

TESTIMONIALS FROM ADVENTUROUS FRIENDS

'Seriously inspirational'

Sir Ranulph Fiennes OBE

*'A man who has truly battled to live life to its
full capacity, every gritty inch of the way'*

Bear Grylls OBE

'A good old-fashioned exploratory romp around the world'

Rebecca Stephens MBE

*'Not many people have smelt the breath of an
elephant seal ... amazing stories!'*

Steve Backshall MBE

'Captivating, stirring & authentic'

Levison Wood

'A smorgasbord of adventure'

Dee Caffari MBE

'An inspiration to future generations'

Colonel John Blashford-Snell CBE

'This book will ignite your spirit of adventure'

Mark Beaumont BEM

‘Completely bonkers, very eccentric & reassuringly British’

Rosie Stancer

‘A rich collection of stories to inspire’

Louis Rudd MBE

‘Neil has done it all – extreme challenges all over the world’

Sir Chris Bonington CVO CBE DL

‘A gripping compilation of adventure stories – one hell of a ride’

Vanessa O’Brien

*‘A real-life Phileas Fogg, continuing the great
British tradition of eccentric exploration’*

Leo Holding

*‘These stories will inspire you to grab your
own dreams with both hands!’*

Lucy Shepherd

‘Wonderful stories exploring Planet Earth’

Major Tim Peake CMG

‘Occasionally an individual has the drive to follow their own star’

Pen Hadow

‘A wonderful reminder to say “yes” a little more in life’

Sir Richard Branson

ADVENTUREHOLIC

EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEYS ON SEVEN
CONTINENTS BY LAND, SEA AND AIR

NEIL LAUGHTON

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Dedicated to:

Oscar, Scarlett and Amber

*I hope you will follow your own dreams with confidence
and that you have as much good fortune as your dad*

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FOREWORD

Bear Grylls OBE

Neil is unique. A man who has truly battled to live life to its full capacity, every gritty inch of the way. From the first day I met him in 21 SAS, he has exuded a presence and confidence that is inspiring to be around. Losing his naval father early on in his life was a devastating blow to him as a young teenage commando. But out of that pain came this determination to live his life ‘all in’, with total commitment, resolute never to waste a single moment. If I had to pick one word to describe him it would be resilient.

Most regular climbers, faced with the horrors of death close up as Neil did on Everest in 1996, would have maybe backed away from such dangers again. To Neil the grim statistics of his attempted climb that year simply fuelled a hunger to come back stronger and to prevail. And that is how Neil has tackled everything in his life. The word ‘no’ simply means ‘not yet’. Insurmountable means a challenge. Whether it has been smashing world records on a penny farthing or on jet skis, crossing deserts in a flying car, serving with the elite or climbing the world’s highest peaks, he has truly grabbed life with both hands.

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But alongside this resilience is a kind heart and mischievous spirit. These are the sort of qualities that turn what could be an intimidating person of high achievement into the sort of guy you always love to share a tent or a beer with, any time. This kindness has always been a light to his life. Whether as a wonderful son to his late mother, husband to the remarkable Caroline or father to three gorgeous children. Kindness before self.

And no doubt, if it wasn't for his open spirit and overt encouragement to me as a young soldier looking to make his mark on the world, I would never have got to build the life I have. They say we all stand on the shoulders of giants. Neil has been one of those to me. For that I will always love and admire this man and I am sure the stories you're about to read will inspire you to go out and grab life with both hands.

PREFACE

Author's note

The definition of adventure is ‘an unusual and exciting or daring experience’ and this book is a compilation of my most memorable journeys during the last forty-odd years. I should explain that I am not a full-time professional explorer or adventurer but an amateur organiser and leader of adventurous expeditions. This has been my main hobby, passion and addiction, whilst holding down a day job, since an early age. My first expedition was a three-day canoe-camping trip on our local river when I was thirteen years old.

I hope that the true stories contained within these pages will be entertaining, informative and a catalyst that encourages you to be a little more adventurous. Placing adventure at the forefront of my life has provided me with incredible worldly experiences, stiff leadership challenges and unlimited fun!

Being adventurous has helped me develop useful skills, boosted my confidence and exposed me to the essential ingredient in life – being resilient. In addition to sharing the ‘nuts and bolts’ of each adventurous expedition, I have tried to provide an

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honest commentary about what went well but also to consider, when a mission failed or was problematic, why. This includes the mistakes of the leader! I reveal not only the what and when but the how and why including the finance and funding of the more costly missions. Each chapter ends with some lessons learned (top tips) and the final chapter reveals my summary reflections on a life well lived, laughed and loved.

How did I end up as an Adventureholic? Well, it wasn't looking too likely early on as I was a child patient of Great Ormond Street Hospital with urinary problems. After successful treatment I was sent to a boarding school from the age of nine, which I didn't much enjoy, with its culture of corporal punishment, bullying and 'fagging'. As a 'fag', in the 1970s, a junior boy was expected to 'clean up' after a senior boy. To avoid this, I volunteered to run the tuck (sweet) shop which gave me my first taste of independence, responsibility and of being an entrepreneur.

When still in junior school, I spent three incredible days at sea on the commando carrier HMS *Bulwark* thanks to my father who was a Royal Navy Captain. Inspired, I felt my destiny lay in a career with the Royal Marines. A few years later I completed a junior military parachuting course a year before being allowed to start driving lessons.

Academia wasn't my forte. It took me three attempts to pass Maths O Level (GCSE) and a handwritten school report still exists from my Geography teacher: 'Neil is trying very hard but achieving very little.' Like many a naughty schoolboy I got caught making illegal 'hooch', set the Chemistry lab on fire and organised a massive rave which resulted in eight lashings of the

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cane and my being expelled. Weirdly, I was allowed back the following term and made head of house and appointed a school prefect! I got back on the right track ...

Instead of going to university, I filled a gap year with exciting work placements – instructing inner-city kids on survival courses in the highlands of Scotland, working on a P&O educational cruise ship as a school’s liaison officer and travelling across two oceans on a cargo ship to undertake a recce for Operation Raleigh. This was to search for a ‘fire-breathing dragon’ on a remote island in Papua New Guinea on the instructions of Colonel John Blashford-Snell, who was to become a lifelong friend and mentor.

My call-up papers to join the Royal Marines as a young officer arrived whilst I was hitch-hiking across Australia. At the time, my dad, whom I loved and adored, was battling throat cancer, having smoked for most of his life. He died whilst I was in the middle of the arduous Royal Marines Commando Course. I passed and proudly wore the commando’s green beret but mentally, I was lost in a world of grief, my focus and concentration gone. Eventually I was called in for an ‘interview without coffee’ and released from my duties. Devastated and depressed, I travelled to London and signed up to a freelance sales commission job whilst living at a YMCA hostel in Stockwell. I was at my lowest ebb.

A series of unfulfilling roles as a salesman and sales manager followed. My first boss was defrauding HMRC and committed suicide in his Rolls-Royce before reaching Wormwood Scrubs. My second managing director spent the company’s money on fast cars and it went bust. I had high hopes for my third appointment as sales and marketing manager for an up-and-coming

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commercial interiors business. In the course of eighteen months I helped increase the company's turnover from £1 million to an order book of £15 million. Then at 0730 hours one Monday morning I was called in to see the boss. My expectation for this meeting was a pat on the back and possibly a pay rise but incredulously, I was unceremoniously fired, handed my P45 with the words 'It's not working out.' I learned later on that my replacement was the managing director's best friend. He wanted my job now that the company could afford his salary demands. I decided then and there that I would never again rely on others for my employment and financial security.

Meanwhile, like many, I had been mesmerised by the storming of the Iranian Embassy in London during the spring siege of 1980 by the Special Air Service and on the 10th anniversary there was considerable interest in the SAS. Queues of fit young men formed down the King's Road seeking an opportunity to join the regiment. I was one of them and after a long gruelling selection process I joined 21 SAS as a reservist and trooper for six years (the lowest rank in the British Army). Someone at headquarters must have discovered I had held a Queen's commission in the Royal Marines, so I was recommended to attend the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and served a further six years in the regiment as a troop commander. This is where I met Bear Grylls and many other special people.

The elephant has a long memory. Still infuriated by being ousted unfairly from a good job in the construction industry, I founded a company in direct competition to my former boss. A decade later, with my industrious and trustworthy business

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partner Andrew Russell, we were pitching for and winning multi-million-pound deals. After delivering a stunning twenty-million-pound refurbishment of BAA's new headquarters building at Heathrow Airport, a FTSE 100 company made an offer to buy our company and I was then free to explore other business (and adventurous) opportunities. These included founding companies in property development, leadership development, event management, a bicycle club and even an international airline!

Despite the demands and pressures of being a company director and family man, travel, sport and adventure have always been and remain for me non-negotiable in my life. I have the most wonderful, understanding and supportive wife Caroline ('Management') and this book is dedicated to our three amazing children, Oscar, Scarlett and Amber. I thank them all for their love, support and generous understanding of my adventure addiction.