

Mike (M.P.) Laird (1974-87) – North Pole Adventure

I never would have thought that the basic skills I learned during Outdoor Education trips at the Academy during the 80's would go on to be the building blocks for the skills necessary to take me almost 600 kilometres on foot to the Magnetic North Pole three decades later.

For some people to reach 'A Pole' is a life long ambition. For me though, it is something that only really came onto my radar two years ago. And the two years that followed have been wholly necessary to build on existing skills and to fill any gaps where the required skills simply did not exist. First Aid, gun handling, navigation and general camp craft were the start but Satellite Communications, polar bear psychology and frost bite treatments were added to the arsenal of skills needed to keep us in one piece and ensure our safe return.

Flying from Edinburgh to London and on to Ottawa was easy. After that though the terrain from the plane window grew ever more rugged, the outside temperatures dropped colder and the planes that transported us grew smaller in size as the flights landed and took off from Iqaluit, then Iglulik, Arctic Bay and then finally Resolute Bay. Stepping off the last plane the temperature was below -30C and the cold arctic air gave us its first taste of the torments that lay ahead. Down jackets were hastily put on over fleeces and two layers of hats and gloves donned whilst we came to terms with the fact that our nostrils were frozen. Arctic shock is a very real condition that can set in when expeditionists first come to these regions and can dash all hopes before people even venture out onto the ice. Thankfully none of us suffered such a fate.

Four days were spent in and around the South Camp Inn at Resolute. In a town of just over 200 people (which I believe is the most northerly, permanently inhabited town in the world) it was the place we chose to use as 'Base' and where we tested kit, finalised logistics, used the pump-action shotguns and bagged up food rations for the weeks ahead. Despite having visited 73 countries and taken part in countless expeditions across the globe, this was a trip that would test me further than any other had so far.

The day that we left and set out across the ice was deceiving. The sun shone for us, the wind abated, we unzipped our wind suits and wore only one layer of gloves. It seemed like a dream but the serenity was short lived when only two days later plummeting temperatures, fierce winds and swirling snow



soon enveloped us. Some blue-skied days were magnificent and sunny, yet others were harsh and soul destroying in the way they attacked us. You could never tell what any particular day would bring when you first ventured out from the tent. There were in fact three days where venturing from the tent at all would have been so dangerous we decided to stay under 'canvas'. These were difficult days because staying in the tent was boring, stressful and cold. Even though all of my new found friends were great guys, we were still effectively strangers, and small tensions could easily arise.

For yourself, try to imagine existing on top of a double bed with two other men and all of your kit, snow covered boots and wet sleeping bags. You sleep there, cook and eat there, wee into bottles in front of each other and forego all privacy. Above your heads hang gloves, balaclavas and mitts to defrost and dry but as they do the droplets of water drip onto your clothes and sleeping bag, freeze and add to your daily torment. Over the coming days and weeks the accumulated wetness mounts and you have to work out how to exist with it and each other and keep your clothes and sleeping bag as comfortable as possible.

One great and incredibly brave guy on our expedition was extracted with severe frost bite to three fingers and while the rest of us finished, we felt sad for he who did not. Temperatures of -40C and -50C have a nasty habit of damaging the human body no matter how good your kit or how hardy you believe you are. Initially a diet of well over 5,000 calories seemed fine but significant weight loss caught up with us all. I lost 20 pounds in less than a month but one of our team lost 29 pounds. The Arctic is a very real challenge.

The Magnetic North Pole is a place that will continue to lure many an explorer and expeditionist for decades to come. To have enjoyed it makes me feel very privileged, yet it leaves me with an outstanding question which has no doubt been faced by all of those who reached it before me. And that is 'What next?'

