

Paul Kirtley's Blog

Wilderness Bushcraft • Survival Skills • Outdoor Life

Male Speaker: This is the Paul Kirtley Podcast, Episode 12.

Male Speaker: The Paul Kirtley Podcast, Wilderness Bushcraft, Survival Skills and Outdoor Life.

Paul: Welcome, welcome to Episode 12 of the Paul Kirtley Podcast. My guest today is Lou Rudd. Lou joined the UK Armed Forces at the age of 16 where he has served a full career spanning nearly 25 years. During his military career, Lou has completed many tours in extreme cold weather environments, some inside the Arctic Circle. He's a qualified ski instructor and an Arctic Warfare Instructor. During the winter of 2011 to 2012, Lou along with Henry Worsley completed an 800 mile unsupported journey following the original route of Roald Amundsen from Bay of Whales to the geographic South Pole. That was part of the Scott Amundsen Centenary Race to mark the 100th anniversary of that original race for the South Pole.

Now, Lou's currently preparing for a new unsupported South Pole expedition which he will lead himself. I caught up with him to discuss his Antarctic endeavors.

So, I'd like to welcome Lou Rudd to my podcast. Hi Lou, how are you doing today?

Lou: Yes, very good, thank you.

Paul: Excellent, excellent. Good and we're going to go into a reasonable amount of detail, but you're currently preparing to do a training phase for your upcoming expedition and you're heading off to Norway very shortly, is that right?

Lou: That's right, yes, and we're looking to fly out to Norway this Sunday. We're going to take all the provisional team members. We're flying into Oslo. When we first arrive, we're going to do a little bit of polar culture. I'm going to take the team, there's a museum in Oslo, it's got Roald Amundsen's original ship, the Fram, which is what he used on his original expedition just over 100 years ago, obviously the first guy to reach the South Pole. They've got the Fram, it's an awesome museum piece, I'll take the team into there. We're going

to go and have a look at that and all the various sorts of artifacts from that original expedition.

Then from there, the following day we're going to move north, about three hours north of Oslo to a place called Reine, where there's a Norwegian military base. We're going to go into there, a couple of days of preparing kit and equipment, a bit of training, and then we're going to head on out to a place called Lake Femund, which is I think the third largest lake in Norway. We're going to get dropped to the base of that and we're going to do a 10-day mini-expedition, running as we would in Antarctica, practicing all the routines, pushing out hopefully some good mileage as well, and testing all the equipment that we're going to take with us. Also, it will serve as final team selection; I'm actually taking extra guys on this trip, and at the end of this trip, we will confirm the final six-man team that will go to Antarctica.

Paul: Okay, so there's a bit of an incentive for them to perform as well.

Lou: Absolutely, yeah. This is the final phase. This has been going on now for 18 months. I started with 50 applicants, and we're down to the final 9 now for Norway.

Paul: Am I right in thinking the Fram was also the ship that Amundsen did the Northwest Passage in, is that right?

Lou: That's right. That's correct.

Paul: So, a real illustrious history to that boat, isn't there?

Lou: Yeah. I think it will be fantastic and I haven't seen it myself either. I've read a lot about it in the original diaries from Amundsen. So yeah, it will be great to go and see that.

Paul: You were involved in a polar expedition previously a few years ago, weren't you? You, as part of the Scott Amundsen Centenary Race expedition, you did a trip to the South Pole. Could you tell us a little bit about it, what you experienced, how you actually got involved in that, and just tell us some of the statistics about the trip and what you actually achieved.

Lou: Yeah, that's right, yeah. It was over four years ago now, and basically it was a centenary expedition, so what we looked to do, it was exactly 100 years to when the original journeys of Roald Amundsen and Captain Scott took place, and what we set out to do really was to commemorate those epic original polar journeys by the polar pioneers and redo those two routes done by Scott. So we

had two three-man teams, one three-man team doing Captain Scott's route from his original start point. And then I was in the other team that was recreating Roald Amundsen's route, starting at the Bay of Whales, crossing the Ross Ice Shelf, ascending up through the Axel Heiberg Glacier onto the Polar Plateau then across to the pole. So, it was a major five years in assault planning and training for it, and then we finally set off in November 2011. Our particular route was just over 800 miles. And again, we set out to do that unsupported, so we got dropped at the Bay of Whales on the coastline of Antarctica and we did it without any form of resupply. We didn't use kites or any kind of assistance; it was literally on skis, each man holding his each individual pulk. I think our start weight was about 165 kilograms and in there we had 70 days' worth of obviously food, all the cooking fuel we needed, and obviously the tents and sleeping equipment, basically everything we needed to survive out on the Polar ice pack for two and a half months. It was a race and we raced against three guys doing Captain Scott's route. We set off at the same time, we linked up via satellite phone call literally "on your marks, get set, go."

Paul: Really? Okay.

Lou: Yeah, and then from that point on there was no communication between the two teams. So, it wasn't until we arrived at the pole nearly two and a half months later that you found out if we won the race or not. But it was incredible to go back. And nobody had been back and redone Amundsen's route in 100 years. People had been out there on [inaudible 00:06:30] and looked at sections of it, but nobody had ever walked the whole route from the Bay of Whales to the pole, so it was a Polar first when we got there as well.

Lou: That's quite incredible, isn't it, that even the success of that expedition in the first place, that nobody used that route again. Is there any reason why it wasn't then thought of as an optimum route?

Paul: Yeah, I think it's difficulty in getting to it. It's quite expensive. There's one main company, ALE, they deal with getting people into Antarctica, and they're really based around the other side of Antarctica over on their main base camp at Union Glacier is sort of round the Ronne-Filchner Ice shelf, so getting around to the Ross Ice shelf is very expensive. It's a lot of flying and you're really paying quite a premium for the aviation gas to get you all the way around there.

So, I think it's mainly the cost to deter people. And the unknown really, nobody has been up and down the Axel Heiberg Glacier unsupported. No one ever tried to drag a pulk up there from the bottom up. A lot of people thought it was probably unachievable, because Amundsen had originally gone up there with dog teams, so people weren't quite sure because of the steepness. It is pretty

difficult. It took us six days to get up there and we had to double haul. It was actually too steep to drag your own individual pulk, even traversing. So, we ended up, literally, two of us getting on one pulk, traverse up 500 meters, drop that off, ski back down, and then get the next one so in fact we were climbing every hill twice. It was pretty emotional at times.

Paul: Yeah, I can imagine, I can imagine. So, you're on skis with skins presumably.

Lou: Yes, so you got full skins, so literally, you're just walking on skis. There's no glide or langlauf technique at all because of the weight of the pulk. It's literally slower than walking pace; it's sort of a trudge really. Many have a full skin that covers the whole base of the ski to get sufficient purchase to move the pulk forward.

Paul: And how did you become involved in that expedition in the first place, Lou? Because clearly that was quite a prestigious thing to do and quite a historic thing to do. How did you become involved?

Lou: Yes, yes. I've always been interested in polar history. I grew up reading about Scott of the Antarctic and that kind of stuff and I've always really been interested in polar exploring and always on the lookout for an opportunity to go and do something. So, yeah, very fortunate five or six years ago now, just got advertised, it was all military personnel on the expedition. It wasn't an official military expedition, unlike the one we're doing next. We have to negotiate time off from work to go and do it. But yeah, it got advertised within the military, so I put my name forward. I went through quite a lengthy selection process and fortunately made it down to the final team and I got selected to go, so I considered myself really fortunate to be part of what was a really major and historic expedition and getting to do quite a historic route. So, it was incredible. And we did it for the... it was in association with the Royal British Legion, and we successfully raised, I think, in excess of 150,000 pounds for the legion.

Paul: That's fantastic, that's fantastic.

Lou: Which was great and again, we raised the profile of Captain Scott and his original journey, so it was great and really good.

Paul: And you hadn't been to Antarctica before that, that was your first time you set foot on Antarctica, was to do that expedition.

Lou: Absolutely, that was the first opportunity I had and it really was straight into the deep end with quite an extreme trip, doing it unsupported and over 800

mils, so it really was chipping at the deep end. But we went to Norway, we did a lot of buildup training in Norway and had all the right kit and equipment and we were well prepared, so it was good.

Paul: So, that was going to be my next question actually: how do you prepare for a trip like that one, or a trip that you're doing now? You mentioned five years in the planning and preparation for the one a few years ago, clearly there's a lot of logistics involved but in terms of physical preparation, what do you need to do as an individual to prepare for something like that physically?

Lou: Yeah, physically, especially if you're going to go for a long, unsupported, journey, you do really need to be in peak physical condition. And really yeah, it was a whole combination of things. The backbone really of all of our training was tire-holding, so we all got ourselves a big old weighty Land Rover tire and then wearing the actual pulk harness with the ropes. You just go out and I'm quite fortunate I live alongside the River Wye. There's a nice river footpath and [inaudible 00:11:31] out dragging tires and starting in hour-long sessions and then as you get closer to the expedition itself, I was going out and doing sometimes eight, nine hours of hauling these tires. And it's the closest thing you can get really to replicating the physical hauling of a pulk. And so a couple of walking sticks to simulate the ski sticks, but also a steady pair of boots and dragging a big old tire. And then as I progressed through my training, I then added a second tire. I got a few funny looks as you can imagine.

Paul: Local dog-walkers got to know you quite well I would imagine.

Lou: [inaudible 00:12:11] getting stopped and they were asking what the hell I was doing and I'd have to give them a quick explanation of what it was all about. But yeah, so tire-hauling was really the backbone of it. But then mixed in with regular gym work, a lot of squats and legwork in the gym to really build up leg strength. And long cross-country runs, again stamina and endurance, key aspects really of that kind of journey. We looked heavily at the nutrition and really focused on that to make sure we're getting the nutrition right. We're eating in excess of about 6,500 to 7,000 calories a day, but burning 10,000 as we subsequently discovered afterward, so we looked a lot at nutrition, preparation, eating well. So, like I say, a lot of cross-country running as well mixed up with the tires, so a lot of time invested in the physical preparation.

Paul: And what sort of time period did that physical preparation... I mean clearly you're a military man, you have a good base level of fitness to start off with, but how long did that period take from [inaudible 00:13:15]

Lou: Yeah, I guess I really started the dedicated training about 18 months out, I got into it, because we had pre-trips to Norway where we were doing again, some long-hauls, 10-day trips out to Norway, so again I was preparing for those and doing it 10 days in Norway with some quite big mileage and then come back and carry on with the tire hauling. I was just slightly unfortunate last time that the six months prior to going on the expedition, I then got a posting to Afghanistan. My time just came around to do a six-monther as a lot of ministry personnel do.

Paul: Yes.

Lou: And, you know, the Army's response when I mentioned about the expedition was, "Well, you're slumming off on a skiing holiday for three months in Antarctica. We want our pound of flesh now before you go." I did six months in Kandahar at +40 degrees and [inaudible 00:14:08] got back a week before we went to Antarctica, so it wasn't ideal going from +40 to -40, but you just make the best of a bad deal. I managed to... I took my tire out there and the harness. In my spare time I went around within the perimeter fence of Kandahar Airfield and carried on with the tire holding out there.

Paul: I guess in that heat that must have been pretty brutal.

Lou: It was, yeah, and again, we're sharing a base with a lot of other nationalities, Americans and Canadians and they'd all be heading out in their vehicle on patrol and coming past me and they'd all be comments like, "Hey, that looks like a bit of a drag mate," and all that kind of stuff. Yeah, and the dust was the main problem [inaudible 00:14:57] a lot of the vehicle routes around the base, and any time you get a vehicle come past, you just end up in a small dust cloud. It sure wasn't great for my lungs.

Paul: Not great for the lungs, no, no, no. And it's interesting you mentioned about the calorie usage. I remember reading a book about one of Ranulph Fiennes polar trips with Mike Stroud and how however much they tried to bump up the calories, they burnt more than they expected to and they'd lost a lot of weight. Was that a similar experience that you had, or had people that do Polar expeditions now learned from some of those earlier trips and can manage the nutrition a bit better?

Lou: Yeah, I mean we looked at it, we sought a lot of advice, and what we were getting told was that it was...speaking to some nutritionist, they said it was fairly pointless eating beyond 6,000 to 7,000 calories in a 24-hour period because of the fact that your body couldn't really make the best use of it and absorb it. They said, look, you can carry, you can take with you 10,000 calories

a day as your food lines, but number one, obviously you're increasing your weight massively: you've got to haul all that. And physically trying to eat that much as well, we'd probably find it quite difficult. So, they recommended a 6,000-7,000 calorie allowance, which we did. We took that, but yeah, subsequently it was...because we were hauling for 10 hours a day on the last trip, and when we got back, we did a little bit of moratorium while we were out there, blood tests and various things, came back and they worked out that we had been burning round about 10,000 actual calories per 24 hour period, and so we lost weight. I went from 13 and a half stone down to 10 and a half, so I lost 3 stone in body weight. We did some before and after photographs, which I'll put upon your website and showing the difference. I mean, I was pretty emaciated, skin and bone.

Paul: What height are you Lou?

Lou: I'm 6 foot.

Paul: So, about the same as me, so yeah, that's pretty light. When I used to race mountain bikes, I was about 11 stone and that felt pretty light.

Lou: Yeah, 10 and a half is a little light for me. Last time I weighed that much I was probably about 13 years old.

Paul: Yeah, it's quite incredible. And to get that calorie count, were you eating a lot of fat? Because I guess the calories per gram of the weight that you're pulling as well is higher, isn't it, if you're eating more fat?

Lou: Yeah, yeah. So, everything was about saving weight to be honest. When our initial source [inaudible 00:17:42] saving up the calories per day which is way too heavy, so we got some specialist freeze-dried food from Expedition Foods, which was great because they're were really high-calorie, our three main meals per day; a breakfast bag of porridge, which had nearly 1000 calories in.

Paul: That's that really creamy stuff, isn't it?

Lou: Yeah, yeah, which was great. And then for an evening meal, we'd have a main course bag, a dessert bag and again, they made up about a couple thousand calories with them. And then on top of that, each day we had basically a grazing bag, a freezer bag with broken up macadamia nuts, energy bars, bits of salami and really high-calorie bits and pieces in there. And basically as you're skiing along during the day, you'd just be grazing on that all day. So, every hour you'd just grab a handful of it and just pop it in your mouth and just keep your calories constantly coming in. The combination of that grazing bag

and your actual freeze-dried food and also we had some energy drink powder as well, which was high calorie, and that sort of combined all of that gave us about six and a half thousand calories, I believe.

Paul: So, it didn't feel too hard getting the calories in, because I've heard of people adding butter to things and it being really quite difficult to get the calories in, but that sounds like it was reasonably manageable if you kept that routine up with the grazing as well during the day.

Lou: Yeah, it was. It was definitely in the first couple of weeks, we struggled to eat all the fat. We'd have half of our grazing bag left after a day, and then the middle phase of the journey, it was bang-on, it was just about right, you could comfortably finish it what you needed to in a 24-hour period. And then probably the last three weeks, it wasn't enough. We were permanently hungry and you'd sort of consume your grazing bag halfway through the day and be thinking, "Oh my god," and just be hanging in there the rest of the day until you got into your tent for your evening meal and you probably could've eaten six of the freeze-dried packets per day. So, we went through phases.

Paul: Yeah it's interesting, it's interesting. I guess to start off with your weight was highest, at which point did you feel like you were making most progress? It's clear you were losing weight and maybe losing a bit of strength towards the end. Where did you feel like you were strongest and making most progress?

Lou: Yeah, definitely looking back we kept a daily diary, recording our progress and mileage. Yeah, in the middle phase of the journey, so definitely early on, the early phase when the pulk was heaviest. Say it was 165 kilograms was our original start weight when you got the 70 days' worth of food in there. I remember carrying 25 liters of cooker fuel each as well, and obviously the crevasse rescue kit and med pack in there. So, yeah, we were really slow I think in the first week, we were only averaging about five, six nautical miles per day, which is really low.

Then as we gradually began to eat our way through our burden, I found our bodies as well, despite all the training, still took a little time to acclimatize to the polar cold and adapt all the muscles and everything to develop for the hauling. I think the middle phase of the journey and weeks four through to about seven, eight, we really were banging out some great mileage daily, doing marathon distance in the hauling. And we found as well as we got further inland, the ice pack hardened, it was actually better. The temperatures got a bit lower, so less soft snow, less snowfall as we got further inland as well. So, we cracked out some great mileage. But then once we climbed the Axel Heiberg Glacier, almost a home run the last three weeks, we were up at then 9,000 feet

on the Polar Plateau. Temperatures dropped and we found once the temperatures got below -30 on the Polar Plateau, they were regularly -40, the snow surface really changed and became much more gritty and like a sand almost-type surface. It really stuck to the runners.

The way the pulk works, it creates a small amount of friction on the runner as it glides over the snow. And that friction creates a very thin film of water and moisture between the snow and the runner and the pulk glides quite easily. We found once we got to the Polar Plateau in the last phase of the journey, even though the pulk was really light, we were only carrying two weeks' worth of food and it was probably down to about 70-80 kilograms, which was nothing compared to the start, because of that lack of friction and the runner couldn't melt that thin film of water, the pulk was just sticking to the surface. So it actually felt like a 200 kilogram pulk despite being much lighter. And by that point, we were much weaker as well, had lost a lot of body fat. I think we were starting to digest probably a bit of muscle and we were pretty exhausted as well, so probably the last phase was probably the hardest. We didn't make the mileage so it dipped off and it went down to achieving about between 10 and 12 nautical miles per day in the final two weeks, so yeah.

Paul: And the total distance was 800 miles, what was the total time that it took you in the end?

Lou: We got there in the end in 67 days.

Paul: Was that within your expectations, was it?

Lou: It was. We set off with 70 days of food, so we were very close. But yeah, we estimated a 65-day journey and we took a 5-day reserve on top of that. We got there and we did have a couple of no-travel days with pretty rough weather conditions and we had a couple of dramas as well with kit and equipment failing in bits and pieces.

Paul: Oh really?

Lou: We had to stop at one of the...one of the pulk harnesses broke, so we had to spend a day fixing that and getting it repaired, so we did lose a little bit of time. But generally it went pretty well. We got in at 67 days, so we were pleased with that.

Paul: How did the opposing team do?

Lou: Yeah, we didn't manage to recreate history and the Norwegian route prevailed again. Myself and Henry, yeah, we got in 9 days ahead of the Scott team, so they came in on 75 days.

Paul: And were they using the same type of pulks and skis and everything as you were?

Lou: Yeah, exactly the same equipment. Again, a three-man team unsupported, yeah, identical equipment. The original concept for the journey, actually, we offered it up to Norwegians, we were going to put a brick team do the Scott route and race against a Norwegian military team, but they turned down the offer unfortunately.

Paul: Oh really? That's a shame.

Lou: Yeah, their thinking was they won it once 100 years before, so why risk it again?

Paul: Quit while they're ahead.

Lou: Yeah.

Paul: That's a shame, that's a shame. So, you talked a little bit about daily routines. I'm presuming it's super important just to stick to a routine while you're doing a journey like that.

Lou: Yeah, absolutely, routine is key really. Yeah, and to outline the daily routine, we used to have the alarm go off at 7 in the morning in the tent and we'd be taking turns to be cook, so Herv was on the cooking duty. We would shuffle out the seat and bag and get the cooker going; that was always a priority. The most time-consuming thing really was melting snow. We didn't carry any fluids, so everything was melted snow. And really being a very dry cold in Antarctica, there's not much moisture in the snow, so it actually takes quite a lot of time. You pack a whole load of snow into the kettles which you very kindly supplied this time around...

Paul: You're welcome.

Lou: ...and yes, you pack a whole lot of snow into your kettle, fill up a 5-liter kettle with snow. After about 10 minutes, you have a tiny, thin film of water in the bottom of the kettle. You're just constantly then refilling. So yeah, the morning routine would take about two hours of running the cooker, melting enough snow to fill, each guy would have two one-liter flasks. So we get those

filled up so that would be his drink for the day, basically surviving on two liters of fluid for 10 hours of skiing. And again, it's that compromise; you could carry more fluid, but you've got to carry more cooker gas then and run the cooker for longer to make more fluid. So, we trained ourselves to manage on two liters while we were skiing during the day.

So, we'd do that, make up the flasks, make up the breakfast bag, re-hydrate that, there's more water required for that, have a drink as well, morning brew, pack up the tent, everything else, get sorted, and then be on skis and moving by 9 o'clock. That was our two-hour morning routine. And then we would ski pretty much non-stop. Right away through the day we'd generally do a 10-hour day is what we were averaging, so we would finish skiing at 7 in the evening and then take about 10, 15 minutes to get the tents up. And again, the evening routine would involve several hours of melting snow to make up your evening meal. We'd do a satellite phone call just back to the expedition company to give our current position and report back to the website for people who were following us, write diaries, conduct any kit repairs; invariably the sewing kit would be out and some sort of stitching going on and repairs to keep the show on the road. And generally asleep by about midnight once everything was done. So, you'd get about seven hours sleep a night. So, it was very much a ski, eat, sleep, repeat was the routine.

So, it was key, really, during the day while you were outside that tent just to keep moving and make the mileage and keep pushing it. We'd change over the lead every hour, so the three-man team would swap a lead because it was slightly harder up front because you're breaking through fresh snow, so when you're slightly behind you get a little bit of light relief. And the guy up front, again, responsible for navigation ahead, he would have an A-frame on his chest with a compass mounted on it. And so you'd use that for navigation and the second guy behind would be check nav'ing and the third guy very much just relaxing, iPod on and enjoying just following in the tracks for an hour and then we would swap briefly. Probably literally two or three minutes to change over the lead, have a quick drink out of the flask, a mouthful out of the grazing bag of food and then we'd be off again.

Paul: And how much do you think you were drinking a day in total, because you mentioned it being a very dry environment. A lot of people are surprised at how much fluids you need in those cold, dry environments, aren't they?

Lou: Yeas, I think about half a liter in the morning in the tent with our breakfast before we set off and then we'd drink...so we had the two liters to drink throughout the 10 hours of skiing from the two flasks that each guy carried and then back in the tent in the evening, you're pretty dehydrated by the end of the

day, so the priority straightaway, we'd make up a liter each of drink as soon as we were back in the tent, drink that, and then have the evening meal and then probably one more cup of tea or something just before we'd head down. So, I estimate, I reckon it's about probably three and a half, four liters per day of fluid. But again, we couldn't really afford to drink much more than that because again, we were really careful about how much fuel on the cooker we were consuming. We calculated, we did a lot of test runs in Norway to make sure we worked out, we should be fine with 25 liters per man to get us through 70 days.

Paul: Yeah, and did you have much left at the end?

Lou: No, we were on vapors.

Paul: Right.

Lou: It was dash for the pole at the end. So, the final day we said, we need to get to the pole today because we haven't got any cooker fuel left. It was right down to the wire.

Paul: That's quite incredible. Good planning and good calculations in the first place.

Lou: Yeah, and we never used the cooker just for heating the tent or for warmth, it was as soon as the snow melting process was done, we'd flick it off straightaway.

Paul: So, you were using a mountain-tent style tents, were they?

Lou: Yeah, Hilleberg, so we used the Hilleberg Keron three-man tent is what we used, with double poles. So, it comes with a standard single pole, but then we bought a second set of poles, we basically had double poles for each sleeve to give it a bit extra slant because you get these katabatic winds in Antarctica that can hit 80, 100 miles an hour sometimes. So, if you're riding out a storm, then you need extra security. But yeah, a superb tent, ideal for the job and we'll be using it on the next trip as well.

Paul: Yeah. I don't have that model but I have a couple of their tents and they are excellent tents.

Lou: Yeah, yeah, superb.

Paul: So, you're doing all your cooking in the vestibule presumably, were you?

Lou: Yeah, that's right. So, everything inside the vestibule. And again, as long as you're careful and sensible, then it's fine to do that. It helps you make sure the tent's well vented while the cooker is running as well to avoid any fumes. We didn't have any problems at all. The only time we did have slight difficulty as we got the altitude, the cookers did struggle to run as efficiently, when we were up at 9,000 or 10,000 feet. I think a lot of people don't realize the pole itself is just below 10,000 feet. It's an uphill walk from the coastline all the way.

Paul: Yeah, it's a long...I've never been clearly, but I've read a fair amount about polar exploration and it's a long drag up to the plateau at the top, isn't it?

Lou: Yeah, yeah, definitely.

Paul: And in terms of...because people do worry about cooking in tents, don't they, and carbon monoxide poisoning and setting the tent on fire. How did you make absolutely sure that you didn't have any problems with those?

Lou: Yeah, so basically we practiced it countless times in Norway on buildup trips. We made sure we were all over the cookers and the procedures. When we did initial lighting, obviously you bleed, the cooker we were using, the Primus OmniFuel, you bleed a little bit of fuel in first and then turn it off and then burn that, and that burnt not quite a yellow flame, you didn't get a great deal of heat coming off that. It's a bit safer. But again, with that, you should make sure you have the flap of the tent above it wide open. So, if it did rear up too much, it was just going to go through the roof and not catch the tent, the fabric. And then as soon as then you've got it running properly, obviously you've got to then put the kettle on the top straightaway. We had to fit it to a wooden baseboard so it was nice and stable, no danger of tipping over...

Paul: Right, yeah.

Lou: ...and the snow as well, so the baseboards work really well.

Paul: It's not going to melt anything underneath it or melt the snow and become unstable, yeah.

Lou: Yeas, it just sat on snow on the baseboard. So, you're in the vestibule area, and whoever was the duty cook, he minded that cooker the whole time and didn't really take his eyes off or start doing any of the jobs in the tent. That was his primary goal, was to mount that cooker while the other two guys could crack on and do any bits of admin.

Paul: And what about personal admin and personal hygiene? How much of a compromise is that on an expedition like that? How much routine do you need to make sure that you do maintain that personal admin?

Lou: Hygiene-wise, it was the bare minimum for us because we were doing an unsupported journey. We would initially pack the pulks and on the training trips we put in spare underwear, a second set of base layer thermals, various things, and realize that actually, as we were building towards the expedition, we realized we need to save weight somewhere. We had to start cutting down. The first thing to start to go was spare clothing, wash-kit type stuff. In the end, we finally went with, the only hygiene we were really doing was teeth cleaning, so we each had a toothbrush and one small tube of toothpaste. So, we cleaned our teeth once a day, again, to save carrying too much weight in toothpaste and things. And then washing-wise, all we'd do was our feet and we literally, at the end of each day once we'd go into the tent, we'd take off our ski boots and the socks we'd been skiing in, we'd hang those in the roof of the tent, the socks, to dry them out, powder our feet, a quick snow bath, rub a bit of snow on them, dry them off with a small hand towel, a bit of foot powder and then put on a dry pair of tent socks and then tent boots and that was it. So, there was no room for soap; we didn't carry any soap or anything like that at all.

And the only luxury I carried, my luxury item, was a small packet of wet wipes. We only had 10 in there, there was a little travel packet of 10 wet wipes and every couple of weeks as my luxury treat, you'd have to plan it in advance because you got to thaw these things out...

Paul: Yeah, of course.

Lou: ...and you'd have to carry it in your jacket pocket the day before you want to use it and then thaw it out. And then, every two weeks I'd use a warm wet wipe. I'd go outside and just have a clean around the vital areas, have a bit of a freshen-up really and that was it. We stayed in the same pair of thermal pants, underwear and thermal long johns and thermal top, which was like merino wool kit, and we stayed in that same base layer for the whole, you know. But I think by the time we got back to Chile into the hotel, we'd been wearing that base layer for I think 90 days.

Paul: That's quite incredible. I think the longest that I've been in the same set of merinos is maybe three weeks. But I mean, it's remarkable stuff though, isn't it?

Lou: Oh, it's incredible, absolutely amazing. And I'm sure we stunk to high heaven, but you just get used to each other and it was never really an issue, but it was very minimal hygiene. As I say, it was purely down to the fact that we

were trying to save weight so we can carry anything else ablutions-wise. But that was fine, it worked fine. We pulled it off.

Paul: Excellent, fantastic. So, turning to the expedition you're preparing for now, you're taking a military group this time. Is this an official military expedition this time?

Lou: Yes, it is. This is a team of army reservists, so again, it's through the military. It's a composite team of guys from across the Army reserves, and we're looking at a six-month team to head off in October this year to do a route that starts at a point on the coastline of Antarctica known as Hercules Inlet, and as the crow flies, to the geographic South Pole. It's 730 miles, but I think in reality with boxing around crevasse fields and other things, then we're probably looking at, again, probably towards an 800 mile journey. And again, we're looking to go unsupported, so dropped on the coastline, no form of re-supply, we won't be using kites or any form of assistance. We'll go for an unsupported journey to the edge of the pole itself.

Paul: So, you're still in your preparation phase. When is this expedition going ahead, by the way? The end of the year?

Lou: It is, yeah. So, we'll leave the UK to head out to Chile in mid-October this year. We estimate to be in Chile between one to two weeks waiting for, again, a weather window and final prep to get us into Antarctica. If you fly into a temporary summer camp that they set up, a place called Union Glacier, which is pretty much midway between the coastline and the pole itself. We'll go into Union Glacier, fly into there on a large Russian Antonov that they charter in. Once we get into the edge of Union Glacier, again, depending on weather and anything else, we'll be there between one to two weeks acclimatizing any final bit of preparation, and then we'll be loading onto the small Twin Otter aircraft ski planes, which will then fly the team out to our chosen start point on the coastline and then it will be, well hopefully it will be early November we should start walking and begin our journey to the pole.

Paul: And so that's the Antarctic summer, or getting on for it at that time of year.

Lou: That's right, yeah, so the Antarctic summer season runs November to the end of January. We got a 3-month window there and 24-hour daylight, which will be great.

Paul: Yeah, does that...clearly then in terms of the admin reaching you talked about, there are no issues with putting tents up at 7 o'clock in the evening and doing all the admin until midnight, but does it make it difficult to sleep?

Lou: It can be, yeah, it can be pretty bright because the sun doesn't dip below the horizon at all during the summer season. So, the last time, we took eye masks and you definitely need those because it can be really bright in the tent. But on the plus side, everything we do out there is run off solar panels, so we're charging our satellite phone, the camcorders, cameras, and iPods as well, we're charging them all off of solar panels. So, while we're skiing during the day, we'd have a solar panel laid out on top of the pulk charging the battery pack and even actually inside the tent at night while we slept, it was bright enough as well to charge the battery packs.

Paul: Is it through the wall of the tent?

Lou: Yeah, through the wall of the tent. I had a personal...we carry several. We carry some large panels for the satellite phone batteries, which were they key bit we had to maintain, and I had a personal, this is a very small solar panel. It's like a PowerMonkey Extreme, and the charger and the power pack, and again, I just had that, I put that out inside the tent while I slept at night and that was sufficient to recharge my digital camera and iPod, so that was great.

Paul: Yeah, that's fantastic, fantastic. So, now you're going out at the end of the year in October, what needs to be done between now and then to get ready for the exped?

Lou: Yeah, so the next big thing for us is obviously we've got our training event in Norway coming up this weekend. We head out to Norway, so that will be a key training trip, final team selection. I'm trialing a lot of kits as well, kit equipment. Things have moved on us the last four years, so we've got some new kit to try, which will be great. We get back from that on the 10th of March. We've got our official expedition launch event, so we've got our patrons, which are Cyrano Fiennes, he's a Civilian Explorer patron, we've got a political patron who's Julie Ambrasia, who is the MP for Reserve Forces, and then we've also got a military patron as well, a retired general Sir Cedric Delves. I know these guys are coming along and we've managed to secure a venue in the Palace of Westminster and Parliament for the 10th of March. We'll be holding an evening reception there inviting a lot more of our sponsors and supporters and a bit of media, so it's quite a bit of work to do in preparing for that.

And then after that, then we'll probably look at another trip possibly out to Italy, again into the snow, and it's kind of the back-end into the season there. And

then get a bit more training in. And then really it will be team-training weekends and building up to the expedition just in the UK. So, we've got some specialist polar doctors to coming brief us on cold weather injuries and frostbite treatment. We'll practice. We'll probably go into a climbing center and practice the crevasse rescue routines, because that's a real serious threat out there is a team member on a pulk going down a crevasse. So, we'll make sure everybody is swept up in the roping procedures to recover somebody from a crevasse if we're unfortunate with that. And then various training as we need to do, and really before we know it, October will be upon us and we'll be on our way.

Paul: Yeah, sounds fantastic. What are the actual aims of this trip, then, both in terms of physical aims on the ground and also the aims in terms of raising awareness or raising funds? What are you hoping to achieve from this one?

Lou: The big thing is, I suppose the main thing at the moment is the fact that it's an Army Reserves expedition, so typically within the military, it tends to be the regular troops that participate in the big expeditions, such as Everest and various sort of challenges. And the Reserves have been in the shadows, because they're part time soldiers. It's hard for Reservists to commit to big three-month expeditions because these guys have all got civilian careers and taking time out can be quite difficult.

In terms of financially, it can be easier for regular troops to get the funding required. So, really for me this is all about the Army Reserves. There's never been a polar expedition by a team of Army Reservists anywhere, North or South Pole, so it's a first in that respect and it's the first time a team of reservists attempted a polar journey, which is fantastic and it's really about raising the profile of the Army Reserves and saying, you know, these guys have got fantastic capabilities. I think it will be a great recruitment tool, again, really showcasing the opportunities that exist in the Army Reserves. I know the Army media group is going to leap on this and use it as a great recruitment tool. I think it will be good for retention, again encouraging people to continue service in the Reserves when they realize the opportunities and things they can get on, which is great. We're doing this one in association with a great charity, the ABF, the soldiers' charity. Again, we look at different charities and being an Army Reservist team going on this expedition, we want to do it for military charity and help those service personnel that require the support of a charity, so we're doing it alongside the ABF and then hoping as a consequence of the expedition to raise 100,000 pound.

Paul: Okay, is that general donations that you're looking for from people?

Lou: Yeah, yeah, exactly, yeah. So, we're just giving a link on our website and Facebook pages where people can go in there. So, we're hoping once the expedition kicks off, we've got quite a big following already, but once we actually go, hopefully that following will build and it will encourage everyone that is monitoring our daily progress just to make a small donation and hopefully we can build it up from there.

Paul: Well, I'll certainly share those links on the show notes underneath the podcast, and you've got a website as well, have you, for the expedition, I think you said?

Lou: Yeah, so it's spear17, so S-P-E-A-R, and then the number 17.org, O-R-G is the website. And on the website is links to our Facebook page and Twitter, but they're all the same name; they're all spear17.org, all our social media. Again, there are regular updates on all those platforms as to what we're up to. And then when we go on the expedition itself, via the [inaudible 00:44:58] we'll be carrying, we'll be putting on a daily blog, so we'll have a website manager back in the UK. We'll call into him and leave a five to six minute audio recording from one of the team members. People will get to listen to that audio recording; it will be written up as well in text and pushed out on Twitter. Also, we're hoping to get a daily image out as well, a photograph of the team from Antarctica as well, so there will be plenty, and obviously a rolling map as well with a beacon showing exactly our progress and where we're at.

Paul: Fantastic, and that will be on the Spear17 website, will it?

Lou: Yes, it will all be on the Spear17, it will be updated on the website daily and on the Facebook page as well.

Paul: Fantastic. Well, I'd encourage everybody to find that and like the page and follow it. It sounds like it's going to be interesting to see your progress. A couple of final questions: do you take anything to read on these trips, or is it literally just an iPod and that's your luxury in terms of entertainment or relaxation?

Lou: Yeah, we did actually. Last time, because we were doing Amundsen's route, I actually took Roald Amundsen's, a copy of his original diaries, which is great. To save weight, I did actually cut the covers off of it, which is ridiculous. We were [inaudible 00:46:18]. But yeah. I took a copy of his diary and I was reading daily as we were [inaudible 00:46:30] because we were in very similar areas, especially in the early phases, we were in the same sort of peak of the day, the same area that he was at exactly 100 years before us. I'm really glad I did take that book actually, it was a little bit of weight but it was great to have a

read of that, but also half way into the journey, I was reading it myself and the guy I was with, Henry, we were having a read through together of his diary and we realized, actually, that there was reference in the diary that Amundsen had laid a temporary cache around about the point that we were at, which was at the base of the Axel Heiberg Glacier. He made reference that he laid his large depot on the ice pack with dog food and various other things in there to use on their return journey on the way back from the pole.

And he made mention that on a nearby rocky outcrop which he called Mount Betty that he built a small rock can as a marker for the main depot down on the ice pack. He mentioned the inside of this can and he placed a small tin of paraffin and a tin of matches. And then when we read the return journey of the diary, it made reference to the fact that they'd obviously accessed the main depot down on the ice pack, used all the stores in there and collapsed it. But it didn't mention at all that he'd come back upon to Mount Betty and collapsed his can and removed the tin, the paraffin and the matches. So, we were there and we were thinking, "Crikey! That could still be there 100 years on from now and the rest of it." And there was no actual coordinates to exactly where Mount Betty was and the day that we were there it was quite cloudy, a bit of white out conditions in the bit we were in. But we elected to go out and see if we could find this.

So, we left the tent and the pulks, went out quite light, just on skis, with a sack nav and a warm jacket and said we would give it a couple of hours, if we can't find anything, we'll come back. But we set off. And in climbing up a bit higher, we got above the mist we were in and it cleared. Off in the distance we spotted quite an obvious looking man made can on top of this rocky outcrop and skid over to it and went over and pulled a rock out the side, and lo and behold, inside this can was this tin of paraffin and tin of matches that had been sat there for 100 years. It's the only thing left behind from Amundsen's original journey. It was still there, so it was actually incredible to find that.

Paul: That must've been such an eerie feeling to both be reading his journal as you were traveling through the same terrain, but then to find that as well.

Lou: Yeah, yeah. Incredible, to come across that and find that. It was really pot-luck we were in the right area at the time. So, that was pretty amazing. I'm really glad I took that book.

Paul: What a great story, what a great story. That's fantastic. And what do you like listening to on your iPod, if it's not too much of a guilty pleasure?

Lou: Yeah, yeah, so a range of audio books that I have there. This time I have Scott's Diaries a few Polar areas; I'm really interested in Polar history and original journeys of the polar pioneers. So, audio books, and then music-wise, I like a little bit of ACDC. I have different playlists too depending on what mood I'm in that day, rock and stuff and a day of pop is a little bit of Michael Jackson, I have to confess to unfortunately. And last time, I think I got stitched up, my daughter actually stuck up a couple of different Justin Bieber tracks on there. So, that was greatly insane and I only had a shuffle so I couldn't delete them or anything.

So, yeah, and actually some audio recordings from family members as well, which was actually a nice surprise...

Paul: Oh, nice.

Lou: ...trudging along to hear one of the children wishing me luck and so, it's great.

Paul: Fantastic, fantastic. Well, that's been very, very interesting Lou, so thank you for that and I think what would be great is maybe towards the end of the year when you're just about to do the expedition or maybe after you come back, it would be great to do a follow-up session for listeners, to see how you're getting on, because I think it's quite a special thing to be doing, isn't it?

Lou: Yeah, yeah, no. Absolutely a pleasure.

Paul: Fantastic, thank you. So, thank you very, very much. Please do find the Spear17 website guys and girls, and follow them on Facebook, and be ready to follow them when they're actually on their way to the pole as well. Thank you for sharing all of that with us, Lou. It's been a real pleasure, thank you.

Lou: My pleasure, thanks a lot Paul.

Paul: Cheers.

Well, thanks again to Lou for a fascinating insight into what it takes to undertake and successfully complete these tough, unsupported polar journeys. I'm sure you'll join me in wishing him all the best with the upcoming Spear17 expedition and we look forward to hearing more about it in due course.

Please do visit the Spear17 website and visit them on social media. The website has a blog including a good amount of content regarding preparation and physical training for cold weather expeditions. And as usual, all the links for

this episode are in the show notes at paulkirtley.co.uk. Finally, if you've enjoyed this podcast, then you'll likely enjoy my other podcast, yes, my other podcast, Ask Paul Kirtley, which is my weekly question and answer podcast available on my blog at paulkirtley.co.uk and now also available via iTunes. So, if you're not already subscribed to Ask Paul Kirtley on iTunes, please do go there next time you're on your machine and subscribe so that you've got those podcasts as well. It will help me by raising the profile of the podcasts, the more subscribers I have, the more people get to see the podcast in their iTunes suggested podcasts. That helps me of course get some more people on the podcast. It gets more questions so that I can answer them and therefore you benefit as well by having more good questions for me to answer. And also, more importantly for you, by subscribing ensures that you don't miss a single episode, so please do go across to iTunes and subscribe to Ask Paul Kirtley.

Thanks again for listening to this episode of the Paul Kirtley podcast. I look forward to bringing you more great guests full of information and insights to help you enhance your outdoor life. In the meantime, take care and stay safe.