

25 Jul 17

British Trans-Americas Expedition 2017 concludes on Alaskan coast

Six members of the British Armed Forces have completed an epic 77-day, 23,000-mile motorcycle expedition from Ushuaia on the southern tip of South America to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, traversing the Pan-American Highway, the longest unsupported British military overland expedition for 45 years.



The End – Prudhoe Bay, Northern Alaska.

The British Trans-Americas Expedition 2017 saw the Royal Navy and British Army servicemen riding cross-country trail motorcycles through 13 countries, negotiating vast changes in terrain from the tropical jungles and mountains of South and Central America, through the heat and deserts of North America and on through the cold and snowy wilds of Alaska.

The six, Majors Nick Foulerton and Adam Szczerbiuk, Surgeon Lieutenant Alex Bamford, Staff Sergeant Tony Cotty, Corporal Tom Makin and Leading Medical Assistant Lee Macpherson, encountered serious injuries and complex mechanical challenges as they moved through different altitudes and climates.



Raising the profile at the 'Motorcycle Live' event in the National Exhibition Centre.

A year of intensive planning saw the expedition aim to set a world record crossing of the Darien Gap, which straddles Panama and Colombia. However, due to unforeseen circumstances this wasn't possible and the team had to airlift their equipment over the gap to Panama to resume the journey north.



The motorcycles ready for shipping.

Despite this set-back, the soldiers put their military skills to the test, demonstrating the benefits of the expedition as a means of developing leadership and teamwork, and testing physical endurance and mental stamina for future training opportunities of this nature.

The expedition itself required the team to be self-supporting in a challenging logistical environment; practising long-range vehicle patrolling, navigation and mechanical skills as well as field craft, jungle warfare and medical skills – all of which were relied upon for the duration of the ride.



Dawn in the pampas of western Argentina.

The diverse and challenging route from Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world, took the riders along the eastern flank of the Andes, through the Argentine Pampas, avoiding highways and encompassing as many unpaved sections as possible.

Crossing the Andes, the team followed the spectacular Carretera Austral north through Patagonia, Santiago, where they serviced the bikes and replaced tyres, continuing northwards into the Atacama Desert – one of the driest places on earth.



A fuel stop in the Atacama Desert, Chile.

Leaving Chile behind, the group rode up the 14,698ft Paso del Cajon into southwest Bolivia, a volcanic sparsely populated region, and onwards and upwards through Le Paz and along the shores of Lake Titicaca to the ancient Inca capital of Cusco. At the Ecuadorian border, the team's dreams were dashed as they learned they could not cross the challenging Darien Gap on two wheels.



Suffering from the effects of altitude at 15,000 feet in southwest Bolivia.

Having flown their equipment across the gap, they continued their journey north through the jungles of northern Panama. After a swift passage through Costa Rica, they arrived at the Nicaraguan border. The Nicaraguans could not have been more hospitable and it was just one of many examples of extraordinary hospitality throughout the journey that left a lasting impression on the team.



Another day, another fall – extracting a bike from a rather large pothole in Mexico.

Honduras and El Salvador were traversed quickly despite the men outstaying their 24-hour visas by 14 minutes and being issued a fine. Diplomatic discussions ensued to reduce the fine and highlighted the benefit of having a competent linguist on board.

The journey continued across the Paten region of northern Guatemala, through to the eastern border of Belize and the relative comfort of the British garrison in Belize City, where the team performed more bike maintenance.



The Dalton Highway, northern Alaska.

Having reached the Mexican border with the USA, via the dry jungle of the Yucatan Peninsula and the Caribbean coast, the team rode on through North America, riding for 10 hours and 380km a day, allowing for refuelling and maintenance.

The Rockies, British Columbia and Yukon brought the riders to Fairbanks, Alaska, and the last 800km ride along the unpaved Dalton Highway to the oil terminal of Prudhoe Bay on the shores of the Alaskan Ocean, 75 days after leaving the south coast of South America.



The snow was rather deeper in the Arctic than we had anticipated. Northern Alaska.

It was 75 days of environmental, physical and mental challenges, ultra-bike maintenance, climate changes, diplomatic and linguistic problem solving, crashes, injuries, mosquitos, altitude sickness and ultimately teamwork, bonding and the elation of reaching the finish line.

This British Trans-Americas Expedition would not have been possible without the support of the MOD and non-public funds that routinely support such activities. In addition commercial sponsors CCM, Belstaff, LS2 Helmets, Oxford Products, Nomad Travel, Global Rescue, Urban Car Spa, Vollebak, Captain Fawcett, Michelin and Stanfords who provided both equipment and financial support.



Departing for the UK from the British Training Area in western Canada.

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NOTES

The six riders were selected from across the military and the final team had the requisite capabilities; linguist, doctor, medic, mechanic and jungle specialist. As an authorised activity the expedition had to pass the scrutiny of a Military Judgement Panel, designed to ensure that sufficient planning, training and risk management had been implemented prior to departure. In order to pass this stress test the expedition conducted rider, medical, mechanical and language training.

The journey began 15 March 2017 and finished 1 June 2017

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