



ICE MAN

The *returneth*

ANGUS BEGG ATTEMPTS TO WORK OUT THE COMPLEX CHARACTER THAT IS SIR RANULPH FIENNES, WHO RECENTLY ATTEMPTED TO BECOME THE FIRST PERSON TO CROSS THE ATLANTIC DURING THE WINTER MONTHS

He's mentioned in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the greatest living explorer. I'm not quite sure how one would apply to set such a yardstick, but my abiding memory of the impressively eye-browed Sir Ranulph Fiennes is of him posing for a photograph, in a jacket and watch, on the east pier of Cape Town's V&A Waterfront. A modelling 'shoot' for a label, he was leaned against a Land Rover, with a designer travel bag draped over his shoulder.



The Ice Team on the crevasse boom of the Caterpillar



The Fuel Scoots and Snowflake, the snow truck

It had been a favour for Sir Ranulph's American-sounding-German-speaking nephew named Michael, who lives in Nepal and owns the label. This was the day before the explorer would depart for Antarctica on his latest polar expedition – 'The Coldest Journey'. Michael was taking the pictures.

That bit of the adventure was the easy part. The problem is that Sir Ranulph got frostbite while training for the hard part – the skiing. So he's already back, probably on his Devon farm by now, nursing his sorrows and daily living with the adventurer's agony of what might have been.

Nevertheless, the journey continues. It remains Sir Ran's quest, and he is still very much alive, albeit understandably a little deflated after the years spent preparing for this most significant and dangerous of polar expeditions.

But I'm still trying to work out this distant relative of the royal family, this third cousin to actor Ralph Fiennes, this part-time country gentleman who cut off his own frostbitten fingers with a saw on the advice of his wife. Prince Charles – a long-time patron of Fiennes' expeditions – has referred to him as "marvellously mad".

Not many will know that 'Sir Ran' grew up in Constantia and spent his early school years in Cape Town; that he was

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part of a local gang, in the old sense of the word; that his nickname was 'By' – Afrikaans for 'bee'; and that they used to play *skip-die-blik* in what then must've been a larger and wilder Tokai Forest.

Or that his full name is Sir Ranulph Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes, 3rd Baronet OBE (Order of the British Empire). This speaks to a history of privilege found in the United Kingdom and a few other select spots keen on monarchic tradition.

But with said privilege comes expectations, often self-imposed, to perform better than most in some or other field. His father had died while serving in the Royal Scots Greys regiment of the British armed forces, and after a stint with the Special Air Services as a demolitions expert, Sir Ranulph's life of adventure had only just begun.

He was involved in counter-insurgency

operations in Oman, after which he led a hovercraft expedition up the Nile; parachuted onto a Norwegian glacier; travelled the entire planet via both Poles; discovered the lost city of Ubar in Oman; and walked across Antarctica unaided.

It's his tale of cutting off his own fingers that had me battling to work him out. Admittedly, the better part of an hour – before he was down the gangplank and off in a helicopter – didn't give me much to work on, and after viewing our interview yet again I was questioning whether the deadpan expression accompanying a tale related like buttering toast was 'macho' Sir Ranulph playing up for the camera for the thousandth time or simply his telling it the way it is.

Someone who knows him very well is Dr Mike Stroud, a gastroenterologist at a Southampton hospital and relative giant

of polar exploration. He has been exploring with Fiennes for over 30 years.

He's the man who dreamt up The Coldest Journey, and speaking to us on the deck of the *SA Agulhas* the day before the expedition set off, he confirmed that his veteran exploring partner was "extremely tough" – all the more reason for Sir Ranulph's intense irritation at having allowed himself to get frostbite before they had even started the trip.

Stroud didn't underplay the danger of the venture. No one has ever crossed the Antarctic in winter, a period that will see four months of darkness and temperatures between -20 and -90°C.

Stroud himself has completed five North Pole expeditions. In 1992 – walking with Sir Ranulph – he made the first unsupported crossing of the Antarctic. And he's one of very few men to have lived for a month at temperatures of -68°C. That may be seriously off-putting to some, but Sir Ranulph has famously been quoted as saying that, "There is no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing."

What would be a serious deterrent to most, however, would be the living conditions – something that no one has yet experienced. He and the five supporting crew would share a shipping container for the better part of a year, including the four dark, thoroughly

freezing months of the polar winter.

So unique are these living conditions that for the duration of the expedition, Stroud is conducting a study for the European Space Agency and NASA called the 'White Mars Project'. "The crew... will be isolated in a small living module in a very hostile environment, with no way out and no daylight for six months."

It's the perfect analogy for astronauts on a prolonged space mission. It's also a recipe for extreme stress.

Stroud seems to delight in relating just how tense living quarters in cramped, freezing, polar conditions can be. "There have been huts where there's a white line drawn across the hut with one group of individuals saying this is our half – that's your half. That's happened."

Conditions are so inhospitable and dangerous in Antarctica in winter that the British Foreign Office has until now refused permission for its citizens to attempt to cross it (because there's no chance of rescue). Not that there'd be a rush in applications, but it nevertheless meant these polar explorers had to wait for the development of certain technology before they were given the green light.

So the challenge that Stroud once saw as a two-man expedition has become a massive operation. In essence, it's a train involving two Caterpillar bulldozers, two

containers (one for accommodation, the other for stores – both on ski-fitted sleds) weighing 80 tonnes each. Fiennes was meant to be one of two skiers 40 metres ahead of this 'train' of vehicles – whose job it would be to warn of deadly crevasses that may lie in their path. That perilous job now will doubtless reside with one of the others.

Expedition co-leader Anton Bowring – another of Fiennes' polar expedition veteran comrades – says although the machinery has been tested to temperatures of -50°C in Sweden, they have no idea how it will perform at 90 below.

"So we're relying on technical know-how and, uh, good luck," says Bowring, his left eyebrow arching upward.

Bowring was with Fiennes when they carried out their first expedition. Called the 'Transglobe Expedition' and crossing both Poles in the three years it took to undertake the journey, it was to set a standard for extreme global adventure. And for Bowring, then a novice polar enthusiast entrusted with planning that and subsequent Fiennes' adventures, it revealed the man's character, which will be called upon in regard to this latest journey of 4 000 kilometres through what will often be blinding snow in temperatures never before experienced



by man – at least, not by anyone alive.

Now it's to be attempted by lesser known polar mortals. Men who haven't lived a life of setting records, and who themselves will have to be wary of the dreaded frostbite.

Sir Ranulph's previous encounter with the condition was painful. He says that while waiting for the nerve ends to grow beneath the frostbitten ends of his fingers (on the surgeon's advice), he was eventually prompted by his wife – tired of his complaining as he painfully bumped a nerve end yet again – to end it all. After trying the odd saw, he found the right one – and dispatched the offending digits.

Although that particular hand spends more time in his pocket, he happily wiggles his fingers for the camera when needed. It's easy to think of the expedition as a *Boys' Own* adventure, paid for by the various corporate sponsors who see mileage in Sir Ranulph's sense of risk and adventure. But he has long been aware that the publicity his expeditions raise can be put to good use, and in 1993 – the same year he and Stroud had crossed the Antarctic unassisted – he was awarded the OBE for "human endeavour and charitable services".

This particular trip hopes to raise US\$10 million for Seeing Is Believing, a charity that combats preventable blindness. Relating a tale he's obviously

told too many times, Sir Ranulph says he once had snow-blindness for 10 days – in which time he couldn't see, and thought he may never see again. "It's absolutely frightening."

Beyond the charity and White Mars projects are significant studies involving climate change, new GPS techniques and an educational website – with an interactive component – for those British and Commonwealth schools connected to the Internet, and even those that are not. It's a lot of work, which won't leave much time for the Monopoly and Kindles the crew have taken along.

Most of his expeditions had in part been planned by his wife, Ginny, by all accounts a true soul mate he met when he was 12 and she was nine and who, evidence suggests, loved getting her hands dirty. On expeditions, she'd man the radio, and back at their farm in Somerset she'd bring in the cows.

Her death from stomach cancer just over nine years ago is said to have devastated Sir Ranulph. Although he has since remarried and had his first child, Ginny's passing could well have triggered a renewed desire to explore. Some have even whispered that he took on such a dangerous expedition because he no longer has anything to lose (although he did tell us that leaving behind a six-year-old daughter is "a new experience").

The show must go on

The rest of Sir Ranulph's Ice Team has decided to continue 'The Coldest Journey'. "The decision was unanimous and immediate. We had a job to do and a strong desire; we were going to stay and do it," said Brian Newham, who has now taken over as expedition leader on the ice.

Sir Ran was evacuated from Antarctica in February after he had developed severe frostbite. The five remaining team members he was meant to lead will now attempt to cross the polar ice cap without his valuable expertise. With Newham will be Ian Prickett, Rob Lambert, Spencer Smirl and Richmond Dykes.

The Ice Team immediately had to reassess how they would continue their journey. "With one fewer, it meant that the workload for each of us increased, and we had to rethink how we would deploy the ground-penetrating radar for detecting crevasses, as this was going to be chiefly Ran's role during the traverse," Newham told *BBC News*.

The team had been in Antarctica for over two months and were preparing for the official start of the Antarctic winter on 20 March at 11:02 GMT – the time of the equinox, Newham explained.

Sir Ranulph added his words of support in a press release: "Under the expert leadership of Brian Newham, I know that they have every chance of pulling off this extraordinary feat and making me and people across the Commonwealth extremely proud. It is a very difficult and dangerous undertaking, but if there is any one group of people who can do it – it is them."

But for now, the 3rd Baronet of Banbury won't meet some heroic end in the snow. Neither will he himself set any records.

While the sumptuous challenge of the cold, white unknown remains, this legendary explorer may have to be content with milking the cows, and bouncing his little daughter up and down on his lap. As they say in the comparatively timid game of rugby, "It's a big ask". ©

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