



MEDIA UPDATE

Thursday 18 March 2010

NORTH POLE EXPLORER REACHES FIRST DEGREE

Western Australian adventurer Tom Smitheringale is “living the dream” while attempting to become the third person in history to reach the North Pole solo and unsupported.

While most would call dragging a 160kg sled across snow and ice for days on end in temperatures around minus 30 degrees Celcius a nightmare, Tom considers himself extremely fortunate to be on his way to the very top of the world.

He was extremely excited earlier this week to cross the 84 degree mark on his way to 90 degrees north. There are roughly 111km between degrees and after 18 days on the ice, Tom is 659km from the North Pole. He has travelled 114km from his start point at Ward Hunt Island.

Tom has so far avoided any encounters with polar bears, is yet to swim across any leads (breaks in the ice) and has minimal frostbite. He has experienced some extremely harsh terrain, which has been as much a mental battle as a physical slog. However, the arduous terrain has been tempered by mostly clear skies and minimal wind and drift, and Tom’s spirits on the whole have remained high.

“The conditions have been reasonably kind, with temperatures in the negative high 20s or low 30s, which has made it reasonably comfortable,” Tom told his Western Australian based support team via satellite phone earlier today. “The ice is slowly improving, so I should be able to make more distance and find it a bit easier going. It was good to get to the first degree.”

Last week’s shock of breaking two ski poles has subsided somewhat. “We’ll make do with what we have and hopefully they will make the distance,” Tom said after fixing one of his broken poles with a tent pole and some rope. He still has two good poles on the go and has also adjusted his grip on the poles, putting less pressure on them.

“I’m very lucky and am having a great time. Some days are really really tough, but other days are peppered with brilliant moments and I will never forget how lucky I am. I’m living the dream at the moment. I’m very fortunate.”

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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