" in Stewart Crossing (F) before reaching Eagle Plains (G). Satch Carlson proposed a race to Dawson (H), but we forged on to Inuvik instead. Near Fort McPherson (I), birds felled a Suburban. The Cassiar Highway (J) held the last peril before the Harrison Hot Springs finish (K).

fuel was in fact at ambient temperature, -50 degrees, and it instantly stripped the top layer of flesh from the hand of the careless refueler. "Because you'll be filling your cars often," Errington continued, "you should keep that incident in mind."

Errington also informed us that the Arctic is as dry as a desert, and that the best way to keep warm in its "moon" temperatures—from -30 degrees Fahrenheit to -50, on average—is to keep your blood circulating. To keep your blood circulating, you need to drink more. "Don't worry about drinking *too* much," Errington concluded with a smile. "The body has an effective remedy for the overconsumption of liquids."

Right. And human flesh freezes in 45 seconds? We decided that if the situation came up, we'd opt for being a little chilly and thirsty, thank you.

"Bring leg gaiters," advised Chris Jensen. A Cleveland *Plain Dealer* writer and an Alcan veteran, Jensen was once a Vietnam War photographer which should explain his predilection for adventure. He and friend Bill Sadatagi drove a Ford Ranger pickup in the 1988 Trans Amazon Rally—through nine South American countries and countless swarms of dangerous insects. Because Jensen has survived all of these escapades, we treated his advice with respect. And bought leg gaiters.

Jensen and Sadatagi rounded out our in-

formal all-Jeep/Eagle team: one Cherokee Laredo and two Eagle Talon TSi AWDs. The Talons would, of course, be fun to drive, but Everett and I were confident that our Cherokee would be the hot setup. Why? Well, long rallies with complicated 30-mile timed sections following 600-mile transits the same day distill an inevitable, inescapable byproduct: exhaustion. To combat this, we would have a crew of three in our car—something not possible in a Talon loaded with blankets, sleeping bags, extra clothes, first-aid kits, fire extinguishers, spare parts, tools, and enough food to choke Roseanne Barr.

We enlisted Jack Christensen, inventor of the respected Timewise rally com-

RALLY RULES AND SAVVY

The competitive sections of this 6200-mile rally totaled only about 300 miles, split into a dozen small segments ranging from two to 30 miles each. The remaining 5900 miles of the event were long-but-quick drives from one competitive segment to the next. Think of it as a baseball game with each inning played in a different city.

The competitive courses are measured to the one-hundredth of a mile. Teams are instructed to run at one-minute intervals from each other, and they are given a speed at which to travel. The distance of the course calculated by the speed of the car tells the teams when they should arrive at certain places on the course.

Cars are timed as they cross hidden checkpoints. Passing checkpoints early or late by one second gives you one penalty point. Ten seconds late, ten penalty points. Since the teams don't know where the checkpoints are they must try to drive at a calculated continuous speed.

Driving with this kind of accuracy on ice takes practice. Average speeds for the competitive segments ranged between 30 to 40 mph.

Every team that scored well did so with the help of a specialized computer connected to an odometer that could be adjusted to measure fractions of an inch. The computer calculates the exact speed to drive by means of its clock that teams set each day to the U.S. Bureau of Standards shortwave time broadcasts.

In two weeks of driving, the winning team was off the pace set by the rally organizers by only 24 seconds, which is remarkable considering the conditions. Remarkably, the next four cars varied from the winner's performance by no more than 22 seconds.

puter, to occupy the navigator's seat of our Cherokee. Jack is the sort of guy who can solve tangential equations in his head while the driver is pounding on the ABS and the rally car is sliding into a downhill, off-camber, ice-coated corner 20 mph too fast. He'd provide exactly the sort of edge we'd need if we figured to win the Alcan 5000.

We brought dried fruit and granola bars and candy bars and trail mix and microwave dinners. (Jensen advised us to bring microwave food because, in a pinch, you can heat it under hot running water.) We even bought those little candy bars sold in mountaineering stores that boast about 400 calories in every bite. A man could live off this stuff. No way were we going to buy dog food. Or need it. Or eat it.

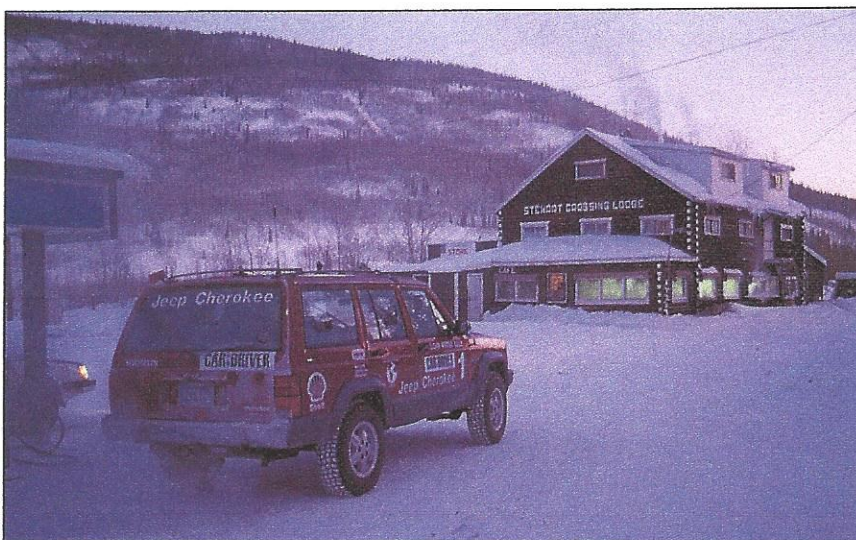
Preparing for the worst, we also brought a host of spare parts for the Cherokee: a fuel pump, a fuel filter, a water pump, and plenty of hoses and belts—all supplied by Eastside Jeep/Eagle in Bellevue, Washington. "And you need a spare exhaust manifold," a mechanic told us.

"Why?" we asked. The 4.0-liter six in the Cherokee is a long engine, and its exhaust manifold is a two-foot piece of cast iron that must weigh about 75 pounds. We didn't exactly want another along for the ride.

"Look at that stack of manifolds," said the Jeep technician, pointing to a discard pile. "Every one of them is broken because the front exhaust-pipe hanger clamp breaks and the whole system pulls down on the manifold. Then you'll burn a valve and the car will stall. And you'll freeze to death."

After examining the clamp in question, we realized that we could bolt a second clamp on backward next to the original—doubling in strength. A neat fix, and one that not only saved us 75 pounds worth of cast iron but also made even more room for our dried peach pits and alfalfa-root snacks.

We also brought an engine-block heater and an electric battery blanket to keep the engine from freezing at night. The Jeep had been fitted with four huge Hella 2000 rally lights by Sadataki and Greg Lester (Jensen's co-driver) and also sported three inside map lights and a Timewise mileage computer. In addition, we had the latest K40 CB; all the truckers we talked to said that it sounded just like a real big-rig radio. ("What are them California cars with writing on 'em, race cars or what?" asked one confused eighteen-



wheeler.) We also installed a two-way Icom business-band radio that could transmit 70 miles in good conditions.

Our teammates' Eagle Talons were equally well outfitted. Michelin supplied tire designer Kevin Clemens to look after our studded snow tires and offer technical help, should we have problems. "Studs don't work very well at -30 degrees," Kevin explained. "But at that temperature the rubber can get an amazing amount of grip on ice."

The rally started in Seattle. From there, we would spend four days driving up the Alaska Highway before heading up the Klondike and Dempster highways through the Yukon and into the Northwest Territories. Finally, the route would turn back south toward Seattle with a swing west through the twisty Cassiar Highway in British Columbia.

As we made our final preparations, Jensen approached with a word of advice: "Watch for suicidal killer trucks on the Cassiar Highway." This sentiment was echoed by nearly every other experienced driver on the rally. "They should have closed that road to the public years ago," one fuel-station attendant in the Yukon later told us. "Sometimes the trucks crash into cars, the rest of the time they leave a snow cloud 100 yards long that blinds you."

We surveyed our competition. Looking hard to beat was longtime ace rally driver Gene Henderson, a veteran of the 1964 Monte Carlo rally and the Shell 4000 through Canada; he was the U.S. rally champion before such names as "Buffum" and "Millen" were recognizable. Henderson has been a "factory" Subaru driver for

Mid-morning at the Stewart Crossing. Gas was three dollars per gallon.

the past few years. He is sharp and by some measure one of the fastest drivers in the group. And he's very serious.

Henderson is a retired vice cop from Dearborn, Michigan. We had another lawman on the trip, too: Dan Goodwin, an active U.S. marshal. Goodwin spent twenty years with the Alaska State Troopers, so he was well prepared for the roads we'd be traveling on. He told us about the time he chased crooks headed from Anchorage to the Canadian border for 65 miles along the highway—until the fleeing felons crashed. "Chasing someone that far is not the frightening part," he said. "The scary part is when you catch them. You're completely alone. The nearest help is probably three hours away." Goodwin was as serious as Errington about the dangers we'd be facing: "If you go off the road at 70 mph in deep snow, you rise above it—like a skipping stone. You sail so far it takes two wreckers to get you out."

You don't need to be a cop to do well in an arctic rally, but you need to know your math and your computers. Art Issler and Fast Eddie Botwick planned to run the route without the expensive computers the rest of us had. Instead, Botwick armed himself only with a small programmable calculator. (The team posted remarkably good scores at the finish.)

Siegfried Lucka, a three-time German road-racing champion who now runs a construction company in Ontario, showed up in a Ford Ranger pickup supported in part by Ford of Canada. He planned to use the Alcan as a shakedown run before competing in the Australian Safari Rally and the Paris-Dakar raid in Africa's Sahara. Lucka and co-driver Michael Ruge entered the event specifically to

drive the untimed transit sections at high speeds.

Our entourage left Seattle and, after running two timed sections, headed for our first night's stop: Quesnel, British Columbia. There, the first scores were posted. We were only a second behind Henderson and co-driver Ralph Beckman. But, as the rally moved up the Alaska Highway toward Anchorage, that spot was going to be hard to keep.

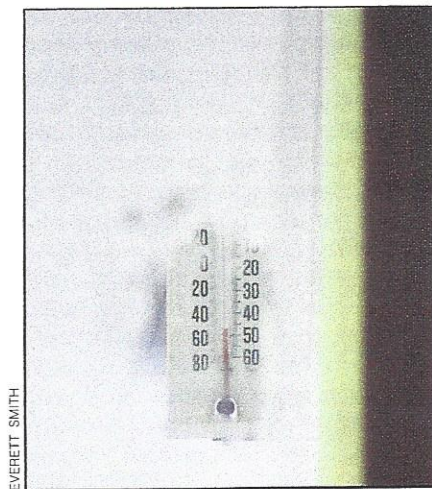
The Alaska Highway, often called the Alcan Highway (for "Alaska-Canada Military Highway"), is a tough road, with spotty shoulders in places. But it is well marked on its 1500-mile length from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, to Fairbanks. Salt doesn't melt ice at the temperatures we were driving through, but on corners we found that the ice was coated with sand or shale chips.

As the rally progressed, the course called for a southern deviation toward Anchorage at a town called Tok. On our way to Tok, during an all-night drive from Whitehorse, the Cherokee developed a nasty and worsening tendency to bottom its rear suspension on what appeared to be small bumps. "It feels like there's nothing back there," Everett called out from his sleep in the back seat—the noise of the solid axle pounding into the Cherokee's frame rails no doubt influencing his dreams. The car felt as if it were being dropped by a helicopter each time it crossed a frost heave. And no wonder: when we hoisted the Cherokee into the air at Anchorage's Jeep/Eagle dealer, we found that the right-rear leaf spring had snapped off at its rear shackle. A new spring and four new shock absorbers later, the Cherokee was once again ready for the return ride on the tough highway—and for the trip north toward Inuvik, Northwest Territories.

Now we were worried. It was getting *cold* outside. As the temperatures dropped, we devised the official *Car and Driver* Arctic Temperature Test: you wrap a piece of duct tape around a can of Diet Coke and pinch the tape in one of the side windows with the can hanging outside. If the temperature is in the "moon" range, the soda will freeze completely solid in six minutes.

On the way to the Arctic Circle, in the wee hours of the morning, we stopped at Stewart Crossing, Yukon, and found Henderson and his Subaru Legacy in the only garage within a 50-mile radius. Henderson was busy barking orders into the

Stewart Crossing low:
-54 degrees.



phone. It turned out that an engine-oil seal had failed during a cold-morning start. Someone had noticed the pool of Mobil 1 on the ground and nicknamed the car "the Subaru Valdez."

Though we hadn't seen any scores from the timed legs after the Anchorage rest stop, we felt good about our performance. Following Henderson's misfortune, our most serious threat came from the second "factory" Subaru Legacy wagon of Ken Knight and Dave Harkcom, executives at the Subaru-Isuzu facility in Indiana. These two have quietly been running rallies for years. And Ken has driven up the Alcan Highway on engineering drives, so he knows the roads and conditions.

Because Knight and Harkcom were driving without a third teammate, we had made a team decision in Anchorage to keep them up all night—hoping their fatigue would give us an edge on the timed sections out of Anchorage. While Everett and Jack got needed sleep, I took the Subaru teammates to the bar for an extended "conversation."

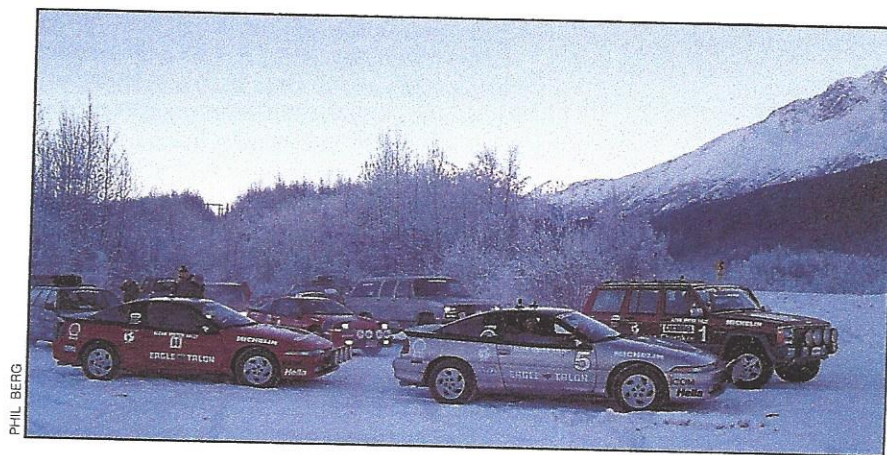
My strategy backfired. As we drank our bottles of Kokanee beer, Ken and Dave told me their heart-wrenching story. Their car had been lovingly assembled by honest, hardworking Indiana folk, each of whom had signed the team's dark-blue Legacy. These people had stayed up nights away from their wives and children preparing the car. Dave intimated that these poor, honest, hard-working co-workers would suffer tremendous disgrace if the two were not victorious in the rally. Then, after several more bottles of beer, I think Ken began to tell me about how one of his daughters needed new shoes.

On the next timed section, Harkcom and Knight took only one penalty point. I, meanwhile, shaken by the tearful story of Dave and Ken, took five. When the scores were posted that night at the Eagle Plains Lodge near the Arctic Circle, we had fallen to third place.

Meanwhile, Henderson and Beckman showed in their rejuvenated Subaru—the car having been fixed with a hefty glop of gasket cement. That evening, Knight tried to tell us how a new seal had been air-freighted for Henderson's car from Subaru's Portland parts depot, and how mechanics were waiting on call in Whitehorse, and how the engineers at Fuji Heavy Industries told him over the phone that they would stay up 24 hours designing an improved oil seal for the Legacy.



Jack's magic box—the Timewise mileage computer. Mileage can be adjusted accurately to 1/100,000th of an inch.

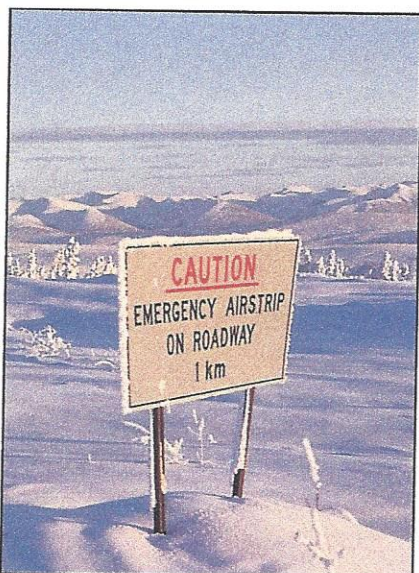


and how they would soon fly in from Japan with a full rally crew and rebuild the Subarus, and how they were even going to install CD players and bring a team masseuse for Dave and Ken.

We didn't fall for Knight's routine a second time. But it was now clear that the competition from the Subaru effort was going to be fierce.

Some of the other teams posed less of a threat. Tim Paterson, the author of MS-DOS—the operating system on which IBM-class personal computers are based—was having problems in his Porsche 911 Carrera 4. His computer expertise had failed him: by feeding the wrong speed change into the team's computer, Paterson and co-driver Don Gibson dropped out of winning contention on a quick two-mile timed section in Whitehorse. Brian Davitt and Adrian Crane were driving a four-wheel-drive Talon and were frequently the first car to reach the end of each transit section—often by

Seventeen cars started the rally. One Suzuki broke before we hit really cold temperatures.



We'd been warned about killer trucks doing 85 mph and drifting 10 wheels through corners. No one told us we'd have to watch out for airplanes, too.



hours over the rest of the field—but a computing error also knocked them out of contention. Satch Carlson, still on “sabbatical” from *AutoWeek*, flipped a switch too soon in his Mazda 323GTX and racked up 85 seconds worth of penalty points in one swoop.

We left Eagle Plains and headed out in the dark pre-dawn hours to the Arctic Circle. Just past the Arctic Circle sign, at the Northwest Territories border before the town of Fort McPherson, we found a large sign proclaiming, “Radar Detector Use and Possession Illegal.” A week ago, we would have expected to see a sign reading, “Go Back While You’re Still Alive. Find Warmth. Buy More Thinsulate Polypropylene Garments.”

By now, organizer Jerry Hines had decided that probably everyone was tired and most people wouldn’t want to drive all the way north to Inuvik—about 114 miles one way from our Fort McPherson fuel stop. So he changed the course to make an Inuvik trip optional. We elected to go, summoning the spirit of the Yukon Mounties’ Lost Patrol and the Mad Trapper of Rat River, but all but four other cars cruised down to Dawson City. We will forever consider our fellow competitors who went south for hot food and long sleep to be, in short, wimps.

The road to Inuvik is a broad two-lane highway, well graded and loaded with sweeping turns around rolling hills. We passed a few settlements of houses and a few locals in pickup trucks, but little else.

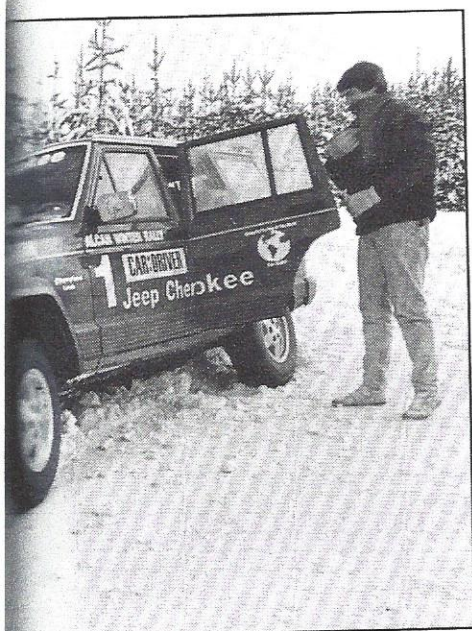
In the winter, Inuvik is quiet—as you’d expect in a place where the daytime tem-

perature hovers at -40 degrees. It is a clean, brightly painted town of 3000. For 57 days each summer, the sun is visible at midnight. Satellite dishes here are aimed straight across the ground.

Just as we were driving down the main street of town, a young woman dressed in bright clothes straight off the pages of *Vogue* and with coat open to the wind crossed the road in the sort of lightfooted gait you’d expect of a fashion model on a stage. Hmmm. Inuvik may be a desolate place, but it is clearly not a dangerous place.

Rounding a turn as we drove back toward the Arctic Circle and Eagle Plains, we came upon a group of suicidal ptarmigans on the road. These dim-witted birds look exactly like the snowballs left by a plow’s blade, and they refuse to move when a car comes up on them. I stepped heavily into the ABS, but I collected a few before I stopped. Jack called back on the radio to warn the sweep Suburban following us of the hazard. Unfortunately, the birds spooked the Suburban anyway—it went off the road and into a ditch. We were ten miles ahead and entering a deep gorge when the sweep vehicle’s plea for help came over the radio. Sixty seconds later, and we’d have never heard them.

The Cherokee couldn’t budge the Suburban back onto the ice road, so we set off to find help. We found a road-maintenance camp twenty miles south and were assured by road workers Joe and Willie Snowshoe that a grader was on its way toward the Suburban to rescue it. While we were waiting, Joe served us fried cari-



Heading down the stretch, I stuffed the Cherokee into a snowbank.

bou heart—on Valentine's Day. In return we gave him all of our microwave lasagna.

I had computed our fuel range to be 320 miles exactly. But in the two hours we sat with the engine idling while we made sure help was coming to the Suburban (we left it running so it wouldn't freeze up), our fuel level dropped precariously low. For 60 miles south to the Arctic Circle, I used only enough throttle to keep us moving at 45 mph. The wind picked up as the sun went away, and it blew hard enough to send cold jets of air rushing in through the door handles of the Cherokee. The landscape looked colder than the moon. This is *the* wrong place on earth to run out of fuel. The Eagle Plains fuel stop was about 24 miles south of the Arctic Circle. At the circle sign, the Cherokee's fuel light came on. Two gallons of fuel remained, enough for 32 miles—if nothing went wrong. Fact: it is possible to sweat like a Finnish sauna attendant when you're running out of gas and the outside temperature is -45 degrees.

We made it to the fuel stop.

The Cassiar Highway heading south from Whitehorse through British Columbia gave rise to the famous Alcan 5000 saying: "The easiest part is behind you." Mindful of Jensen's earlier warning, we watched out for big rigs. We'd seen some logging trucks doing 85 mph behind Hines's Audi 5000CS Quattro, drifting ten wheels through the corners, but, luckily for us, a large bridge had collapsed at the southernmost tip of the Cassiar, and truck traffic was unseasonably light.

We had settled into a good routine on the timed sections, and after a breathtaking drive down the alpine Cassiar, only two timed legs were left before the rally's finish. Our calm and precise driving, I thought, had been honed to perfection in the past ten days. It was only bad luck that had us out of first place. This would be the stretch where we would collect the Subarus and wave the famous Jeep flag. This was, it turned out, where I stuffed the Cherokee into a snowbank with a *National Geographic* photographer in our fourth seat to record the incident. Fortunately, that leg of the rally was eliminated because of a bad route instruction.

When the final points were tallied at the finish in Harrison Hot Springs, British Columbia, we ended up in fourth place. After 300 miles of precisely timed sections during the twelve-day event, the difference in penalty points between Henderson's winning Subaru and Jensen's fifth-place Talon was only 22 seconds. We were only twelve seconds out of first, having lost third place by one second on the final timed section to teammates Sadataki and Dave Killian.

In 6200 miles, we had come close to getting stuck in the snow only once. In fact, we may have been overprepared: it is possible, we discovered, to take a normal vehicle, drive sensibly, and get halfway to the North Pole in the middle of winter. It isn't costly, and it isn't frightening. You can find an open gas station at least every 200 miles, and you can eat at a McDonald's any time of the day or night as far north as Whitehorse.

And, with luck, not once will you have to eat dog food.