

# GOLIATH EXPEDITION

“An odyssey worthy of  
Ulysses himself, a saga fit  
for the old Nordic gods...”

- Frederick Forsyth

36,000 miles  
Unbroken footsteps all the way

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## JOURNALS

### Extracts from Karl's diaries covering the Bering Straits Crossing 2006

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Friday, 17th March 2006  
Cape Prince of Wales

We are up and about early, as you might expect, the school corridors eerily quiet in the dark. I had dreamt about this day for years but in my imagination it had never been quite this subdued. In the staff room I make some coffee and then begin eating in earnest. A can of 'Spam', some biscuits and anything else I can get my hands on. Dimitri is making himself busy, neither of us talking much. Morland Sanders, a presenter from the BBC programme 'Inside Out' has joined us in Wales to cover the first couple of days of the crossing. With him is a specialist cold weather cameraman from Iceland, 'Ingy'. Morland has covered two sections of my journey, the Rocky Mountains in Canada and the crossing of Alaska last year. Both made 10minute slots on the 'Inside Out' programme and were nothing short of bloody excellent. Ingy was the cameraman last year so I know them well and they are cracking lads. They are in the school library using the computers and we join them to send some last e-mail. Slowly, as we wake and come to, we begin to chat and discuss plans. We huddle around a computer screen, scrutinising the latest satellite photos of the Bering Straits. A large area of open water the shape of an inverted teardrop stretches from the tip of the Seaward Peninsular north for about 50 miles, being about 10 miles wide at its greatest extent. North of the Diomedes there's also a lot of open water, created by the northern drift of the ice.

We pack and move our sleds from the gym to the school entrance. Then, gathering in the library for a final look around, we talk over today's plans. With the BBC camera running and once I'd had a last look at the up-to-date satellite imagery, I chalk up a schedule on the library's blackboard and brief everyone on the game plan. We will push out from the coast heading north and then at the right point, head out at an angle towards the sea using the fast ice (that ice anchored to the Alaskan shore) on a north-westerly bearing. Our aim will be to achieve the best position we can to find a route north around the Diomedes but also around the southern end of that large teardrop of open water. I sketch this out roughly on the board for the sake of the camera. And that is it! The truth is of course, everything is open to pure chance, and we know it.....Right! Fall in outside in three ranks.

The sleds and BBC cameras are carried out into a very cold day. Two of the teachers have volunteered to assist the BBC by transporting them on snow machine and sled for the first few miles. They will follow us to get some film for as far as it was safe. After our goodbyes, Dimitri and I pull away. The Bering Straits extravaganza is underway at last. It had been a long journey to get to this point but we are equipped as well as we can be. We have done our part and the rest is up to the gods. We follow the snow machine trails left by Innuiaq hunters and fishermen along the coast, heading north-west. The BBC speed ahead and film as we pass, then shoot off in front again. We eventually reach the point at which we peel off from the mainland and step onto the fast ice. There is no obvious demarcation line defining land or sea, you just get the feeling that this is the right spot. A quick check of the GPS and all looks good. We make a brief stop to touch base with the BBC. In front of us there's a stretch of open, flat ice for maybe 500/600 metres. This then stops abruptly against walls of crushed ice, denoting the end of our joyride. The BBC will go as far as they can but no one wants to take the snow machines much further. We do some last filming at this gateway to a Hellish world. Initially we pick our way through quite easily but it soon gets a lot harder. Fields of crushed ice make even the shortest distances a lot of work. Glancing behind I can see the crew standing on a raised slab of ice in the distance. We are still in contact with them on hand-held radios and they want to come out to film if we can find the edge of the fast ice within the next couple of miles. However, we're unsure as to just how far that will be and three or four miles would be too far. As it turns out it's about three miles before we sight the first movement. Through gaps in the pressure ridges I can see a tall distant pinnacle of ice moving slowly north. As we close with this moving ice, we come across a wide area of open water. On the far side is a world of crushed ice, inching its way northwards. This is the real Bering Straits and it's time to don our neoprene hoods and lifejackets. Time to get into the water. Time to get into the game. Weeks of training, practising and testing equipment is to be put to the test.

Once ready we push the sleds to the edge of the ice. As we do it begins to break away beneath us. From somewhere down below, large chunks of sea ice roll to the surface in clouds of bubbles. We ease ourselves into the water after the sleds and begin to swim for the other side. We had trained in the rivers in Fairbanks, but this is no river. Hundreds of metres wide, with a stiff breeze, we have to deal with waves. It's not as easy as I'd hoped and it's hard to see if we are making any progress at all at times. I become a bit worried about my smaller sled. The larger sled was built with polar travel in mind and is more seaworthy, however the smaller one is weighed down and sits dangerously low in the water. Waves would lap over the side onto the canvas and I begin to worry that it might take on water. If it does then our attempt is doomed from the word go. If it sinks we will lose the tent, sat phone and a whole bunch of stuff we need just to survive. At one point the whole back end of the sled seems to vanish in a wave. Keep swimming! Backstroke, a slow and tiring process. It seems endless. Ice cold water splashes into my face, an icy wind burning exposed wet skin. We have to be very careful in these particular suits as they do not have a watertight seal around the neck and if you are not careful water can make its way down inside to your clothing, an obvious no-no in these conditions. At times I feel as though I'm losing my direction and am unable to fight against the waves. I'm being washed to a position beside the sled and struggling to keep it on a straight path. By the time I reach the far side my arms are burning with lactic acid and I feel as though I could barely swim another yard. Yet our troubles are far from over. From the fast ice we had not been able to ascertain what we would find on our arrival. We in fact find very unstable broken ice. As we try to climb out it just comes apart, rolling under us as we struggle for quite some time to get a beachhead established. Once on the ice we find it hard to stay on top because if you stay still for more than a moment it begins to sink and break away beneath you, your legs punching through into the sea. It's hard to judge what to step or stand on.

We push on into this ice soup, just hoping to God that things would get better. However, to our front they did not look like they would. At this point we are drifting northwards at about 2mph, although you are not aware of this movement as it's all somewhat relative, your whole world moving with you. We move between chunks / patches of ice, some the size of your living room, others the size of your sofa. Inevitably, and with monotonous regularity, we sink into the water, the ice rolling away beneath us. We try to pick the best route, helping each other when required, but the going is painfully slow. Eventually, beyond this wretched mix of ice and water, we find something a little more stable under foot. The downside is we now come across great jumbled blocks of ice that make for very tough going. Despite keeping up a regular schedule in the gym on the run-up to this winter, I soon realise just how much upper body strength will be required for the job at hand. By the end of the day we have made little westerly progress and are pretty much beat. At this point our plans to push on into the night seem almost ridiculous. We use the fading light to locate a flat area that is able to support our tent and crawl inside.

Monday, 20th March 2006

This morning we check our location on the GPS to find that things have changed. We are now in reverse and moving south at a similar speed. We're also about midway along this 50mile giant 'teardrop' lead. Using the GPS we trace last night's route showing how we had drifted, stopping somewhere about level with the top of the lead then starting back down. We leave the GPS on 24 hours a day, never turning them off and constantly monitoring our movement. At a loss as to what to do we decide that since we are on a stable pan of ice we should simply stay put for the day and see where the ice takes us. I must confess that at this stage I'm thinking things look extremely bleak.

We have got into the routine where I call my father every morning (evening in the UK) at a set time before setting off. Using his computer he can pinpoint our location then inform us of just how the ice is shaping up. There is a website run by the University of Alaska which shows new satellite photographs of the area every three or four hours so the information is bang up-to-date.

We stay in our sleeping bags and watch as the ice slows down but still heads south. The nights out here are extremely creepy. Tightly wrapped in our bags we start as things outside crack and groan. As the ice constantly shifts, forms pressure ridges or breaks apart it creates the most amazing sounds. Unlike anything you would expect, it can imitate a car engine, a pack of howling dogs or a human scream.

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Wednesday, 22nd March 2006

In the darkness of the early hours I listen to the foxes howling. Sounds like coyotes but has to be foxes, nothing else out here that it could be. We regularly see fox tracks in the snow. It's bitterly cold and we're using 'vapour barriers' inside our sleeping bags for the first time. These are just huge plastic bags we sleep in. They stop the body's moisture freezing inside the sleeping bag. The sleeping bags can very quickly become full of ice, which obviously greatly reduces their efficiency. We are wearing all in one fleece suits to sleep in and the one major downfall of the vapour barrier is that you get very damp, so it's not the most pleasant start to the day. However once cooking and moving around in the tent you tend to dry off pretty quickly. We turn the plastic bags inside out and hang them from the roof of the tent while they dry out.

I make the morning call to my father and all looks well. We are drifting north again but very slowly, at about 0.4mph. It's been extremely cold overnight and the ice is looking so good we decide not to use the dry suits today avoiding that morning and evening dance. Now outside the tent I hear the foxes again, only to realise I've been fooled by the shifting ice. Close to our tent a ridge is being formed as giant sheets of ice are forced together, like the slow-motion crash of continents. This slow-motion is a good sign and means a lot of the water around is freezing over.

The going is good and we find large areas of flat, snow covered ice pans that allow us to work around a lot of the pressure ridges and fields of crushed ice. There's no wind either! A bright sun and not a cloud in sight. Perfect weather in fact but bitterly cold.... it's ideal for what we want but how long can it last? The biggest factor right now is the wind. If the wind blows the ice moves, if the ice moves it breaks and if you haven't been here it's hard to imagine or appreciate what that can be like, and how it can affect us. We find our first Polar bear tracks today.

The day gets cut short as we find ourselves up against an open lead at 18:00 and decide it's just not worth the trouble donning the suits now, deciding to call it a day and hoping that the lead may have gone come the morning. However, today has gone very well and has been our best day yet, making eight miles westward. In a conversation with my father we decide it might be good idea to take this opportunity to re-supply with food and fuel. Within the next day or so we should reach the International Date Line and crossing that will take us into Russian airspace. Evergreen helicopters, whom we have been using up to now, will not be allowed to fly into Russian airspace and accordingly if we want a re-supply we'd better take it now. We've only used about a third of our food and fuel but of course, have no idea what lies ahead. We left a re-supply box of food and fuel back in Nome with Evergreen just in case and it may well be time to bring it out. After tomorrow it may be too late and the box would sit there whatever happened to us.

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Saturday, 25th March 2006

Once it's dark and all our admin is complete, there is little to do other than lay in the darkness listening to the grinding of the breaking ice, hoping of course that it's not our pan. Each night we find the biggest pan we can and pitch tent in the centre, staying away from the edges which tend to decay first. There's no denying it's a little creepy and just plain scary at times. Still, it could be a damn sight worse if the wind was blowing hard. Our worst fear of course is not being able to get out of our sleeping bags and then the tent quickly enough should a nightmare materialise. You're wrapped up pretty tightly in your bag and sometimes it's difficult to find the zips, and even when you do they can stick. Should the tent begin to sink an air bubble may support the top half for a while but the rest would simply wrap around us as we slide down to the bottom half.

This morning we get to test the drill. It's 04:00 and I'm awake. It's not sounding good outside at all. We are not on a particularly large pan and there's grinding all around us. Suddenly shock waves shake the tent, a deep booming sound coming from below. I sit up, eyes wide, heart pounding. If you're not only hearing the ice but feeling every move it makes, it's a pretty good indicator things are definitely not right.

"Dimitri"... "DIMITRI!"

His eyes flash wide open. There's a momentary pause followed by a thunderous boom. Now we are both sitting up in our bags. Another pause as we sit motionless with bated breath, listening to the grinding outside. The tent rocks with another boom!

"Ohhhhhh Crap!"

We burst into frenzied life. It's amazing just how fast you can move when you need to. From sleep to 60 mph in a flash. Outside we find that the ice is breaking not only all around but right under the tent. A larger pan is passing, tearing ours apart. We move as quickly as possible, and grabbing the corner of the tent we sprint to what is relatively safer ice. Later that morning, at about 09:00, I had just finished speaking to my father and getting our daily ice check when great cracks in the ice started heading swiftly in our direction. Once again there's a scramble to head for safer ice, but at least this time we were on our feet in daylight.

We pack and prepare to get under way, but before doing so make yet more sacrificial offerings to the ice gods. Our sled is so full we are unable to fasten the zip on the canvas cover and this could be a real problem if the sled tips in water. There's nothing else for it and our wonderful night vision helmets go to help gain us a few brownie points. Somebody must have been looking after us last night after all.

It's a mixed day, some hard going but also some good open flat spots. Most significantly, we get to cross the Dateline and a 'nav check' puts us firmly in Russian waters. It's almost hard to believe but of course it's far from over. Again another perfect day, cold and still with a bright blue sky. How long can this last? Our morning checks with father suggest that the picture in front looks good to, whereas a couple of miles behind us the ice is fraying and coming apart. We can hear it at night, sounding like a distant freight train. Most of the route we had taken is now open water. There's no walking back.

Today we make 4.6 miles and I start to notice we are feeling tired. There is less of a spring in our step, or should I say stumble. The days are long and very demanding, a constant drain on our upper body strength. However, crossing the Dateline has been a real shot in the arm. Suddenly we realize.... Christ! If the weather holds, we might actually do this!

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Tuesday, 28th March 2006

The mood in the tent this morning is sombre as we are becoming increasingly worried about the maths. We now have five days food and fuel but doubt we can make it to the coast in time before both of these run out. If the wind picks up we've had it for sure. But again, today there is no wind. How long can this last? A sat phone call to father identifies a troubling weather system to our south that is about to start affecting our region. My father also notes a fracture or thin line running through the ice parallel to the coast at about 4 or 5 miles out. This is clearly a demarcation line, denoting the separation between the fast ice anchored to the shore and the pack ice. We had expected open water before we could reach the fast ice and now we also have to expect worse overall conditions as we close with the shore.

We push on, finding it very hard going. At one point, a white bird similar to a stormy petrel flew out to meet us. We gaze upwards as it circles around us, checking us out. This little bird shines a brilliant white in the sun and for some reason makes an impression on me that I'm sure I'll never forget. It seems like a beacon of hope taking my mind away from this endless grind. After four hours of hard work we had moved less than a mile. This is a real blow as we had drifted more than a mile and a half north-west during the night and have not even been able to make up that loss. This is very bad news and there are no signs of it getting any better. At this point I call time-out. We have to find a way to change the situation in our favour if we ever hope to reach Russia. Major factors have to be taken into account. Firstly the changing weather pattern is a real worry. We could expect winds at any time and in fact they're well overdue. Secondly, with the sled at this weight we clearly can't move fast enough. Thirdly we now have limited food and fuel so there is a clear defined cut-off time of 5 days after which we will be in real danger. My proposal is to make backpacks and lose the sled. We'll take with us only those items are vital to our success and survival. Having to lift the sled over obstacles every few feet and constantly stopping to unhook the sled ropes is slowing us down far too much. However, the backpack idea is not met with enthusiasm from Dimitri, he's not sure about it at all. I myself am convinced something has to change. We stop, pitch tent and I give my father a call on the sat phone, running the situation passed him to get his opinion. He is not totally convinced this is the right road to take but agrees that something radical had to be done. Father also comes up with the good idea of using one set of our immersion suits (we each have two suits) to make waterproof backpacks that will float. Begrudgingly Dimitri will go along with the plan. So we set about making the backpacks with whatever is available. The tent resembles a scene from the 'A' team, littered with masking tape and rope. We cut the legs from the 'tactical' suits, closing the holes with tightly tied a rope. The arms become shoulder straps, tied to the stumps where the legs had once been. The necks of the suits are similarly closed leaving only the large body zips that would allow us to fill them with equipment then seal the 'pack'. We then begin to break down our remaining equipment to its bare minimum. This is easier said than done and we have to make some hard decisions, disposing of a lot of very expensive equipment and personal items we had spent many months as well as thousands of dollars collecting. It's a problem making a backpack that could carry the very heavy equipment that is left. There are a number of problems to overcome but as the day progresses we succeed in finding a system that will carry the kit and skis. However, at the end of our labours the packs still weight about 80lbs each. In these conditions we can't even get to our feet without each others help. The thinking had been that we could move faster than with a single heavy sled but this now looks like it will not be the case. It took all day to get the idea into shape and start moving. After only a few hundred feet I slip and fall, ending up face down right next to open water, unable to move and pinned down by the weight of the equipment. A serious rethink is suddenly forced upon us. It will be clearly dangerous to continue with this weight on our backs. Our chances of reaching Russia before one of us is injured are slim. My backpack idea has failed and we have lost another day. We retreat back to the sled then pitch tent. We have been stuck at about 20 miles from the shore for three days now. Walking towards then drifting away. Clouds are starting to move in from the south but at least there is still no wind and the ice movement is slow.

Thursday, 30th March 2006

The weather has at last closed in, the air now filled with snow. Wearing our kayaking dry suits we set off at best speed for the coast. Although the weather could be a problem, the ice stays as it was yesterday and our going is good, or at least as good as it gets out here. Within just two or three miles we meet an unusual ice wall across our front. This is 20ft high in some parts and right in front of the wall, almost like a moat, is a stretch of water, some of it open, some areas covered with very thin ice. This can only be the narrow line my father had seen on the satellite photos. We were expecting open water maybe a few hundred feet wide, as we had experienced when leaving the fast ice on the Alaskan side. Maybe it had closed. At this time there is a wind blowing from behind us, as luck would have it, and this would effectively pack the ice against the shore. During last night the wind had picked up and we had listened to the grind of moving ice all night.

We manage to find a narrow frozen bridge across this moat, allowing us to cross to the base of the wall without getting wet. On scaling the wall we are presented with a fantastic view of the Russian coastline and most impressively, the village of Uelen. We experience a rush of euphoria such as comes rarely in one's life. We have now definitely reached the fast ice off the Russian coast. This is a huge victory and has increased our chances of success a hundred fold. We are about five miles from landfall and if the weather changes for the worse now there's a good chance we will still be OK. On the other hand the ice directly behind us will be swept out to sea. We have crossed a very important line and spirits are high. The ice directly to our front, though solid, is a nightmare. I had been expecting it but this is the worst ice we've seen so far. The actions of tide and wind have piled high the stacks of crushed ice. There is no time to waste however and we push on into the last stretch. The sled is now the lightest it has ever been, but the going is extremely difficult and consequently slow. We move at a crawl. There is just no room for manoeuvre, no chance to get a run at anything, just simply climbing up and down constantly.

From time to time we lose visibility as the blowing snow closes in. I keep a close eye on the GPS and have set the direction arrow to a prominent point on the coast. Very slowly the miles count down until we are only two miles out and at last things change. Suddenly large open areas appear and we fit our skis, whooping for joy thinking we have made it. Unfortunately, after only a few hundred metres, we hit another broken ice field and this stops us in our tracks. The light is now fading quickly and it would be extremely foolish, if not plain dangerous, to try moving in the dark. Today is also my 37th birthday and what an extra bonus reaching the coast would have been. Now, only half a mile from landfall, we are brought to a halt by a rough patch of ice and our last light goes. The overall conditions are now pretty grim, with very limited visibility in this strange dark grey light. Hardly able to stop ourselves, we stumble and fall. I have to call time. The very last thing we need now is for one of us to get injured. Shame about the birthday treat but we can't justify going on. As far as I'm concerned though it's a done deal. I might not be standing on solid ground but this ice isn't going anywhere and we will still be in this position when it gets light. I am absolutely sure the ice below us is solid right down to the bottom as we had not seen any open water since crossing the wall five miles out. I speak to father on the sat phone who states, bearing in mind the time in Alaska when we were swept out to sea from the beach, that he will not announce our victory until, as he puts it, I have dirt in my hands. In spite of this I cannot restrain myself from calling friends in Fairbanks and spilling the beans.

Friday, 31st March 2006

We start with our normal morning routine, but with an added upbeat mood. The wind now howls as it has all night, and the air is heavy with snow. Once outside we have very limited visibility but know our goal is just there, through the gloom. As if the going hadn't been hard enough area yesterday now the falling snow hides man traps that lay amongst the jumbled ice. Things do improve though, eventually, and we get back onto our skis and cover some ground. It's now virtually a white-out so there is nothing else to do but follow the arrow on the GPS. I constantly scan to my front, more than aware that we must be very close to the shoreline. At last shapes appear as though behind a heavy veil. Are they really there or is my imagination being prompted by my hopes. Yes, there's definitely something there. Through the driving snow the shapes seem to make no sense, but they are not the shapes we are used to seeing. I have not said anything to Dimitri until I'm sure what I'm looking at is something worthwhile.

What the hell is that? And there, more shapes off to the left! Buildings?

"Dimitri... I think I can see something out there... looks like buildings... there at 11 o'clock. Damn! There's an object at 10'clock ... a radar dish?"

As we close with the object at 10'clock we can now see that it is definitely a large radar dish. Christ! Not the best place to come ashore in this extremely sensitive part of Russia. Needless to say we are somewhat nervous and decide to put away our cameras. It would appear we have come ashore right in the middle of the early-warning base about 3 miles north-west of Uelen.... Bollocks! As we almost creep closer it becomes clear that something is amiss. The site is in fact abandoned. Not only that but it looks like it's been empty for a good number of years. This is greeted by some serious sighs of relief. We climb up onto the shore amid the wreckage and broken infrastructure. There's a couple of photos then I make that all-important phone call home. My first words to my father :-

"Terra firma ... Terra firma."

Now we finally have dirt in our hands. It is a victory that was not thought possible and we are both stunned by the event. After a brief back-slapping celebration we peer out to the south-east and catch a glimpse of Uelen through the now rapidly improving weather. We set off towards the town along a coast littered with debris and looking like some post apocalyptic scene. Shattered buildings and cannibalised rusting vehicles lie half submerged in the deep driven snow. Crates, oil drums and truck parts scattered over the whole three miles. Twisted metal and wooden beams reach skywards through the snow wherever you look. We manoeuvre around the debris and over bars of driven snow. Slowly but surely we close on Uelen. We had not seen anyone on our walk to the town, however as we pass what appears to be an airfield on the outskirts we catch our first sight of the Russian people.

We have just come through one hell of an adventure, but all my instincts tell me we are at the very start of another. What will happen in the next few hours or days is as every bit unpredictable as when we first stepped out onto the ice of the Bering Straits.

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