

Maiden in the ice

BROUGHT up on a Bradford council estate, Ann Daniels left school at 16 to work in a bank. Happy with her lot she thought she would stay there for the rest of her life – that is until she spotted a newspaper advert which would transform her life. Now one of the most prominent British polar explorers, she is about to embark on the challenge of her lifetime – a solo trek to the geographic North Pole. As she begins to plan her final record-breaking expedition, Ann opened up to EX about being a mum of four, training on Dartmoor, being stalked by a polar bear and the constant draw of the ice. **By Laura Dale.**

Pictures by Martin Hartley



Ann Daniels



Pulling the 250lb sledge whilst leaning into the wind



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KNOCK on the door and a small wiry woman with bright blonde hair answers the door. She's full of energy and enthusiasm and she welcomes me into her house, which is – befitting of a polar explorer – cold. Sitting down on the sofa with notebook and pen in hand, a fascinating story of triumph over adversity begins to unfold. Ann said: "I didn't come from an outdoor background. I was brought up in the city centre of Bradford. One day I saw a newspaper

advert asking for women to apply to become part of the first all-female team to walk to the North Pole. At the time I was a house wife with triplets."

Ann continues: "My husband encouraged me. I applied and sent off £75 and thought it could be a scam – for all I knew I could have appeared on Crime Watch." Then a kit list from Pen Hadow arrived in the post and Ann set about borrowing gear from her military friends. "When I got there all the women were all Outward Bound instructors. I was the only person who had done nothing. I hadn't used a rucksack or a compass before and that weekend completely destroyed me. I was totally out of my depth."

After the two day trial Ann was interviewed by the media and asked how she would feel if she got a place on the team. "I said I couldn't dream what it would feel like to do something so extraordinary, so I was just going to go for it." And that is exactly what Ann did. Over the next nine months she trained hard, determined to complete the four-day SAS style selection and be chosen for the team. "My family and friends taught me how to read a map. I used to put the children in the local gym nursery and I would do circuit training in the garden. I built up my strength and my physical abilities. I went back in nine months and I was a new person. I knew that if I didn't get a place, it wasn't because I wasn't capable."

Ann did get a place on the expedition which took place in 1997 when her triplets were just three years old. "We flew out to the Arctic and the first thing they did was teach me how to ski. Up until that point I had never put on a pair of skis. We left for the Arctic and it blew me away. Up until then I had spent a few weekends on Dartmoor training. It was such an incredible environment, total wilderness and it was terrifyingly cold. The ice is as big as hills and it moves and cracks. There are so many colours, the ice is white, green and blue. When the ice splits you get a film on the top and the air catches the ice crystals and they look like little flowers. It's like it has a heart, as if it's living."

There were five groups of four women and two guides. The groups would each complete part of the route in a relay becoming the first British female team to reach the North Pole. But Ann's triumph was overshadowed by a devastating rupture to her family life. When she got home, her already strained marriage fell apart. "When the marriage fell apart I was devastated – I had been with him since I was 18. I didn't have a job or any money and exploring gave me a way of supporting my children. My expeditions became a way of fund-



Ann Daniels and Caroline Hamilton reach the North Pole in 2002

ing a new life for my children." Ann contacted some of the other women from the North Pole expedition and put together a team to trek to the South Pole. They trained in Norway with one of the World's most accomplished Polar travellers, Geoff Somers. The five women crossed Antarctica, travelling about 700 miles over snow and crevasses and facing winds of up to 90mph. Christmas 1999 was celebrated with a phone call to Prince Charles (the expedition patron) and the new millennium was celebrated with extra chocolate and a Mars Bar each. After 60 days toiling south the team spotted the Amundsen-Scott South Pole base on the horizon. They stepped onto the pole and entered the history books as the first British all women's team to reach the South Pole on foot. Following her second record-breaking expedition, Ann began to lead Last Degree trips. "They were usually all male teams and I would navigate and lead them. It was good, but I wanted to do something else. I wanted to put a team together to go all the way to the North Pole."

Ann's friends and fellow polar explorers Caroline Hamilton and Pom Oliver decided to go with her. "We were pulling tyres, going away for weekends together and carrying heavy things in the Majorcan mountains – we already knew we could do cold so we decided to go somewhere warm." In March 2002 the team set off to ski from Canada via Ward Hunt Island to the North Pole. Infamous for being one of the coldest, bleakest years in the Arctic the team battled temperatures of between minus 44 and minus 56 degrees (without wind chill) for the first 27 days. "It was truly horrendous," Ann said, but things were

about to get a lot worse. Ann continued: "We all got carbon monoxide poisoning. We had the tent made with special vents but because it was so cold the vents froze and we weren't getting any air circulation. I was cooking and suddenly Pom just collapsed and I felt drunk. We opened the tent door and cut a hole in the roof. It was just hell. We were all in a mild state of hypothermia. Our sleeping bags were so frozen we had to break them open to get into them. One night the ice started to break underneath the tent, this went on for a period of seven days and we had to move out of the area."

Ann and the team hauled heavy sledges over ridges and rubble. One day the weather changed and the wind picked up so much that they couldn't get the tent up and lay underneath the tent material for three days whilst the storm battered them. Ann said: "Giving up was never an option. If it got to the stage where we could not keep going then that was different. I knew it was a big challenge and it was never going to be easy. If there was a problem it was a case

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Swimming through freezing water



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of how are we going to get through this. There were three more storms then we got frostbite. We were in a terrible state. Pom got wet gangrene and she couldn’t do anything. We realised the challenge was bigger than the three of us. We knew if we were going to complete it Pom would have to leave.”

On day 47, the team had a resupply and Pom left. For Ann and Caroline, she became the driving force behind their goal of reaching the North Pole. They had 300 miles to cover in less than 30 days. “We started to build up longer days – sometimes we were on the ice for 14 hours. With cooking we were getting five hours sleep. We became one person and had the same thoughts. We were so in tune with each other and our environment. We were a force together, the two of us.” She continued: “Every day was about getting to the pole. We were drinking tepid water at night because we could not afford the time to boil the water to make hot chocolate.”

On June 1, 2002 they reached the pole. Ann recalled: “We couldn’t believe we had got there. We came over the final ridge and it was there. We planted a union jack and sung the national anthem. We hugged each other and had some whisky which burnt our mouths and throats, but we’d carried it all that way and we were going to drink it.” The pair clinched the record by the skin of their teeth – if they hadn’t reached the pole that day they would have failed because the plane was arriving to take them off the ice. Ann added: “It was as much Pom’s achievement as ours. She was with us all the way.”

Ann’s expeditions are littered with vivid recollections of sights, sounds and events from the ice. In 2005, she came dangerously close to a powerful polar

bear which stalked her for three days. “It circled the tent first thing in the morning. You have to carry a gun and the thing is to frighten them away, so I shot the ice and the bear just looked at me and wasn’t frightened at all. I shot over its head and it left quietly and went his own way. Each day I saw him, then he started to track me. On the third day I was more in tune with my surroundings and I just knew he had left me. At the time it was terrifying, but I was also really honoured that the bear had been part of my life for three days and I would be part of its.”

The danger of the situation doesn’t escape Ann, but it’s her level-headedness which allows her to keep her wits about her at the most crucial moments. “When things are difficult I think of the children. I say to myself, before I tackle this, can I justify to them what I am about to do? Am I going to be 100 per cent safe? Can I justify crossing this ice? If I can’t justify it then I find a way around it. I have to come home. I absolutely have to come home. My children are my barometer.” Ann also carries two talismans with her, a troll with pink hair that her niece gave her before her children were born and a St Christopher given to her by a friend. “Sometimes if I’m in a difficult place then I think about my grandmother and she keeps me safe. People come to you when you are out there. Whether it’s real or imagined I don’t know. Maybe it’s because we are in such an extreme environment where we are at one with nature. There’s no music, no mobile phones, nothing to distract you. It’s just you and the elements and your journey.”

Being a polar explorer has allowed Ann to be a full time mum for the nine months of the year when she’s not on an expedition. Her parents, and latterly her partner Tom, have looked after the children when she’s away. “I’ve always felt



Crossing the Arctic on the Catlin expedition

“I’ve always felt comfortable that the children were happy and what we were doing was improving our lives.”

comfortable that the children were happy and what we were doing was improving our lives. I think if we can live the life we want we can be a better parent. I admit it is an unusual thing for somebody with four children to do, but for me it works very well.”

Now 18, Lucy, Rachel and Joseph are embarking on college courses and learning to drive. Ann’s youngest daughter Sarah is nine. “Of course I miss them when I’m away, but polar exploring is such a big endeavour that you have to compartmentalise your life. I put my children in a place in my head where they are always present, but I am in a survival situation for a very long time and you have to concentrate on that situation. I think about them just before sleeping or every so often I have to contact them by sat nav and hear their voices.”

Her children are all the more precious to her because their arrival didn’t come easily. Already settled and working in a bank, Ann and her then partner had trouble conceiving. “I had a miscarriage and ovarian cysts. In those days you had to have major operations. We couldn’t conceive naturally so we decided we would try IVF. As soon as the eggs went in I knew they had taken and I didn’t want to lose them. I had a feeling that weekend the pregnancy was going to be successful. I was settled and happy with my lot.”

But Ann’s journey from council estate to housewife and mum of triplets wasn’t over yet. She would go on to lead some of the most prestigious expeditions on the planet including The Catlin Arctic Survey. “I remember at the launch Pen [Hadow] told the media that he hadn’t asked me to join the expedition because I was a woman, but because I was the best. That meant a lot because he had chosen me for my first expedition all those years ago.” Like all of her expeditions, the ground-breaking Catlin Survey was not without its hurdles. Ann, Pen and photographer Martin Hartley were working with NASA to record the thickness of the ice. They spent years planning the expedition which got off to shaky start. Ann said: “Pen had a really bad chest infection and none of our equipment would

work. We had tested everything but we did not realise there was a problem with the batteries and their fuses. We couldn’t use a radar so we had to drill down and physically measure the ice with a tape measure. The pole was no longer our target – we had to let go of that, which was difficult because we are expedition people.”

No longer racing to reach the pole, the team concentrated on retrieving scientific information, which in turn “liberated” them from their need to satisfy personal goals. The team had regular resupplies but at one stage the weather was so bad they had to wait in bed for five days to conserve energy. Ann explained: “We got down to 100grams of food a day, which is about 30grams each. We had a handful of nuts and chocolate and that was it, but we did have water. We would argue over whether we were going to eat the food all in one go or spread it out over the day. We spent 73 days in the same environment together, so it would have been bizarre if we never rowed. An expedition is about who you are and how you behave out there. I was fortunate to be with two men who behave very well.”

Ann is gearing up for one last big expedition – a solo trek to the geographic North Pole. “I am 48 years old this year and next year I will be going into my 49th year. I’m going to be dragging a 250lb sledge over the worst terrain in the world with temperatures down to minus 60 for over 500 miles. It’s something that will take every ounce of what I have and more. I’m of an age where I have to say that’s it now. I don’t think there’s anything else I want to do, so this will be my last record attempt – my last major expedition.” Somebody once wrote Ann a poem about the Arctic called Crystal Beast. In it they call her “a maiden in the ice” – for Ann the Arctic has become part of her, her spirit and her soul. “I feel a pull back to it. I have a relationship with the ice and it has captured my soul.”

For more information visit www.anndaniels.com



A flag flies at the geographic North Pole in 2002

Left: Rare time out in the relative warmth of the tent