



**MEDIA UPDATE**

**Friday 5 March 2010**

### **ICE FIELDS CREATE OBSTACLE FOR SOLO EXPEDITION TO NORTH POLE**

Huge ice fields have created an early obstacle for Western Australian polar explorer Tom Smitheringale in his quest to become the third person in history to reach the North Pole solo and unsupported.

After five days, Tom has covered just 9.5km and has experienced some of the toughest terrain he is likely to encounter during his whole expedition.

During the first two days, Tom faced ice fields that were covered in blocks of ice – some the size of cars, others the size of houses. It is near impossible traversing this harsh terrain even pulling one sled. Tom is pulling two sleds. Through these ice fields he employed a strategy called ‘double hauling’, where he unfastens one of his sleds and leaves it behind. Then after making some ground, he goes back for his other sled and repeats. At times while traversing these ice fields the going got so hard that Tom was sliding down the ice blocks head first on his stomach in the hope that his bulk and momentum would pull the sled he had tethered to him over the crest and down towards him. He covered just one nautical mile on each of these days.

The terrain for the next three days was kinder but Tom has again ended up in a lumpy ice field, which he said was like cauliflower, and the terrain is getting worse. He is planning to backtrack tomorrow to try and find a better route.

After thick grey skies for the first couple of days, the weather has been favourable for the past few days with clear skies, no wind and no drift. However, wind is picking up from a northerly direction, which is good and bad – good because it will close up some of the leads; bad because it will push the ice back towards the land, resulting in negative drift. Positive drift is what Tom wants as it will push him towards the North Pole.

Tom’s spirits remain high and despite its harshness, he is thriving in the environment. “There is more awesome up here than the entire rest of the planet,” he told his Australian-based support team via satellite phone earlier today.

## **THE MISSION**

Tom is trekking 800km of frozen Arctic sea on foot, alone, and dragging a 160kg sled, to the North Pole. It will take 70 days in temperatures as low as minus 50 degrees Celsius.

To get there, Tom will have to ski, climb, guard against polar bear attack, risk falling through the increasingly thin Arctic ice and swim across leads (breaks in the ice). Five people have tried the same feat in the past five years. All failed and two have died trying. In the history of Arctic exploration only two men have ever reached the North Pole solo and unsupported and Tom will be the first Australian ever to make it.

Tom set off from Ward Hunt Island at the northern tip of Ellesmere Island in the very north of Canada on Monday 1 March at 3am Australian WST time. The original plan to leave from McClintock Inlet had to be scrapped at the last minute due to a huge lead forming just off the coast.

## **BACKGROUND**

Born in Perth, Western Australia, to English parents, Tom finished his secondary education in England. He spent five years in the British Army, including time in the Queen's company of the Grenadier Guards (guarding Princess Di among others) before returning home to Fremantle.

Tom is passionate about the great outdoors, travelling annually to New Zealand to climb in the South Island and regularly runs guided trips in WA's Stirling Ranges. He is an accomplished adventure racer competing in many extreme multi-day events often without sleep that involve a variety of outdoor sports such as mountain biking, running/trekking, abseiling, climbing, and kayaking. When he's not pulling a sled, Tom divides his time between working as a personal trainer and preparing for his next expedition applying the lessons he has learned in almost two decades of pushing his limits.

## **THE CAUSE**

Tom's charity partner for the One Man Epic is Burnet Institute.

"During my military service in Africa, the suffering I witnessed had a profound effect on me," Tom said. "I saw people enduring unimaginable poverty, hunger and the devastating effects of diseases like HIV and AIDS. Seeing this first hand really put into context what I'd seen in the media. While I was in Africa, I vowed that one day I would find a way to help make a difference. Discovering that some of the leading research into these diseases is done right here in Australia at the Burnet Institute gave me added inspiration."

The Burnet Institute focuses on curing and preventing the spread of some of the world's worst infectious diseases of global significance. Burnet has offices in Australia, Fiji, China (Tibet), Indonesia, Lao PDR, Burma, PNG, Mozambique and Thailand.

A big part of Burnet's work focuses on the 'Big Three': HIV, Tuberculosis (TB), and malaria which cause the deaths of seven million people every year. In addition, an estimated 33 million people are living with HIV and one third of the world's population is currently infected with TB. Burnet's work combines world-class laboratory research and practical, frontline public health programs in some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised communities around the world.

Tom hopes that through his expedition, he can motivate others to support the Burnet Institute's outstanding work and help improve the lives of people living with these terrible diseases.

## **CONTACT**

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