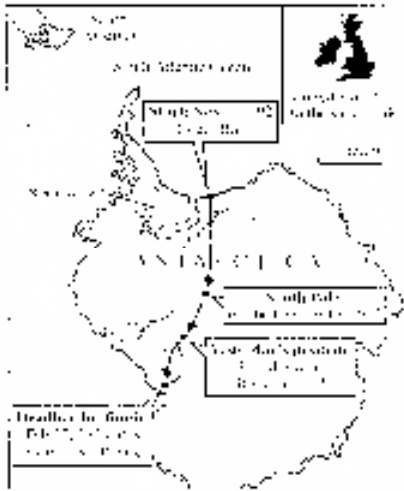


Death or Glory!

What fate beckons for polar trekkers?

by Sean Ryan, Environment Correspondent

In 1993 Sir Ranulph Fiennes and Dr Michael Stroud attempted to cross the Antarctic on foot and unaided. The following article is an account of the closing, dramatic stages of this feat of endurance.



IT WILL be the most critical judgment of his life. Emaciated, frostbitten and exhausted, Dr Michael Stroud must decide this week whether to halt his record-breaking polar trek with Sir Ranulph Fiennes at the edge of the Antarctic continent or risk death by embarking on a further 350-mile march across a floating ice shelf.

The two men have already completed the longest unsupported polar journey by walking 1,257 miles in what some explorers are calling the greatest physical achievement of our age.

Their next goal should be reached tomorrow when, in the face of a 40-knot blizzard at temperatures of minus 25°C, they expect to leave behind the perilous gradients and concealed crevasses of Beardmore glacier, and step out over the ocean on to Ross ice shelf. They will be the first to have crossed the Antarctic land mass on foot without dogs to pull their sledges or aircraft to drop supplies.

Then will come the moment when Stroud, 37, has to deliver his prognosis. If he believes that Fiennes, 48, is too severely weakened by his four-stone loss of weight and a deep infection in his foot, he will radio for air rescue, regardless of any objections.

If not, they will attempt to haul their heavy sledges for 20 miles a day towards Scott base, with only two broken ski poles between them for leverage and an ever decreasing reserve of rations. The deadline for their arrival will be 6 am on Saturday, February 27, the last moment before ice closes in for the Antarctic winter and the ship waiting for them must leave the base.

At their homes in Devon and Surrey yesterday, the explorers' wives were waiting anxiously to hear whether the 90-day-old expedition will be terminated. Lady "Ginny" Fiennes said she was confident that Stroud would end it if her husband, who suffered snowblindness and lost a toe to gangrene on a previous trip to the North Pole, was in imminent danger.

"They will find the mental strength to go on as long as they aren't so run down that they're depressed or dizzy and cannot think clearly," she said. "But there's no suggestion of that: physically they are not in good condition, but mentally they are 100%."

Fiennes and Stroud have earned worldwide acclaim by taking on a challenge as arduous as any accepted by a distinguished line of explorers, from Captain Scott to Sir Edmund Hillary. They have hauled their 450 lb sledges over 10,000ft mountains. They have been walking in three-hour stretches, four times a day, negotiating the constant threats of blue ice and snow-covered fissures at an agonising average speed of 1.2 mph. The effort has required 7,500 calories of energy each day compared with an intake of 5,600, and Fiennes, who started the expedition at more than 14 stone, now weighs barely 10. Both men have suffered frostbite to the lips, feet, nose and fingertips.

Their families, elated with pride after they broke the 84-year-old record for

longest unsupported journey this weekend, nevertheless insisted that the most modest of motives lay behind the adventure. Lady Fiennes said her baronet husband, a former SAS commando who would have preferred serving with his father's regiment to a career in expeditions, was "earning his crust" in the best way he knew. "He also finds it very relaxing. We live such terrifyingly speedy lives, and the expeditions give him time to sort out his thoughts. He likes going for a run near our home on Exmoor but that isn't enough."

Stroud's Dutch-born wife, Thea, said his main interest in the expedition was work-related. A physiologist, he is monitoring both their responses to the extreme cold and stress. He has even insisted that, instead of celebrating their return to England, they will go straight to his office at the Army Personnel Research Establishment in Farnborough to sit in baths of iced water for two days of tests.

Since November 9, when the men set out from Gould Bay on the Filchner ice shelf, the families have passed on and received messages through radio operators squatting in tents at a camp in the Patriot Hills, 800 miles from their present position. Stroud has heard news of his children, aged two and five; Fiennes of his dogs and the garden's spring bulbs.

"It gives them something to imagine as they trudge along," said Morag Howell, 36, the third member of the team, who spoke to them by radio every night before being airlifted off the ice last week. "They have always sounded completely enthusiastic and very keen except on Christmas day, when it was extremely difficult to think of anything to cheer them up."

During the day, they have taken breaks of no more than 10 minutes for a cup of oxtail or tomato soup and a bar of milk chocolate. In the evenings they melt snow to rehydrate one of their four dried meals — macaroni cheese, spaghetti bolognese, shepherd's pie or stew — over a meagre stove before blotting out the bright Antarctic night to sleep in a circular two— man tent, 6ft 7in in diameter, until it is time to set off again. All this, day after day, for 90 days.

Brian Welshy, the nutritionist responsible for their diet, said their 2 lb daily food packs combined maximum energy with minimum weight and the scent of home cooking. "The smells are very, very important because they are at their lowest psychological point when they put their tent up at the end of the day. Once they've got the food cooking they feel contented."

Medical experts fear that the explorers may enter a spiral of decline if they try to cross the ice to Scott base: in their half-starved state, the exertion will eat away muscle as well as fat, threatening to intensify the effects of cold.

Stroud developed hypothermia at an earlier stage after falling into a crevasse. They sat shivering together in the tent for 24 hours until warm enough to continue.

Antibiotics have failed to help the injury to Fiennes's foot, thought to have started as a septic blister. "Each morning for an hour I am the world's worst travelling companion because of the pain," he told a radio operator.

Dr Dick Alan, director of the Army Personnel Research Establishment, said that, while the expedition provided a unique opportunity to study physiological responses to high physical endeavour, science could not explain how they mustered the determination to persevere in such appalling conditions. "That is something that comes from very deep inside the soul," he said.

Both men were encouraged yesterday by the accolades relayed to them. Three, in particular, will have heartened them: the first from the Multiple Sclerosis Society, which stands to benefit by more than £2m in sponsorship; the second from Oliver Shepard, their companion on the world's first surface journey around both north and south poles in 1979—82, who said the new record was the finest in his lifetime; and the third from Sir Vivian Fuchs, who, with Hillary, led the first crossing of the Antarctic in 1955—58. "It is a tremendous achievement," he said. "They are splendid 'men.'"

*Source: slightly adapted from
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