

RIDING THE ICE WIND

By Kite and Sledge across Antarctica

ALASTAIR VERE NICOLL

Foreword by
BEAR GRYLLS

I.B. TAURIS
LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2010 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

Distributed in the United States and Canada Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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ISBN 978 1 84885 306 5

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Typeset by JCS Publishing Services Ltd, www.jcs-publishing.co.uk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham



Foreword

Riding the Ice Wind is the tale of a wild gamble, an adventure so ambitious that few have even attempted it, let alone pulled it off. It is the very honest, human tale of a journey to the coldest, windiest place on earth for nearly three months of indescribable hardship and pain.

People think adventure is romantic. But romance dies pretty fast in temperatures of -45°C . In truth, people have no idea how people like Al and his team can endure the trials of difficult expeditions. Such journeys are always hard to explain. Often it is easier to move the subject on. I understand that feeling well. 'Been away recently, have you?' It is a question that cannot be answered in 30 seconds over a pint. But it is answered beautifully in this book.

A heart-led account of one of the longest, hardest polar journeys of recent years, *Riding the Ice Wind* is a testimony to the fact that enduring hardship isn't about bravado but about a quiet, at times faltering, daily decision to endure. What impressed me most about this journey was the team. They succeeded simply because they worked together so well, although such words don't really do their achievement justice. Their story isn't one of stiff upper lip, but rather a strong resolve to do their part, and more, and never to complain. That is real courage. Getting on and enduring, with a smile.

I know all of the team, except David, and I am so full of admiration for them, as men, as friends and as adventurers. Al is always shy of being called an 'adventurer', as if he feels he hasn't earned the title. This book tells a different tale. Al, you have an adventurer's spirit

through and through, trust me. I have known Al since he was 13 and I have realised over the years that he possesses a rare quality that life often rewards. Toil. Toil, sweat and tears. Hard work, never quitting. And of course he possesses the eyes of a dreamer, one of T.E. Lawrence's all-important 'dreamers of the day'.

Al, Paul, David and Pat have my greatest admiration. Now go home and enjoy a beer, please.

Bear Grylls



Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Route Map	x
Introduction	1
1 Beginnings	5
2 Flaubert's Parrot	12
3 A New Life	16
4 Altered Reality	22
5 Constructing the Creature	29
6 There But Still Nowhere	39
7 Family Matters	45
8 Fly on my Wind	57
9 A New Horizon	64
10 The Icefall	77
11 The Layer Cake	85
12 Down and Out	96
13 Silence Valley	102
14 The Sword of Damocles	110
15 Difficult Decisions	126
16 It's All in the Mind	132
17 Uncontactable	140
18 Divide and Rule	144
19 Heat Miser	152
20 Travelling Without Moving	161
21 The South Pole	171
22 Leaving the End of the Earth	181

23	North	197
24	The Winds of Change	202
25	Touching the Void	206
26	Mutability	213
27	The Final Burst	221
28	An End and a Beginning	226
	Epilogue	239
	Select Bibliography	251
	Author's Note	255
	Acknowledgements	257

Illustrations

- 1 Alastair
- 2 Paul
- 3 Patrick
- 4 David
- 5 Our first taste of man-hauling at Patriot Hills
- 6 Patrick and Alastair hauling up the Axel Heiberg glacier
- 7 Looking out over Independence Hills in the Heritage Range
- 8 Patrick and Alastair crossing a snow bridge on the Axel Heiberg
- 9 A parhelic circle above Silence Valley
- 10 Taking a break on the high polar plateau
- 11 Heading due south
- 12 Over sastrugi
- 13 Emerging from a blizzard
- 14 Patrick being pursued by a battered pulk
- 15 At the axis of the world
- 16 A euphoric team
- 17 Alastair meets his baby

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Images 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 16 © martinhartley.com

Image 15 © Conrad Dickinson

Image 17 © Lyndsey Young

Introduction

Life is not about finding yourself; it is about creating yourself . . .

George Bernard Shaw

We are all familiar with the phenomenon of the mid-life crisis. We can instantly recognise its distinctive and incongruous couplings – the uplifted blonde with the down-slung grey, the slow body in the fast car, the ostentatious outfits but the thinning plumage – but we are less familiar with its quarter-life counterpart. A decade after leaving school and looking ahead to a life of repetitive drudgery like a goldfish in an aquarium, those hitting their late twenties or early thirties can often also face their own, quieter, crisis of direction. While the mid-life crisis is essentially Epicurean – characterised by indulgence – the quarter-life crisis is more Stoic. Rather than wanting to be in society, it wants to be outside it. It wants to get its kicks from something of substance – rather than from substances. It aspires to reinvention rather than reliving.

After my first five years of professional life, I felt a little empty – as if nothing in the current circle of my existence had the capacity to truly stir me. Admittedly, to feel restless after such a comparatively short period of working life sounds somewhat pathetic – despite the fact that for most juniors such a period of apprenticeship inevitably involves repetitious and uninspiring tasks with little responsibility – but it is precisely this brevity, the feeling that you have only dipped your toe into ‘real’ life but have found it unbearable, which leads to the quarter-life crisis. It is worst for those who have excelled at school

and university and who expect and have got used to standing out, or have been funnelled by that very success into professional careers that are the most unromantic and laborious. Your future spreads out before you and can seem so interminable, so dull, so filled with routine tasks – each successive day the same as the next, the career ladder so hierarchical, and promotion won by time-serving, conservatism and petty politics. It is the world of precedent – you learn by copying what those have done before you, all risks nullified. The formula of each year punctuated only by the odd holiday spent going to the same overcrowded and rapidly melting ski-slopes.

The crisis doesn't just have to be professional. Maybe marriage and parenthood are not as ideal as you had imagined them. Perhaps the reality of a long monogamous relationship seems like a more daunting challenge than it did at the first cupidity of love. Some might feel that they've rushed into a career after school or university mainly to satisfy the wishes of their parents or their bank manager, without ever having given careful thought to what they might have been more suited to and are now, for the first time, seriously contemplating how they want to live their life. They ask themselves how they will attain the fulfilment that they dreamed of when they were younger but were too green to reach for. Do they dare to give it all up and strive for something else? If so – what? How can they be fulfilled and rewarded? Life stretches out ahead – how should it be lived? The world suddenly seems a bigger and harder place than it did from the back seat of the family car. It did for me. I felt dissatisfied and a little empty.

I know now that at the same time as I was experiencing this restlessness – this existential dizziness, if you like – in fact society itself was creating a perfect storm, of which we now all have a steadier view. For this was the world of consumerism and excess before the ensuing financial Gomorrah of the credit crunch. I didn't understand it all fully but, like so many of us, my feelings were partly personal and partly an intuitive reaction to the insistent tug of the encroaching whirlwind. Like ants, we have an infinite capacity to create pointless occupations for ourselves but now this was as extreme as it can have ever been: a world of endless cycles; circles within circles; forms to fill in; committees to compromise; consumer

fripperies to manufacture–sell–break–discard–replace; businesses to buy–build–strip–hold–sell – all rotating and counter-rotating within synthetic markets that play pass the parcel with products that don't exist, so that we can lay bets on when the music will stop. And all this activity, this reaching and over-reaching, fans a powerful vortex that spins in an endless gyre, served by myopic hierarchies that face perpetually inward.

I wanted to break away, to endeavour to have my actions match my ideals, to feel a sense of self-worth, even a taste of genuine euphoria. It seemed to me that embracing something of my own choosing whole heartedly and with inspiration would be the only real cure for the restlessness I was experiencing and so I sought a big challenge, something that I thought other people might relate to – partly so that I could feel that what I had done was an achievement, not just inside my head but objectively – because a great undertaking that is not recognised as such externally can also be more easily diminished by yourself.

So, with no prior experience at all and no good reason why anyone would back me, I decided to plan a ski traverse of Antarctica – the coldest, windiest and highest continent on earth. Maybe I hoped to find some nirvana, perhaps I had watched too many movies or maybe I had just gone plain mad, destined to replace one emptiness, one set of endless winds for another. It soon dawned on me that the identity I was experimenting with wasn't a perfect fit and that some very uncomfortable consequences were going to follow when the grim reality of my dream turned out to be a little more than I could handle.

And then Annabel fell pregnant and the mad lunge for the open air didn't seem so sensible after all.

Now, two years after that initial bolt for freedom, I was lying not far from the very remotest point on the planet, off the map, enveloped in whiteness. I couldn't help but consider the radical turn my life had taken. No one can ever tell me now that you can forecast how things will pan out.

I was dimly aware of a thin stream of water trickling across my lips as an ice-cube that was stuck to my nose started to melt and

trickle down my beard. I could barely keep my eyes open but I couldn't afford to sleep. The tent canvas creaked, strung taut against the wind. David kept nodding asleep, nearly dropping his rice into his lap. I had to kick him awake to avoid him making a mess in the tent. I wondered what he was dreaming about. Perhaps that he had nearly died yesterday? In this desolate waste land, he probably felt as if he already had. Patrick stared straight ahead, expressionless. His enthusiasm had burned out over the last 30 hours of constant endeavour. Paul, the last of my companions, stirred the pot with an automatic hand. He must have been thinking of his own family waiting for him on the sea ice only a short distance in front of us. He, of all of us, must have understood why I was in such a hurry – after all, I had miles to go and a promise to keep.

CHAPTER

1

Beginnings

I meant to save you from pipe dreams. I know now from my experience, they're the things that really poison and ruin a guy's life and keep him finding any peace . . . Just the old dope of honesty is the best policy – honesty with yourself, I mean. Just stop lying about yourself and kidding yourself about tomorrows.

Eugene O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh

By that morning I had already made my first mistake. Having shaved for the last time, I turned to the pile of clean, shop-folded clothes on my bed. I decided to wear them all in order to save on luggage weight. I picked up the first item: nylon-fronted underpants, wind-proof at the front, breathable at the back – the perfectly designed garment (except none too flattering). I pulled them on, grateful that they wouldn't be revealed again for the next few months. Long johns and a clinging thermal top followed. Soon they'd take on the tang of adventure and I'd feel like an extra from a low-budget Western. The rest of the layers were piled on top.

The taxi driver and the airport staff must have been in on the joke. I could have sworn that they turned the heating up as they saw me coming. By the time I hit the tarmac to make the short walk to the Russian cargo plane I was sweating profusely. I walked with all the elegance of an astronaut. My brand new, lurid yellow boots creaked and squeaked with each step. It was difficult to bend my arms as my fleece was so covered in logos that it had become as inflexible as a suit of armour. One particularly large corporate logo had been

placed with irritating precision on the point of my elbow. The picture wasn't exactly the one I had been hoping to present.

I was about to board the *Valdivia Belle* – its name signed jauntily on the fuselage next to a cartoon, incongruously, of a blonde, mid-western, all-American girl with an impossible smile and tantalisingly easy virtue. Its wings curved elegantly down from the top of the fuselage, which made it look as if it was permanently swooping downwards like a bird of prey. This menacing appearance was enhanced by a hooked nose. Slung under the eyes of the cockpit windows was a small glass viewing chamber that looked like a beak.

The plane had been chartered out of Kazakhstan to fly to Antarctica. Inside was barrel upon barrel of jet fuel. The fact that I was shocked showed that I wasn't entirely accustomed to the risk profile that my new life had assumed. I was about to get onto a roller coaster carrying a cargo of unstable high explosives. On top of them were all manner of expedition bags, rations, skis, sleds and other equipment.

The heads of the other passengers turned as my face appeared at the top of the ladder like a meercat's. I scrambled in through the cabin door in all my regalia. Everyone turned to look at me. In the few seconds that it took me to appraise the group, I noticed an abundance of facial hair, old tattered woollen jerseys, jeans and jutting chins. No logos, no starched fleeces and no yellow boots. All I needed was a hosepipe and a helmet.

'Hey, the firemen have arrived,' someone quipped.

'He could put it out by sweating on it.'

'That's not a person, it's an advert.'

Thrusting back my shoulders and trying to maintain equanimity, I clambered past them.

'Excuse me, sorry, was that your foot? Oh sorry.'

The gear was covered in cargo netting and took up the entire length of the fuselage. There were no bulkheads. There were no orange curtains. There were no plastic overhead lockers. There were not even any seats. There were only three portholes on each side for windows. We had to sit on wooden benches along the sides of the plane. The first mate, a sturdy Slav, wore a dirty white singlet instead

of the steward's orange suit and lurid tie, his uniform finished off by a woollen hat rolled up high to his temples like an English navy. I doubted if he would be offering me any duty free with a wink later in the flight. He didn't put anything else on for the whole trip, despite the plane getting colder as we flew south. I zipped my jacket a little higher under my chin.

It was 1 November. It dawned on me that I wouldn't see natural colour until sometime in mid-January.

We were flying to the site of a small camp that was established for three months of the year every Antarctic summer in the lee of the Patriot Hills; it is used as a base camp for climbers who wish to scale the nearby Mount Vinson, the highest peak on the continent and therefore one of the 'Seven Summits'.

The camp had not been set up yet. The group that had been chuckling at my appearance was made up of seasoned Antarctic regulars being sent out to staff the base. My eyes were drawn to one of them in particular – Boris. He was a bald Chilean with huge hands and a monstrous bushy beard. I stroked my whiskerless cheeks and felt, next to him, like a soft-palmed little whelp. As the plane rocked in the turbulence, his beard flapped up and down like a platypus' bill.

The rest of my team – Patrick, Paul and David – sat in a row talking excitedly. David had been given a children's book at the airport by his brother for a joke – *Oh, The Places You'll Go* by Dr Seuss. He passed it down the line. Somehow its ingenious rhyming was even more exciting than the most stirring literature:

Congratulations!
 Today is your day.
 You're off to Great Places!
 You're off and away!

It was jaunty and fun but it also went on to remind us that we would have some dark times. I wondered what they would be. What would be in store for us? Would something awful and unforeseen happen? Would one of us die? Would this be one of the epic tragedies of polar history? Or the opposite: too easy – a short walk? It was all unknown, unscripted, like that limitless white landscape ahead of us, an empty page – a writer's nightmare.

The flying time was about five hours, heading almost due south after taking on extra fuel at Ushuaia in Argentina, the most southerly town in the world. It made me realise just how far off the traditional map we were going. In fact, most traditional maps of the world don't even bother including Antarctica. Even if Antarctica *is* marked, it is splayed inelegantly like a spatchcocked chicken along the bottom border of the map in a form that bears no relation to its real shape.

Ancient maps used to mark the borders of the known with furling banners inscribed 'Here be Dragons!' or with drawings of mythical Siamese monsters, half lion, half snake. Beyond these little cartoons the earth was reputed to have tumbled off flat edges in tumultuous waterfalls and the real vaporised into legend and myth.

This situation hadn't changed for me. Antarctica might have been discovered in the interim but it hadn't been discovered by *this* man. As far as I was concerned, it was the land of legend – in fact the only things I really knew about it were the semi-distorted myths of the great explorers. Instead of Hercules, Scott. For Jason and the Argonauts, read Shackleton and the *Nimrod*.

Although I am the antithesis of these heroes, in many ways the story of the wanderer – the person who leaves his home and family to roam in unknown lands in order to prove himself – is the archetype of myth and legend. This blueprint also contains a Darwinian flavour. The young boy leaves to go on Walkabout to come back a man. Having demonstrated his 'fitness', he finds a wife, settles down and has children. His belly slowly expands, the strength in his legs diminishes and the adventure in him is slowly crushed by the weight of responsibility.

I saw this Walkabout as my great test. I was an unripe romantic who had never done anything more extreme than risk being crushed on the Tube or drinking hot wine in the Alps, and who now, untried and unthinking, was on his way to Antarctica to tilt at windmills. As I flew inside this fiery phoenix to the land of ice and snow, it seemed that every nursery rhyme and story I had ever read and every concept of heroism and adventure that had left their mark on an impressionable mind were now being rewritten for me alone.

Antarctica is a mythical place. It is in the thrall of ice, slumbering cryogenically for a future era. Under all that frozen water could be

lost civilisations, fossils of ancient creatures, evidence of a lost tropical world. Even though Antarctica has been covered in ice since way before the era of modern man, Oronteus Finaeus drew a map in 1531 based upon even more ancient maps. His map delineates Antarctica's real shape *beneath the ice* with uncanny accuracy.¹ How could he ever have known that? How could anyone of that or previous eras even have known that Antarctica was there? Although some outlying icebergs were discovered by Captain Cook, the actual existence of the continent was not definitely known until first seen by James Clark Ross in 1841. The shape of the underlying land itself, however, wasn't confirmed until satellites took their first sonar readings from space in the 1960s. It is a land that holds compelling mysteries.

As the air in the cabin slowly got colder, people started to change out of their more comfortable clothes into cold-weather kit. I walked stiffly up the plane towards the cockpit, noticing the plane's exposed fuse wires, reinforced steel girders and metal cargo hooks. It looked like something out of a butcher's freezer. It, unlike me, was stripped and ready for action. I crouched down next to the Russian navigator and watched the sea slowly metamorphose into a soup of floating ice-cubes – some as big as small islands – until it died in ice and everything became white.

From so far above, the pristine blanket of snow seemed benign and calm, exuding an ineffable loveliness like a layer of cloud, its jagged folds lost in perspective. Part sea, part land, part sky, all the elements fused into a viscous whiteness, holding no life, no men, no lights, no cities, no petty struggles. Just an illusion of gentleness, patient but implacable; nothing was tiny, everything was large. It was a veil, a hinterland – representing for me the border between hope and fear, the known and the unknown, the physical and the metaphysical.

As we started to descend for landing, I became progressively more nervous. I was about to hurtle down an ice-chute in a 300-ton luge. There are no runways in Antarctica, there are only a few places that an airplane of this size can land and that is on natural blue ice. Where we were headed, tumultuous winds funnelled through a

1 Dr Charles Hapgood, *Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings: Evidence of Advanced Civilization in the Ice Age*, quoted in Graham Hancock, *Fingerprints of the Gods*.

mountain pass had blown away all surface drift snow and packed down what was left into a solid, glittering strip. To land, it had to be unusually calm otherwise the aggressive cross winds would destabilise the plane's massive tail fin. The Kazak crew had never been to Antarctica before. This would be their first attempt. I started to tie up my bootlaces just in case I had to move fast. We circled slowly over the shining path only tens of feet above it as the crew tried to survey its contours, before suddenly swooping up and away because something wasn't quite right.

The cabin grew quiet. All of us, even the camp veterans, looked nervous. Only the first mate exuded calm. He sat on his stool, still in his vest, like an imperturbable Buddha.

The idea was to touch down onto the ice and then use alternate reverse thrust to steady the craft since breaking would only induce an uneven skid. The main challenge was to keep the plane straight and not to slew around into the flanking mountains.

The landing was perfect. Better and smoother than a runway. An involuntary cheer went up and the Kazaks took out bottles of gin to celebrate, straight from the neck. I guess it would normally have been vodka but here, in a land that hung like a limpet to the underside of the globe, everything is thrown on its head. The whole back of the plane lowered hydraulically, like the mouth of a giant whale and, Jonah-like, I was disgorged from its belly.

I walked down the ramp out into the bright sunshine, taking care not to slip on the sheet ice. Breaking a bone now would be the very epitome of humiliation. All I could see was whiteness. It was like a bad dream of heaven. I half expected a man with a long beard jangling some keys to be ticking me off a list.

Behind me, the ice was thronged by mountains. The sky was absolutely clear. As it's impossible to land in extreme conditions, every introduction to Antarctica is perfect. The cold hit my face; I drew up my fur hood for protection. It was fresh but not aggressive. It was as if I had opened the door of an industrial freezer, a very beautiful one, cranked down the temperature a little more and then shut myself in for the English winter – I wouldn't be going back inside for nearly three months and, with luck, not until I had finished what I had set out to do: a crossing of the continent of Antarctica.

Very unusually, with no weather delays, we'd arrived exactly on schedule. After putting up our base camp tent, which would stay there until we left Antarctica, it was time to sleep. The clouds had come in and the wind had started to blow more strongly. The sun revolved in a low arc over the mountains, never dipping below the horizon and, despite the clouds starting to fill up the sky, it stayed light.

I tried to work out what I should wear in my sleeping bag. I opted for everything. Suddenly I didn't care what my clothes looked like provided they were warm. It was the first of many of my 'civilised' concerns to become refreshingly redundant out here. Our sleeping bags were rated to -18°C. The temperature in the tent was the same. We hadn't wanted to take heavier bags with us, as we'd have to drag the extra weight. I laid my down jacket over my chest for extra warmth.

The wind flapped the tent violently and noisily. It felt like it was going to lift off. Small particles of frozen breath fell onto my face. Where my sleeping bag touched the flysheet it had frozen and where I had drawn the down hood tightly around my face the nylon surface was crusty with frost. Normally, at home – warm – I slept splayed out on my stomach, now I'd have to make like a mummy for the foreseeable future. Shivering slightly, kept awake by Antarctica's night sun, I replayed the reel of the last few years, before I walked off the map.