



Mount Everest, en route to base camp

The Ulysses Trust

Phil Neame tells the story of the unexpected outcome of a winter attempt on Mount Everest.

Mount Everest, 24 December 1992: "It's Endex, we're all f****d!" This was the final recorded radio transmission of a Territorial Army expedition attempting a first British winter ascent of the mountain.

Only three teams – Polish, Japanese and Korean – had then succeeded. A clue in there somewhere! In winter, the Northern Jet Stream buffets the top 5,000 feet of the mountain with winds of over 140 knots, temperatures are generally below -40°C on a good day, and low barometric pressure means even less oxygen – reputedly adding the equivalent of 3,000 feet to the altitude.

The Met Offices at Bracknell and New Delhi had forecast the Jet Stream moving North, with winds at the top dropping to 15 knots.

After 10 days of waiting for the moment, we launched our summit bid. What they failed to forecast was a freak storm and winds of more

than 120 knots moving in, which destroyed every bit of tentage we had, with the summit team lucky to survive. Two years of effort blown away in 48 hours.

The Managing Director of Waitrose, who had given us loads of goodies, afterwards commiserated with me that Bracknell was of little help to them either in knowing when to stack their shelves with summer salads.

The best we could claim was a British winter height record – and, it emerged, the first winter expedition to return without loss. Sometimes just survival can be success! The expedition was the midwife for The Ulysses Trust.

The start was inauspicious. I took command of 10 PARA (V) in 1990, to learn that a TA officer had proposed an expedition to Everest, invited volunteers from across the TA to apply and then vanished, leaving many disillusioned applicants.

The Director of Army Reserves and

Cadets (DARC), also located in the Duke of York's Barracks on the Kings Road, asked me to see if there was anything to resurrect. I found much enthusiasm, and little else. I was not optimistic. But enthusiasm and ingenuity go a long way. Eventually, a strong team emerged, two with considerable experience of winter climbing in the Himalayas. Project DARC STAR was born.

The Territorial Army had never before engaged in such activity and many in HQ UKLF strongly felt that it shouldn't. But 10 PARA was in London District, which is run by Guardsmen who have amazing connections. The GOC, Simon Cooper, visited an exercise I was running for him, and I told him of our plans.

"Do you have a Patron?" he asked. This was something I had never even thought of, and I said so. "Oh, I think you need a Patron. Leave it with me." A month later, we had a Patron – the Prince of Wales.



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Next, the GOC wrote to the Deputy Commander of UKLF, Mike Wilkes, who doubled as Inspector General Territorial Army. "Dear General, I believe it is time you visited London, to see what part of your army is up to."

Mike Wilkes did indeed visit. His demeanour suggested he came to kill the project and he sat impassively through a presentation by myself and Rod Stables, then a squadron commander with 21 SAS, now one of the country's leading cardiologists.

I decided to go for it: "So, General, maybe you would consider becoming our Vice Patron?" He looked unimpressed, so I explained that the Patron's position was already taken, and by whom. "My staff told me that he hadn't yet agreed," he growled. I produced the Palace-embossed letter, like an Ace of Spades. "I must make some phone calls," he said.

He returned, his face inscrutable: "OK, I'll be your Vice Patron."

Lest there be any doubt, I said: "There's a lot of risk involved. You'll be linked indelibly to it – success or disaster."

"Don't push your luck," he replied, but at last with the hint of a smile. Next day, the phones were hot from HQ Land Forces, offering to help!

Now all we had to do was raise £300,000. Commercial sponsorship seemed the answer. News International got interested, and we were invited to lunch at Wapping. I was introduced to Kelvin MacKenzie and Patsy Chapman – editors of the *Sun* and *News of the World*; second to none for exposure, but we still needed money.

In early 1992, the team undertook a training and selection expedition in the icy mountains of Vermont, courtesy of the US National Guard – one of their NCOs, Bill Pelkey, an exceptional ice climber, had agreed to join the expedition.

But potential corporate sponsors had all taken a step backwards because of the high risks and we still needed £200,000, with just seven months left. Things looked bleak.



*"I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untraveled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move..."*

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."
from *Ulysses* by Alfred Lord Tennyson

Then a chink of light. Some companies mooted a charitable donation – if there was a suitable charity to take the money...

No Service charities then existed to support Reserve Forces or Cadet expeditions, so the idea was born – start one and fill the gap.

Tennyson's great poem was the immediate inspiration for the name, so now we needed urgently to launch the charity and a marketing campaign to raise the loot.

A silhouette of Ulysses was the obvious logo, but, pre-internet, how to get that quickly? The answer lay in Rod's exercise instruction. 21 SAS's notepaper featured the bust of Mars overlapped by Minerva's. A quick crop job, leaving just Minerva, who now became Ulysses! Ah – the burden of that guilty secret lifted at last!

In 1992, expeditions by Volunteer Reserves, University Officer Cadets and the Cadet Forces were limited to Adventurous Training on mainly UK-based Annual Camps. The

Ulysses Trust has championed their opportunity to mount challenging expeditions around the globe and raised almost £3.4m, to help some 37,500 young people take part in over 2,900 expeditions.

Tennyson's poem echoes what we seek to encourage, with three principal objectives:

- To develop the character and potential of individual participants – especially confidence, leadership, teamwork, initiative and self-discipline
- To enhance unit morale, recruitment and retention
- Thereby, to contribute to the strength and cohesion of their local communities.

Today, every year we recognise, with the Prince of Wales's Award, the expedition from each of the Cadet Forces, the Volunteer Reserves and University Officer Cadets that has most effectively delivered on those objectives.

Applications for grants are



appraised by a highly experienced team, and we have developed a very rapid turnaround of applications.

Anyone who has planned an expedition, big or small, will know the challenge of getting started – no team, no backing, no money. It's a lonely, stressful time.

In 1992, we were blessed with people who were prepared to take an early chance on us. But most of them simply do not have the connections and profile that we had enjoyed. Helping others through those difficult early moments has been a constant in how the Trust operates.

Cadets mission

Today, the Trust's priority is to do more for the Cadets. A survey of over 500 cadet units that we undertook five years ago indicated that affordability was a major restraint, especially for those units whose catchment includes areas of deprivation.

Yet, it is here that the greatest impact can be made. Our aim, therefore, is that all cadets, regardless of means or background, are able to take advantage of such opportunities.

Equally, we are determined that they be inclusive, for youngsters of different backgrounds facing hardship and challenges together – expanding horizons and raising aspirations.

To that end, we are presently running an appeal for funds to enable us to increase significantly our

support to cadet expeditions.

We also provide more support to those expeditions with a high number of cadets on free school meals – and it is pleasing to note that whilst 12.4% of secondary school students were in receipt of free school meals in 2019, more than 21% of cadets taking part in Ulysses Trust supported expeditions were in receipt.

In the words of the leader of one cadet expedition from a unit in Newcastle: "I am continually grateful to The Ulysses Trust for the support that we have been given. We work with some of the most deprived young people in England and without your help we could not offer them these opportunities."

On average, £140 enables us to subsidise one cadet; £3,400 can make the difference between an expedition taking place or not.

The Ulysses Trust invests in the future – better preparing young people to contribute and lead fulfilling lives. "I loved the feeling of independence we were given – trusted to make our own decisions, find our own way, cut our own path and make the expedition what we wanted," wrote one member of a canoe expedition through the Tarn Gorges in France.

An unsolicited letter from the mother of one Glasgow cadet who completed a gruelling 16-day expedition over the spine of

FACING PAGE: TA traverse of Antarctica
ABOVE: ACF cadets in the Lofoten Islands

Corsica says it all: "What had gone away was a typical urban, self-centred teenager, and what returned was a much more appreciative, polite, self-sufficient adult. The transformation was astonishing.

"Nor can I thank you enough for the support you gave the expedition. Without it, Laura would never have been able to do something like that. The accomplishment ... has altered her self-belief and approach to life. My thanks to The Ulysses Trust for their continued support of young people finding themselves."

Climbing Everest is essentially self-indulgent. But 'young people finding themselves' thanks to The Ulysses Trust has more than compensated for the bitter disappointment of our DARC STAR team leaving the mountain in January 1993. ☺



For more information on The Ulysses Trust, go to www.ulyssesrust.co.uk. If you want to get involved with or support the Trust in any way, please contact Paul Randall at paul.randall@ulyssesrust.co.uk