ED STAFFORD

'In this ultimate test of human limits, Ed shows that he's a true survivor.' *Sir Ranulph Fiennes*

NAKED AND MAROONED

One man. One island.

Contents

About the Book

Stop Living. Start Surviving.

Imagine you're abandoned on a tropical island for sixty days.

No food. No water. No clothes. No knife. Nothing.

You're completely isolated. There's a very good chance you'll go insane.

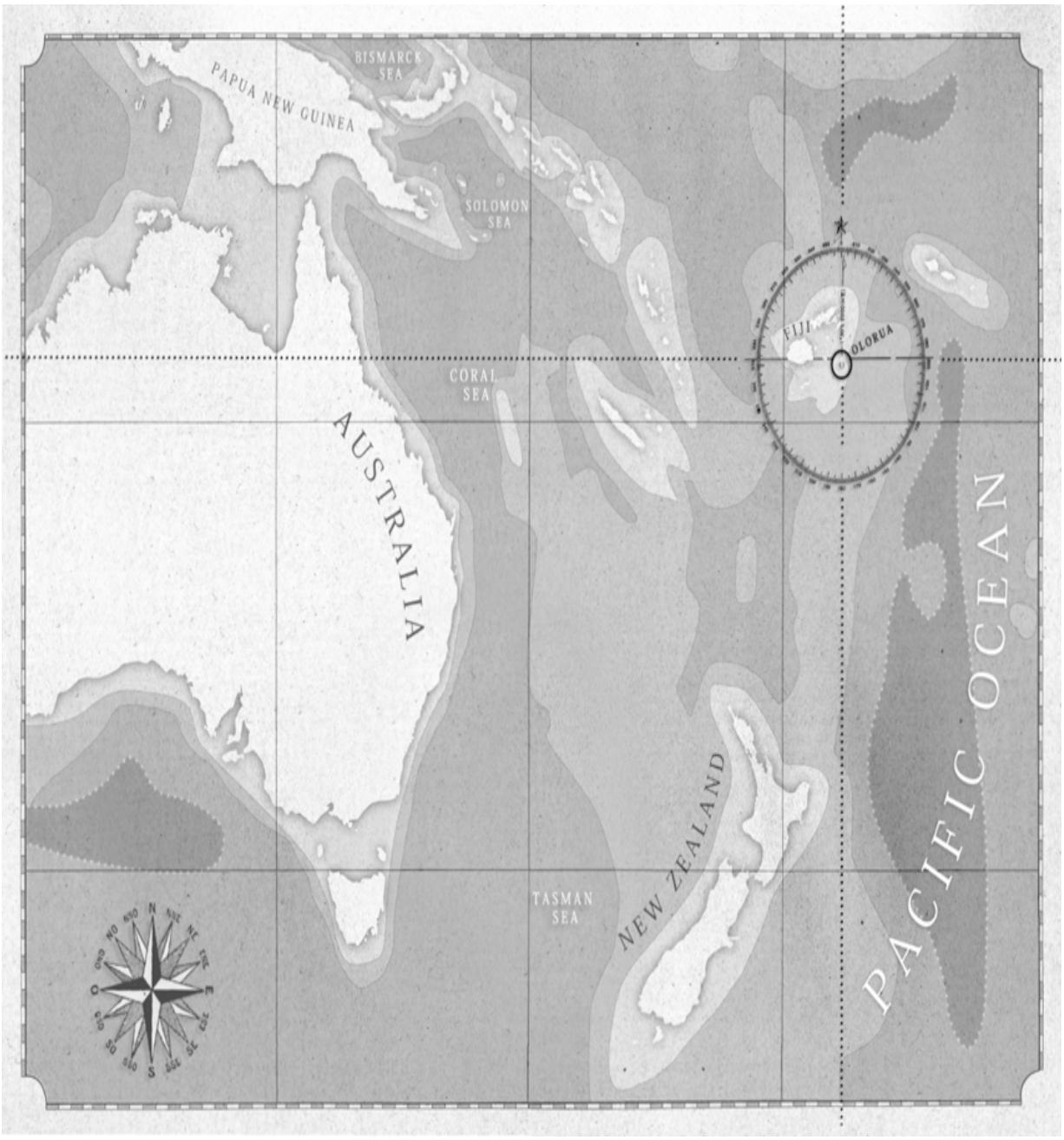
Have you got what it takes to survive?

Find out in *Naked and Marooned,* the gut-wrenchingly honest account of Ed Stafford's most extreme, most dangerous challenge yet.

WARNING! This is not your normal 9–5.

About the Author

Ed Stafford holds the Guinness World Record for being the first man to walk the Amazon River. This extraordinary achievement was documented in his first book and accompanying TV series*, Walking the Amazon*. Ed was also named European Adventurer of the Year 2011. He started running expeditions after retiring from the British Army as a captain in 2002 and has led expeditions all over the world. *Naked and Marooned* is Ed's second book.


BISMARCK SEA
PAPUA NEW GUINEA
SOLOMON SEA
FIJI
OLOBUA
CORAL SEA
AUSTRALIA
TASMAN SEA
NEW ZEALAND
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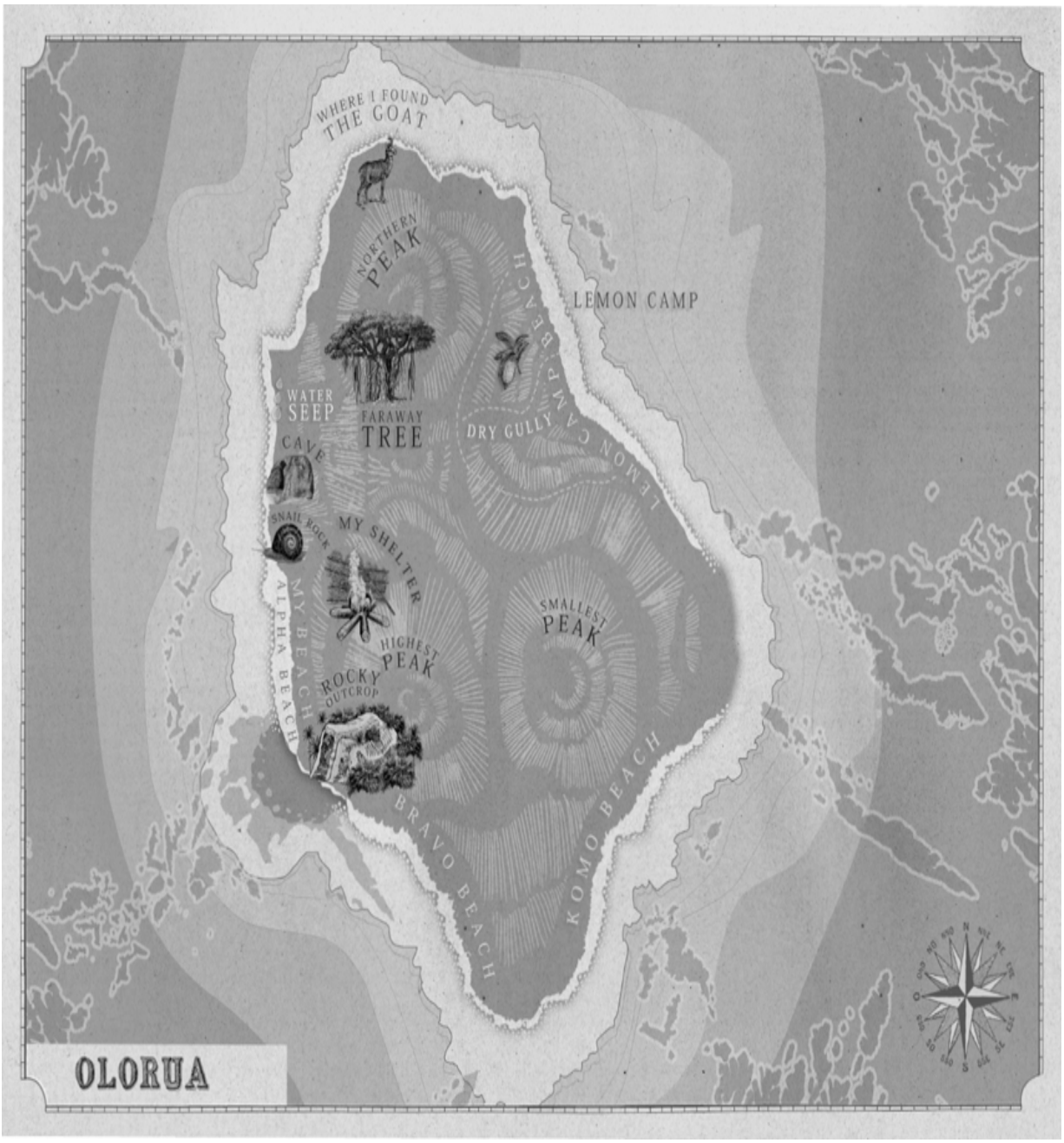
WHERE I FOUND THE GOAT
NORTHERN PEAK
LEMON CAMP
LEMON CAMP BEACH
WATER SEEP
FARAWAY TREE
DRY GULLY
CAVE
SNAIL ROCK
MY SHELTER
ALPHA BEACH
MY BEACH
SMALLEST PEAK
HIGHEST PEAK
ROCKY OUTCROP
BRAVO BEACH
KOMO BEACH
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NAKED AND MAROONED

One man. One island.
One epic survival story.

ED STAFFORD

To Frederick,
Without whom I would never have met your mum
I love you, mate

Prologue

'IT'S TIME, ED. Take off your shorts and get out of the boat.'

The bubble of apprehension that had been growing for weeks moved up from my guts into my throat. This was it – the doors to the exam hall opening, the driving test beginning, first date and first parachute jump all rolled into one.

My fears were compounded by feeling utterly stupid and vulnerable taking off all my clothes in front of a TV producer and two warrior-like Fijian clansmen. The latter's wide faces scrutinised me and, without uttering a word, their eyes told me they thought all westerners were fucked in the head.

Nakedness. Nobody likes a willy waver. There are some men, especially those from military or rugby backgrounds (I qualify for both), who can think of nothing better than getting drunk and taking their clothes off for the thrill of it. I would say I'm the opposite. My earliest recurring nightmare was of turning up at school without either trousers or underpants, and the feeling of ridicule still haunts me now if I think back on it.

Completely naked, I climbed down into the waist-deep tropical water to feel my toes settle on the sandy seabed and my balls shrink against the new, wet, exposed world. Camera in hand and at arm's length, I knew I needed to record my emotions – every crevice of my brain needed to be laid bare to engage disbelieving people wedged into their armchairs in front of the TV. This was real and I wanted to document it all.

I couldn’t figure out how I felt and confided to the shiny black lens how overwhelmed I was. I padded slowly up into the warm shallows and on to the beach in a state of shock.

I watched the small metal fishing boat loiter inanely for a minute or two before the Yamaha outboard coughed up some brown phlegm into the turquoise water and began to back away from me, gradually shrinking in size and influence. As the vessel slipped out of sight, the life-affirming drone of the motor was snuffed out with a huge fluffy pillow of complete isolation.

Utter silence.

I stood on the beach truly alone for the first time. This golden lip that encircled the rainforest-clad island was my doorstep to an intimidating new world. I would not see another person for sixty days. I was on an uninhabited tropical island and I had nothing with me to help me survive. No food, no equipment, no knife and not even any clothes. All I had was my camera kit so that I could intimately record my self-inflicted sentence.

An emotional attack helicopter rose from my belly, rotors lacerating my chest until it smashed violently into my ill-prepared brain. Logical thought was the victim and I was left stunned like an impotent witness of a brutal, bloody crime.

Introduction

I HAD BEEN travelling for over twenty-four hours – London, Hong Kong, Sydney, and now the capital city of Fiji, Nadi. My clothes felt greasy and my skin had acquired a layer of scum that made me feel grubby and in need of a steaming hot shower and a good soapy scrub, neither of which I was going to find at the end of this journey. We were being weighed along with the baggage to ensure that the total weight was OK for the single-propeller plane that we were about to board. I weighed in at eighty-nine kilos – deliberately not too trim – with surplus fat to shed. The Cessna would fly us over the volcanic Fijian mountains and onwards to the outlying tropical island of Lakeba.

We touched down on the wet grass runway of Lakeba and hung around for a few hours eating cheap white coconut biscuits and drinking sweet tepid coffee until our tin boat was ready to ferry us on the four-hour crossing to the remote tribal island of Komo. With bruised bottoms and balls sore from the boat slamming down into every oncoming Pacific wave we groggily and nauseously flopped out of the boat to meet the Komo clan.

Komo is on the very eastern outskirts of the Fijian islands and is closer to Tonga than mainland Fiji. It is home to a tribe of Fijians who are gentle giants. Women stand taller and broader than the average European male and wear their hair in large round Afros that accentuate their presence. Komo men, who have never heard of a dumbbell, have legs the size of kegs of dynamite and faces as wide and kind as you could possibly ask a child to draw. As we picked our way through the wood and tin village of small

self-built huts we were greeted with broad smiles, waves and genuine interest as to what we pale, unhealthy, looking white men might be doing in this colourful corner of the world.

I was travelling with two men, Steve Rankin, a gentle, short, slightly balding TV producer from England, and Steven (with an ‘n’) Ballantyne, our local fixer, a tall, well-spoken and charming expat who lived in Hong Kong with his Chinese partner. The two physically contrasting men seemed to share an understanding of the resigned struggle of surviving in the suburbs of TV World and they had already struck up a close friendship fuelled by late nights and hard liquor. Together we had around thirty-five cases of cameras, laptops, hard drives and bottles of hand sanitiser and we unloaded all this into the house of the village chief who had moved out for the next two and a half months. The house’s sole occupant would be Steven, and he would remain on the island, administrating the filming and coordinating any emergency evacuations. Steve, on the other hand, would return to England shortly after I started filming and oversee the entire event from afar. He would return in two months to film my extraction.

The simple house consisted of two small rooms. The first had three single beds adorned with colourful nylon mosquito nets and the other contained a wooden table and four sturdy chairs. I lay among the black camera boxes on my yellow foam mattress. I didn’t need to unpack anything – that was for the others to organise. All I had was a tiny fifteen-litre day sack with one change of shorts and T-shirt and some toiletries. Where I was going I wouldn’t even be allowed to take those.

I looked up at the ceiling and knew that my job over the next two days was to soak up as much information from the locals as possible and get myself mentally prepared for what I was about to undertake. Don’t worry about anything

else, Ed. The self-coaching voice had already begun to make itself heard.

After an hour or so, huge-haired women started to fill the crude wooden table with steaming plates of rice, chicken and fish fresh from the ocean. This was accompanied by colourful heavily iced cakes and sweet white biscuits. I was apparently expected to eat and eat. The walls of my stomach felt as if they had passed their elastic limit as I struggled to digest the mass of sugar and flour. Visibly straining, I escaped the nervous gorging to explore the island.

A dusty path rose through the village, past the communal generator and behind a small wooden school. I followed it to the highest point I could find. As I crested the hill behind the village the sun was setting low and orange in the west. Before me was a familiar shape that I had seen before only in photographs. Olorua: my home for the next sixty days. The uninhabited island had three topographical peaks and, from my viewpoint, two distinct saddles. With no scars from clearing or logging she was entirely cloaked in thick lush rainforest standing alone in a vast ocean. Although she was only eight nautical miles from where I was standing on Komo she seemed far more remote and isolated than all the other islands in this forgotten corner of the world. She looked bigger than I was expecting and, for some reason, with the warm evening sun lighting up her western side, she seemed peaceful and welcoming. But first impressions can be deceptive.

I passed out that night, having eaten my way through an evening of apprehension, with an uncomfortably stretched belly.

The next day I was introduced to Rama, the brother of the chief, whose job it was to answer any questions I had about local plants and methods. Rama seemed enormous and yet, when I stood beside him, he was only about six foot tall. I was an inch taller than him but he must have

weighed four stone more. Well into middle age, his frame was powerful and muscular but softened by a comfortable layer of fat. Rama was clearly a kind man and had that aura about him, and an absence of ego, that allowed him to be entirely himself. I could tell by the affection in his eyes that he was genuinely flattered to have been given the responsibility of being my teacher and that we were going to get on well.

Fire by friction was the subject I wanted advice on from Rama. I could light a fire back home with materials and methods traditionally used there, but how did they do it here and with what? He said the best tree was called ‘tangalito’ – it had a black stem and there was plenty on Olorua – on this side (south-east), on the shore that faced Komo. He grabbed a couple of pieces of wood from a tree and, without any preparation with a knife or any other tool, he sat down and started to rub one against the other as if he were setting to with a chisel, fuelled by an overdose of amphetamine.

I recognised the simple fire-plough method of lighting a fire and witnessed the wood turn black and emit a little smoke and powder. ‘I’m unfit!’ he declared and gave up trying to build an ember. It was enough for me to know that this wood was good. I probably wouldn’t use the fire-plough method, because I wasn’t confident that I could consistently get an ember that way, but I could see that this wood was suitable for making fire and I left it at that.

I mentally ticked fire off my jumbled list of things to cover before my deployment and immediately flitted on to other worries. No pause, no consideration, no deep breath – I just pinged on to the next subject like a pinball. If I’d been less stressed about my impending ordeal I might have registered the ease of testing wood like this. Even if it was not yet a skill in my armoury I should have seen just how useful it was in itself. All you had to do was rub one piece of wood backwards and forwards on a flat surface of the other

– there was no carving involved – and if the wood was good it would heat up quickly, turn black and start to smoke. But, blinkered by my apprehension about what lay ahead, only the tried and tested methods that I'd *learned* could possibly be an option. Everything else was stressing me out and so I let a valuable lesson slip through my sweaty fingers.

I spent much of the two preparation days relaxing. I was about to do something really hard and I deliberately allowed myself some down time. I lay on my bed, ate copious amounts of food and even played touch rugby with the local men and boys. The one further skill for which I did pick up the basics was plaiting coconut palm leaves so that they could be used to thatch a shelter. I hadn't mastered it but I had seen it done well and had a go and felt that I could figure it out if the need arose. Notably, and slightly worryingly, I *didn't* identify many edible plants that I would find on Olorua; I *didn't* ask about a single method of fishing (or ask when or where they fished); and *I didn't* even ask about how they used coconuts in their cooking. All in all, I squandered some very valuable time with local experts and instead put my feet up and relaxed.

I was so daunted by the enormity of what I was about to do that it made me feel uncomfortable even to dwell on the things that I didn't yet know. Rather than preparing for the future by putting some work in now, I opted to go for immediate gratification – food, rest and play – in the knowledge that my times of hardship had not yet arrived and I should make hay while I could.

What an idiot.

Still, in a way it added to the veracity of the whole adventure. Viewers of survival programmes inevitably ask themselves the question: 'Could I do that?' But they don't take a man full of pizza and tea whose idea of wilderness is the back of a garden centre and drop him unsupported in the middle of nowhere. They take someone like me who, nominally at least, knows what he's doing. So, in failing to

make the very most of my time with the locals I was actually moving closer to the sort of challenge that might face someone suddenly shipwrecked and washed up on an alien shore. When people find themselves in survival situations many of them have no preparation whatsoever. It was more honest simply to arrive on the island and work things out for myself. That was my excuse, anyway.

In fact, mentally I was already in a mess. I was already failing to cope with taking complete responsibility for my own welfare. I was already fast becoming out of control – reaching for any excuse to avoid putting in the work and grasping at superficial distractions. I wasn't being honest with myself and, although I knew it deep down, I hid behind layers of self-deception that I would be fine. *'Another cake? Ooooh, thank you. I shouldn't but I will!'* The sugar would keep me happy for another thirty seconds.

The truth, of course, is that I would not be fine at all. I was about to undergo the most unsettling, soul-searching and frighteningly disorientating two months of my life.

On the morning of Saturday 18 August 2012 I woke up charged with adrenaline. It was game day and I was up for smashing some people. Except this wasn't a rugby match – and aggression was not going to get me through this challenge. Yet my mindset was simple and focused – let's get this started now. I just want to get stuck in.

I was going in by boat but I had to wait for a helicopter to arrive that would film the insertion from the air. I sat on a wooden chair outside the flaky purple walls of my hut and wrote letters to my fiancée, Amanda. I wanted her to know how much I cared about her and for her to have a constant reminder that I was thinking about her. I knew that I wouldn't have any contact with her for the next sixty days and that would be hard for anyone to cope with. I felt selfish that I was putting her through this and yet I knew

she was supportive of what I was doing and so I just tried to stick to the positives.

The mechanical beat of the helicopter's heart pulsed through the air towards my soft eardrums. The flying machine drew louder and closer, attracting an excited crowd on the rugby pitch in the centre of the village. I exchanged pleasantries with the Australian pilot and tried to be as sociable and normal as possible, but in my head I was already on the island and everything else was now just getting in the way. When Steve and Steven were ready, I walked through the village for the last time down to the metal boats and waved goodbye to these kind people who I had hardly made time to speak to. Camera in hand, I began to talk to the lens as if it were my true confidant. 'Come on – stop fannying around – let's go.'

The bashing of the hull against the waves didn't bother me as we slipped out of the reef. I relaxed almost to the point of sleep. Then, as we circled around Komo, Olorua came into view. The small island was utterly compelling on the horizon and I could not stop evaluating, thinking, imagining, wondering. What would these next sixty days be like? I could envisage a magical jungle world under the canopy: giant spider webs the size of a man and troops of apes to live alongside. My imagination latched on to Tarzan stories and I allowed myself to dream of an elaborate tree house with a veranda overlooking the reef nestling into the top of the tallest tree on the island. It felt good to be excited and playful about the idea of this contrived stay – it made a refreshing change from the ominous default feelings of fear, discomfort and dread.

As we approached the coral reef that encircled Olorua the ocean changed from a dark metallic blue to a brilliant turquoise. Steve needed to film me making some opening observations. I sat in the bow of the boat with the island visible behind and Steve fed me questions designed to elicit the dramatic answers he was looking for. If he didn't get

the answers he wanted he simply told me what to say. ‘This is the biggest challenge so far of my whole life!’ I found myself mouthing to keep Steve happy. That’s what he wanted to hear. I couldn’t allow myself to see it that way. I’d walked the length of the Amazon for two and a half years through drug traffickers, defensive indigenous tribes and communist terrorists – an expedition that so many people considered suicidal. This wouldn’t be more challenging than that, would it? Surely this TV project had to be a walk in the park in comparison to a walk along the Amazon.

This simply wasn’t the time for me to be acknowledging fear – far too close to the bone as far as I was concerned – and I was allowing false bravado to distract me. I cringed as I found myself giving Steve the sound bites that he wanted – to me they seemed full of hype and an exaggerated sense of danger – for the opening sequences of the film. Paradoxically simple honesty would have provided him with feelings of more genuine anxiety than he could have dreamed of – but I was now far too scared to be honest about them.

‘I cannot wait until I’m on my own. Nothing personal – but it’s time for you all to bugger off now.’

chapter 1
Surviving

1

THE DRONE OF the motor now long since receded, I walked up the beach to where my case full of camera equipment had been dropped in the shade of a coconut palm. I allowed myself to fall to my knees in the sand and clicked open the four chunky plastic latches. The case opened to reveal the only remnants of civilisation left to me: two video cameras, two head-mounted point-of-view cameras, a very stripped-down medical kit (just one course of antibiotics and a trauma dressing), an emergency satellite phone and a GPS locator device. If ever there was a moment for comfort eating, this was it. But there was no food in the box – nothing to help me survive at all.

I snapped into autopilot and tried to take charge by doing something that I did have control over. As I rigged up the cameras I was immediately aware of my first oversight. I had nothing to clip the radio mic box to. I was naked! 'It's ridiculous, isn't it? The silly things that I'm already starting to flap about.' I tried to joke to the camera and yet inside I wasn't laughing. I tried to clip it to the camera, which completely defeated the purpose of having a remote radio mic. I was flapping. Calm, logical thought was almost impossible to hold on to.

Sand was already finding its way into everything. Deep breath out. Having rigged up the second camera and radio mic, I sat down to make a plan. 'I'm up and running filming-wise. I just have this nervous energy circling round my chest at the moment. I think every part of me knows that this is not messing around – that I'm very much putting my money where my mouth is. If I can survive – on my own – for two months – fantastic. But I've never done this before! Am I going to go mad without anyone to talk to? Oh Christ.' My sentences were just streams of consciousness – there

was no perspective or reason, just raw disjointed emotions and thoughts.

'OK, what's the situation, Ed? What are your priorities? What do you need to do first?'

I am a former British Army captain who has been leading expeditions and operations to remote parts of the world for more than a decade. I have been in very high-risk situations before in Afghanistan working alongside the UN and I've taught survival courses to people about to embark on jungle expeditions in Belize. But a menacing truth suddenly loomed in front of me. I had never had to survive before *from scratch*. You might think that would have occurred to me before but I felt a little sick as it dawned on me that I was making it up as I was going along.

Think about it. Expeditioners, even those at the most extreme level, all carry kit and supplies to help them. They will have food and a means of cooking it; navigation equipment; some form of portable shelter; water and a means of storing and purifying it. If things go wrong they will often still have a lot to help them get themselves out of trouble. They will have a well-thought-through casualty evacuation plan that would hopefully ensure that they are never in a survival situation for very long.

Consider this too. In prehistoric times cavemen would have been very unlikely to have been in a situation in which they started with nothing. They would be born into a tribe or family that had tools, animal skins, a fire, and they would probably all be cuddled up in a well-chosen cave. They would acquire all the skills that they needed in order to live in their world as they grew up. They would usually only have to deal with one problem or situation at a time. 'We need some more firewood/mammoth meat/sabre-toothed tiger skin.' Delete as applicable.

My eyes were suddenly opened to the fact that I'd just volunteered myself for the absolute worst-case scenario with an acknowledgement that I would have absolutely

nothing to help me survive, and a sure certainty that the situation would not change for a very long time. I would be sending an ‘OK’ message every day from the locator device but if I fell off a rock and cracked my skull in the interior of the island it might be too late by the time they found me.

My brain, used to self-deprecation to help me muddle through such times, looked for someone to share a black joke with about the absurdity of my predicament. A chill shudder ran through me as I realised another absolute truth: no one was going to share this with me. No one would laugh or cry with me. No one would give me any encouragement. No one would advise me or warn me of danger. I had absolutely nobody to turn to or to comfort me in any of this. I had to take complete responsibility for myself in every respect – probably for the first time in my life.

‘What the fuck am I doing here?’ I asked myself all too late. What would make anyone volunteer for such a lonely yet totally public self-examination?

Rewind two years and I was running down a sandy beach in northern Brazil into the Atlantic Ocean surrounded by international press teams. Exhausted and yet as high and magnificent as Mount Everest, I stood in the crashing waves allowing the moment to flow through every vein in my body. I had completed an expedition that everyone had told me was impossible – I had walked the entire length of the Amazon and it had taken me nearly two and a half years. Pride surged through me to the point of tears – I had done something that no one had ever done before – and nothing would ever take that feeling away from me.

Or would it?

Imperceptibly, I immediately started to get side-tracked. The media attention made me feel good. When I returned home to a hero’s welcome I found that I was being treated differently. I liked it. People wanted to hear what I had to

say; people wanted a slice of me. The attention made me feel good and, without realising it, my internal glow of self-worth, one that had taken over two years to germinate and nurture, began to get lost in a fog of insincere compliments.

TV interviews gave way to radio, radio to motivational talks all over the world. My story was real and seemed to inspire people, and so I tapped into my pain and my elation time and time again.

'What's your next expedition?' was the question asked more than any other. I found this fascinating in itself; you do something that no one in the history of mankind has ever done before and then, because we are so used to consuming and spitting out information, people want something new.

Have a beer, Ed.

My Amazonian candle of self-worth now all but extinguished – a thin wisp of smoke the only sign of my evaporating self-belief. I listened to what *other* people wanted because they *appeared* to be my source of happiness. What would the Royal Geographical Society think of this? Would Sir Ranulph Fiennes approve? Would this island adventure capture the hearts of the masses? Would that one make good TV?

Have another beer, Ed.

I fought imaginary battles between my perception of other people's expectations and my own lost sense of direction. Where was I going? What had this all been for? How could I once again get back to that place in which I was overflowing with real confidence?

Another beer, Ed?

I needed a sequel. I needed to stay *current*. I needed people to see me achieve something else. I needed to prove that the first time hadn't been a fluke …

In the modern surroundings of a sophisticated basement flat in Streatham, south London, I sat with Craig, my loyal

friend and TV contact, and, over a cup of sugary white Lady Grey, brainstormed what to do next. We'd gone through every expedition that we could possibly conceive and independently acknowledged that I'd probably done the biggest one I was ever going to do. Unless I wanted to commit four years of my life to circumnavigating the earth manpowered via both poles – the apparent 'Holy Grail' of modern-day adventure – everything else seemed unworthy.

I needed to think laterally. What could I do to step sideways from what people expected in order to pit myself against nature in a more intense manner? I wanted to sift out the exploratory filler, the boring bits, and just be left with one raw challenge after another. I began to dream about an event or a test rather than a conventional expedition. Something incredibly hard, outside my comfort zone; something at which I genuinely would not know if I could succeed.

Craig and I began by eliminating every factor that would make my life more comfortable. The first to go was any assistance. 'I need to do the next one alone,' I said to Craig, tapping my mug with chewed fingernails. The help I'd had in the Amazon had been incredible but had left me wondering. Could I have done the expedition without my loyal Peruvian friend Cho who walked much of the journey with me? I wanted to find out if I could stand on my own two feet and be put to the test truly alone.

'What if you were to be on a desert island and had to survive with only the basics?' suggested Craig. I allowed myself to imagine the scenario and then, as a glow of excitement began to spread in my belly, I slowly proposed, 'What if I was to have absolutely nothing to help me survive? No food, no equipment, no knife – not even any clothes?'

'Could you do that?' asked Craig.

'I have no idea,' I grinned.

‘Get a grip, Staffs – deal with practicalities.’ The video camera was my best friend and my mirror and meant that right from the start all my thoughts were verbalised. I caught the look of fear in my eyes in the flip-out screen and immediately realised the obligation to look after this frightened reflection of myself.

I ran through the textbook priorities that I had taught to others so many times. Water, food, fire and shelter. I knew that water was the only one that I really needed on day one but, even as I acknowledged that, a wave of panic rose in me. I had little knowledge of the island and no idea whether there would be any reliable water sources. What if I couldn’t find water? Despite the inherently contrived nature of this experiment, it was now absolutely real and it was happening. If I couldn’t find water quickly I was going to fail, and fail quickly.

‘Stay calm, Staffs. You can delay this problem and give yourself some breathing space by using what you’ve already seen.’ I was my own coach, my own adviser – I held my own clammy hand as I took the first steps on this daunting voyage. Glancing up at the green coconuts I told myself that without even moving from where I was I would be OK for one or two nights. I could throw rocks at the coconuts to dislodge green ones and I could drink the coconut water that I knew was full of electrolytes. That would hydrate me well enough for now.

My knees clicked as I stood up stiffly and brushed the sand off my bare bum. I looked up and down the beach for an obvious coconut tree that was low to the ground and immediately identified one that was only a couple of metres above my head height. I found a rock the size of an apple and threw it overhand at the inviting source of natural single-portion drinks.

I felt peculiarly self-conscious – like something from a kid’s dream – scrumping naked. I threw and I missed. I missed again. Bollocks. Underhand … Missed. And again.

Just as I was becoming exasperated I connected with a satisfying thud. ‘Yes!’ The coconut landed, making a soft crater in the sand.

Having never opened a coconut without a machete I held the rough globe in two hands and tried to think laterally. I found a large sharpish rock that was half buried in the sand and held my coconut aloft. Using the weight of my arms and the fibrous fruit itself, I brought it down hard on the edge of the rock again and again to break through the husk. After perhaps twenty strikes coconut water spurted on to the rock and, panting hard, I held the coconut over my mouth expecting copious amounts of liquid to flow into my parched mouth. A pitiful amount trickled out. ‘That’s amazing!’ I fibbed, faking a smile to match. Then I realised what I’d done and laughed at my immediate instinct to cover up the failure – admitting to the camera that, despite all the effort, I’d hardly drank more than a few drops.

This frantic rigmarole was repeated with low-grade coconuts until I felt that I’d had at least enough liquid to keep me going and I decided to begin to explore the beach.

The long golden beach stretched out below its classic palm-tree fringe. If they were filming a Bounty advert here, you wouldn’t be surprised. But neither would you be surprised to find a few skeletons clutching rotting treasure maps. That popped into my head, too – pirates used to maroon people, didn’t they? I’d become my own Blackbeard, ordering myself off the ship to die in the relentless sun. Not a particularly helpful train of thought.

As I followed the water’s edge I noted small details: where the high tide had left a dirty ring on the beach last time the water had risen; that the sun was about three fists (at arm’s length) from hitting the horizon; and how blood on my foot told me that I’d cut my foot on the coral. I tried to smile and enjoy the beauty all around me. I felt no happiness at all and took zero pleasure in the now irrelevant aesthetics of my physical surroundings. It was

day one: I could feel my shoulders burning, my saliva was already viscous and stale. There was so much unknown, so much to do, and so little to hold on to. I took shallow rapid breaths as if breathing deeply would take too much time.

'Time spent in reconnaissance is time seldom wasted,' I repeated a few times to reassure myself that this was accepted army wisdom and that I was making the best use of my daylight hours. I felt a strong sense of urgency and a need to get on with things. On reflection I had all the time in the world to relax into my own little private world that had no rules other than those that I imposed, but, ever conscious of my commitments to Discovery Channel and fear of looking like a failure, I immediately began to pile on the pressure.

Then the first of my cartoon double takes occurred. 'That's ridiculous,' I said out loud.

Before me, crudely carved out of the vertical rock face, was a cave. Not a small cave that I would struggle to get into, or a damp, low cave that would be wet at high tide, but a large, spacious cave cut high into the cliff above the highest of high tides with its back conveniently turned to the prevailing winds.

My checklist of survival priorities resurfaced from the swamp of tasks in my head and I smugly ticked 'shelter' off the list with child-like excitement. This was a gift on day one and I knew it. As I clambered up the rock on all fours to inspect my new home the musky smell of animals that reminded me of London Zoo hit my nostrils. The cave was about four metres wide, three metres tall and four metres deep. The sill at the front sat a good two metres raised from the beach below. The well-protected dry floor sloped significantly from back to front and consisted of a dirty brown powder (from the crumbling rock) mixed with a substantial amount of animal shit.

'Do they have rabbits in Fiji?' I asked myself. No – it had to be something larger. Sheep? Goat? Deer even? This was

too many ticks at once and I whooped a little self-consciously to the camera to convey my surprise and joy. The prospect of animals to eat was one of my ultimate dreams for the evolution of this project and on day one I was already identifying that meat was a definite possibility.

Like many men I've never been one for multi-tasking; my brain has never liked the stress of lots of things happening at the same time. Despite the fact that my discoveries had been very positive I could feel a need in myself to sit down and consolidate.

I decided that the cave would be my base, at least initially, and went to get the big camera case from further up the beach. As I collected the case from the tree line I realised that if I wanted to film myself carrying it to the cave it would, absurdly, require leaving one camera behind filming me and thus would involve a further trip up the beach to collect it.

I was aware what a peculiar sight I must have looked walking down the beach, stark naked and white-bummed, with the big black suitcase. I could feel the camera's eye watching me from behind. I began to carry the case up into the cave and then fretted that I might slip and fall with the weight. I flapped and decided that a slip or a fall was too risky and instead put the case at the top of the beach in the tree line. I had a whole load of trivial decisions to make in one go. What was the right decision? Who would confirm this to me? No one. Great. 'It's funny, isn't it?' I confided to the camera. 'I need to keep trusting my gut feeling. My brain said take it up there and my gut said – Stafford, get a grip.' I consoled myself that I had made the correct decision, then immediately doubted myself and changed my mind. Finally, I told myself to stop messing around, and hauled the case up into the cave and sat down heavily on the hot plastic, giddy with indecision.

I mused that if the animals were big and they lived in the cave I might need a small rock by me to throw at them

when they returned.

‘Stafford, you always said that whenever you felt unsure you’d sit down and calm yourself down. First day you were bound to be all over the place.’ I went through the positives. ‘You’ve had a drink of coconut water and will be able to eat some coconut flesh tonight, and you’ve found shelter. The only remaining survival priority is fire and that isn’t essential on day one. You’re doing really well.’

But I couldn’t help but be unsettled by the continued look of panic in my wide, white eyes in the flimsy screen on the video camera. I could see the tension in my temples and my forehead looked like a nail bomb wrapped in crêpe paper. I tried to calm myself with words of reassurance – I had the experience and the capabilities to survive well on this island. I needed to trust in that. Unconvinced, I returned to immediate practicalities. ‘Crikey,’ I sighed, ‘let’s get some more fluids down me before the end of the day.’

The rough rocks kneaded the soft soles of my bare feet as I climbed down to the beach. I noticed several plate-sized giant clamshells I could use to hold water and mentally recorded them. The surface changed to soft sand, which felt kinder, but I was going to have to try to make some sandals if my feet weren’t to be cut to ribbons.

In the tree line at the top of the beach was a much shorter coconut tree with some very green fruits on it. I shimmied a couple of feet up the trunk like an overweight chimpanzee on opiates and hand-picked two small coconuts. I smashed them on another sharp rock with all my might (being careful not to trap my fingers underneath) and sank two long, cool, sweet drinks that spilled down my chin and chest. I glugged and glugged and then panted, grinning at the simple pleasure.

In the Amazon I had struggled to stay positive and resorted to NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) tricks to keep me on track. When I had felt the onset of mental weakness I had deliberately envisaged people in my life