



When a violent accident ended Peter Bowker's army career, it opened the door to a record-breaking adventure



GETTING TO THE OTHER SIDE

BY CRISPIN ANDREWS

ON THE JUNE 4, 2015, at 1.36am, Peter Bowker, 28, climbed off the Greenland ice cap for the first time in 27 days. A few minutes earlier, the former soldier had been one of six skiers roped together in a V formation as they completed the final few yards of a month-long expedition.

For the other five, it was an arduous and demanding journey, but people have skied across polar ice caps before. However, when Bowker's skis touched dry land, he set a new world record—he became the first amputee ever to have skied, unsupported, across the Greenland ice cap.

"One guy had done it in a wheelchair before, but he used a kite so it wasn't unsupported," Bowker says.

He recalls a jumble of emotions as he realised what he'd achieved—pride, humility and gratitude to the people who'd invested time and effort into his project. Above all, Bowker reflected, this was a long way away from that dark day in Afghanistan in 2008. A day he was lucky to survive.

BORN IN NORTH WALES, Peter Bowker had wanted to be a soldier since the age of three. He was interviewed aged 15, accepted at 16, finished training by 17 and joined the Queens Dragoon Guards.

"By 19 I was an officer of rank, and the youngest non-commissioned officer in the regiment aged 21," he says proudly.

Things were going as planned until September 2008, when Corporal Bowker's regiment was sent to Musa Qala in Afghanistan's Helmand

Province. Bowker was a trained sniper, but on one fateful day, three months later, he was on convoy duty, "protecting a few vehicles that were going to a nearby supply base".

He was in the back seat of the lead vehicle with two other soldiers. If there was any concern about explosive devices embedded in the

ground ahead, the lead vehicle would normally stop and scan the area with metal detectors. On this occasion, the commander made the call that no one would get out and check. Bowker remains stoical about this decision. "That's how it is in Afghanistan—sometimes there's just no time," he says.

Bowker remembers everything that

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happened next: "I was in the back, looking at the ceiling of the truck. Then, all of a sudden, the ceiling was right in front of my face. A huge explosion, dust, ears ringing, screaming." He managed to pull himself out of the overturned vehicle. Soon afterwards, he was airlifted to Camp Bastion hospital and then, days later, flown back to Birmingham for an operation.

Bowker was in and out of hospital for the next few months, having badly damaged his right femur and ankle. At first, he had visions of getting well and returning to Afghanistan, but

Peter Bowker's team at the apex of the Greenland ice cap

after two years of operations and rehabilitation, doctors told him that his leg wouldn't heal—it would

have to be amputated below the right knee, and he'd be discharged from service.

"I cried when the doctor told me I was never going to be a soldier again," recalls Bowker. "But then I thought, *I'd best find something else to do.*"

Two weeks before his discharge from the army, an officer had advised him to do some adventure training. Bowker put himself down for sailing in the Caribbean, with visions of "beautiful women, sandy beaches



Peter and his mother before the accident; (below) in training for the Greenland trip; (far right) learning to ski with his prosthetic limb



and cocktails". Instead, he ended up in Greenland.

"That's just the army way," says Bowker ruefully. "But, as it turned out, I really enjoyed it. Then one day, as I walked out to the ice cap, I decided that I wanted to cross it eventually. That's where it started."

This was going to be something Bowker did when he left the army, but he soon realised that, since no amputee had crossed the Greenland ice cap unassisted, he'd need a doctor to help him. "I couldn't afford it either," he adds, "so I had to raise some money."

To do this, Bowker set up 65 Degrees North, gathered a team and travelled all over the country, securing sponsors and visiting schools, colleges and universities to raise disability awareness. He got

Royal endorsement from Prince Harry and received £100,000 from the Libor fines pot—money raised when banks were penalised for manipulating interest rates.

Bowker ended up with £300,000 in corporate sponsorship to cover the costs of this and future expeditions. He also raised £30,000 for the charity Help for Heroes, which supports injured and sick military personnel.

TEAM 65 DEGREES NORTH arrived in Greenland on May 7 last year. Their task was to cross the ice cap from Kangerlussuaq in the west to Kulusuk in the east—around 370 miles.

Two thirds of Greenland, which is three times the size of Texas, is inside the Arctic Circle. But while there are 27 million Texans, only 55,847 people live in Greenland—nearly all of them along the fjords in the south-west. There's a simple reason for this: four fifths of Greenland's surface is covered in ice. Its glaciers are 1,500 metres thick on average, but can reach 3,000. Only Antarctica has a bigger ice sheet.

"The three biggest dangers in Greenland are crevasses, the weather and polar bears," claims Bowker. Although the team didn't see any bears, the weather was a constant

problem. Greenland's katabatic winds can reach up to 95mph. The cold air sits on top of the ice cap, then releases and flows across the ice towards the sea. These winds can go from weak to strong in a couple of minutes, and are difficult to predict on the ground. During really bad ones, the team built walls around their tents made out of snow blocks.

"People have died because they didn't build their defences properly and the wind ripped their tents right out of the ground," says Bowker. "We were sponsored by a satellite-communications company, Inmarsat,



who monitored the weather and gave us a few hours warning. But we still lost five or six days to storms."

For 27 days, the team followed the same routine: eight hours skiing with a ten-minute stop every hour, then

a few hours rest. By the end of the first week, Bowker had blisters on his stump.

"You can do all the training you want—skiing, pulling tyres up a slope, cycling, running, martial arts—and your fitness is fine," he says. "But you can't really train for how the skiing motion rubs against your leg"

Bowker countered this problem with bandages and painkillers, and by cutting holes in his prosthetic limb to stop it rubbing. When the limb froze and wouldn't bend, he thawed out the mechanism with a portable cooker. The only sign of life on the



Peter taking a break from skiing; (left) a blue sky on day 17 of the expedition

a humbling experience to see the barren, undisturbed nature of Greenland."

But there was one more unexpected—and almost fatal—challenge

to overcome. With only a few miles to go, one of the crew, Kirk Painting, fell down a crevasse. This is a huge crack in the ice that can go all the way down to the bottom of the ice sheet. In this instance, the crevasse was hidden by snow.

"It was like a trap door," Bowker says. "Luckily, Kirk's pulk got caught

in the gap, or one of his ski poles did, and that's what saved his life."

To prevent further accidents, the team roped up together. They took 24 hours to travel the final six miles in tandem. Normally it would take half that time, but if someone fell into another crevasse, the others would be able to stop them falling far.

"I was in the middle of our V formation when my ski touched dry land for the first time in a month," Bowker says. "It was fitting that we finished the whole thing together."

ALTHOUGH VERY PROUD of his achievement, Bowker is amazed by the huge reaction: "Thousands following me on Twitter and Facebook, hundreds of thousands of pounds being donated by sponsors, tens of thousands donated to charity, meeting the Prince...I never thought it would turn out like this!"

He now plans to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, do some motivational speaking and spread the word that disabled people can live fulfilling

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lives. Although he misses the army, he wouldn't change what happened in Afghanistan.

"I've been very fortunate," he says. "The accident opened doors for me, gave me opportunities that I wouldn't have had otherwise. There's been a lot of pain, but I appreciate life more than I did. When you go through difficult times, it's not so much how you get through them, but getting out the other side to better times." ■

65 Degrees North raises money for the Royal Marines charity. To donate, go to 65degreesnorth.co.uk or visit peterbowker.com



whole trip was a visit from a small bird, who flew down to grab a biscuit from the weary travellers.

On the second to last day, the team pitched their tents facing downhill. "We could see something other than flat ice for the first time," remembers Bowker. "The ice rolling down the hill to the sea and the finish. It was