

Tell me about the expedition to the Arctic you when on, how old were you? Where did you go and why?

I when on a British Schools Exploring Society expedition to Svalbard when I was about 16 in about 1994. I was the second youngest on the expedition most of the other expedition's members were 17-20 years old. There were also some expedition leaders as well. The leaders were people who had been on previous expeditions and had special training to help us if we go into trouble.

We flew to Tromso, in northern Norway in the arctic circle, then we took a smaller plane to Longyearbyen the main town on Svalbard. The airport in Longyearbyen had to be opened special for us. When the plane landed the pilot had to phone someone in the little town, who drove to the airport, unlocked the terminal building got the stairs so we could get off the plane, then he unloaded our bags and then stamped our passports, and he ran the airport tourist shop. So just one man ran the whole airport.

We then we took a boat for 8 hours to the area where we were going to do our expedition and our research work, this area is now a nature reserve but at the time there were also lots of mines, so it was both beautiful and really dirty and dusty near the mines.



Here is a map of Svalbard where my uncle visited in 1994 when he was 16 years old.



This is a team photo of all the people who went on the expedition with my uncle. My Uncle is circled in red.

What was your role in the expedition?

We were all split in to groups of 10-12 people. All the groups did different environmental research. My group was looking at the effect of climate change on the glaciers and how the amount of melt water coming of the glaciers changes as the temperatures changed through the summer months. Others groups looked at other things looked at ptarmigan numbers and how the permafrost changed.

My team had to take reading of the water level in the rivers coming off the glacial streams every hour 24 hours a day. We had get into the glacial streams to take the readings, and it was freezing cold in the water and it was hard to warm up after, so we quickly take all our wet clothes off then run into the tent and get in to our sleeping bags to warm up.

We all had special roles in the groups as well, I was also trained in how to use an army riffle so we could shot polar bears if they came too close to our camp.



This is a picture of their basecamp, my uncle is in purple in the 'mess tent' where they cooked and at their dinner. It was kept away from the tent they slept in to keep them safe from polar bear attacks.

Did any one get hurt on the expeditions?

One other person from my school was selected to join the expedition, Kathleen was in another group to me. When we were not doing the scientific research, we could go on mini expedition. On one of these Kathleen was climbing a mountain. The group was roped together in a group of 4, and one person fell, she had to do a special maneuver with an ice pick to stop them all falling on the ice. She managed to save the group but in the process she fell on the ice pick and got it stuck in her skull just above her eye. The group were able to radio for help and she was taken by air ambulance (see the picture of the helicopter below) and then flown to hospital in Oslo in mainland Norway. Then later she was flown home to a specialist hospital in the UK. She was very lucky that the ice pick didn't go in any deeper into her brain or just a few centimeters lower and hit her eye. She has been left with no sense of smell in one nostril permanently, her actions saved the people she was climbing with so it could have been much worse.



This is the air ambulance take a girl to hospital when she had an accident with and ice pick

Did you have to do any special training to go?

We had to do lots of fitness training, walking with heavy rucksacks, and running. We spent a couple of weekends learning mountaineering skill and how to navigate across mountainous area in Scotland. We also had specialist training in large commercial freezers to get used to working in the cold.

We were also all trained in ice climbing, and how to set bear traps around the campsite and to use a pistol and riffle so that we could defend ourself's again polar bears.

What the artic is like:

What was your first impression of Svalbard?

My first impression was it was much greener than I thought it would be, it was late spring when we arrived and all the sea ice had melted. All the picture I had seen of the artic were of ice and snow, but we were there it the spring and summer. There were no trees and all the plants were only a few inches tall, and as there were not many building, and no farms so it looked very different to Britain.

What wildlife did you see?

We saw lots of amazing wildlife, including Arctic Ring Seals, Polar Bears, Spitsbergen Reindeer, Arctic Foxes, Artic Hares, Ptarmigan, Geese, and Humpback whales. Because the ice had melted, the Arctic Foxes were really easy to spot as they still had their white coats I really love seeing them. Other people saw walrus and narwhals but I didn't see any of those.

Did you see any polar bears?

I saw polar bears a couple of times but they mostly kept their distance. We saw them swimming between chunks of sea ice hunting in the fjords (lochs), and we saw a mum and cub on a glacier during one of our expeditions.

All of our food had to be stored away from the camp so there were not attracted to it. We had alarms set up around the campsite and explosive trip wires around the camp so we would know if they came close. We were told if they were hungry and couldn't find seals, they would kill people. If a polar bear came close to our camp and the alarms sounded everyone had to come out of their tent and make as much noise as possible to scare it away. Luckily we didn't have any come too close enough. In 2011 there was another expedition to Svalbard and unfortunately a School boy was killed by a polar bear that was hungry and had got past the alarms and trip wires into the camp.

Equipment for the artic:

What specialist equipment did you take?

We had lots of equipment. It was around 0C at sea level but in the mountain, it could get down to -20 so we needed equipment to keep us warm.

We had huge warm Sleeping bags, special warm clothes and our food. We also took canoes, skis, special sledges you could bring your equipment with you over snow and ice. We also had radios so we could call for help if we needed and rifles for the polar bears. We also had our equipment for doing the research and we had to be able to carry it all to our base camp. When we were in the water taking measurements in the water we wore double layer wetsuits.

We had to wear Lots of clothes layers of clothes helped to trap air between the layers to keep us warm. Sometimes we had on 4-6 layers of clothes, and we kept moving. The windchill made it feel much colder so it was hard at times. At night it wasn't too bad as we had the big fluffy sleeping bags and the tent was shared with 3 people so it kept warm.

What kind of food did you eat?

Before we went, we had a weekend sorting and packing food. We had to pack kits for our group of 12 for each days, so if we went on an expedition we would take a bag for each day we were planning on being away from basecamp. We had army rations packs that could be boiled in the bag easily without using too much fuel and would last a long time without going off. Because it is was so cold and we were so active, we needed to eat 4000-6000 Kcal day – that is about 3 or 4 times the normal amount. So we need lots of food.



My uncle David is in the purple and green jacket – they are eating their army rations at their base camp.

The experience of going to the artic:

What was your favorite experiences?

Probably climbing the mountains on one of our mini expeditions. ‘Terriefjellet’ is a beautiful bright red mountain, covered with snow in the middle of a glacier. We had to climb a narrow ridge to get to it and it took a day to climb the mountain between glaciers. The view of the glaciers were amazing and we could see north to the pack ice of the north pole. Just such a beautiful spot.

Would you recommend doing an expedition as a teenager?

Definitely! It was hard work, but I learnt so much. I had always liked being outside and outdoor activities, but I learn so much about Mountaineering, climbing, and how you plan the expedition how you navigate in remote areas. I also learnt lots about how good planning and training can help keep people are safe, even if they are doing dangerous things. These are all skills I use every day now in my job and at home. I am now really good at packing for camping trips we always have kits for walking, cycling, campfire, first aid and other activities ready to go.

I would recommend it to everyone.

The artic now:

What do you think about drilling in the artic for oil?

The artic is an incredibly special place, it is not like the environment at a lower latitude the landscape takes along time to recover, it is too special and important to no be protected. Because of the climate and nature of the environment it takes along time to recover, so oil spills and mining activity can damage the environment so much that it will never recover – it not the same at other places where nature can recover eventually from human interference. Our research showed that the permafrost was already badly damaged by the mining in the area and our research helped make the case that more protection was needed so they set up a national park to protect the environment.

Do you think it would look different if you went back now?

I think it would look mostly the same, I think it would look very different in some places as there is a bigger tourist industry now in some places, but the area I was in because it is protected would look quite similar but I don't know how climate change has changes it. It would be amazing to go back and see.

More information:

BSES - British Schools Exploring Society (now called BES British exploring society) was set up by the Doctor on Scott of the Antarctic's expedition/ It is part of the Royal Geographic Society and they do expedition every year to the Arctic, Siberia, South America, they do scientific research and humanitarian projects around the world. You can find out more about it here

<https://www.britishexploring.org/>