

# Ice-cold adventure on top of the world

LSE's most daring alumnus must be **Brett Cormick**. The 40-year-old Australian explains how he made history as he conceived of and led the first expedition to scuba dive beneath the North Pole.

'In the water, first to go were the rubber seals on my drysuit around my neck and left wrist. Freezing water seeped in, sending the left side of my body into spasm'

I first decided I wanted to dive at the North Pole while tumbling through the air above it. On that free-fall parachute expedition in April 1997, as I witnessed the breathtaking beauty of the curvature of the earth and every shade of white imaginable from the most spectacular vantage point on the planet, I started to wonder what it would be like to invert myself under the ice and walk beneath it. I was suffering a malaria attack at the time but we set about making it happen.

It took two years of meticulous planning. During that time one of Russia's most experienced and highly trained professional divers Andrei Rozhkov died in his attempt after descending to around 50 metres, then experiencing equipment failure, and subsequently lung rupture, as he was being pulled to the surface. His support team from Moscow State University also accompanied us on our expedition.

Contrary to popular impression, there is no geographical landmass at the North Pole at all. The Pole is a fixed point surrounded by a frozen polar icecap some 2,000 kilometres across. This mass of unstable and continuously shifting frozen sea water, between several centimetres and many metres thick, covers a drop of nearly four kilometres to the ocean floor. Polar divers also risk being trapped under vast, moving sheets of ice, miles wide. This is coupled with the constant danger of free-floating underwater ice structures, frequently more than 10 metres high. There are also powerful currents beneath the floes, which could sweep a diver miles away or deep under water in minutes, to be entombed



beneath the ice while waiting for the air supply to run out or equipment to fail, as it inevitably does.

Time and space are the main factors in a polar dive. Because of delays caused by cyclonic weather, we ended up having to make a dash for the Pole with only one helicopter instead of two. That meant abandoning all survival equipment and taking only what we needed for the dive.

That day, 24 April 1999 in 24-hour sunshine, it took three hours to hack through the ice to form a 'lead' the size of a standard door. I was alarmed to note that even before I entered the water my buoyancy compensator had failed completely and my fins were curling, cracking and disintegrating, as they had become so brittle. The physical properties of rubber change at -40C, which is the external air temperature around spring at the Pole.

Once under the freezing water I found I had been unprepared for the sheer visibility – and the

reality of that four kilometre drop. As I descended, my Russian team-mates were already breaking up the ice reforming overhead. Even a five centimetre layer would prevent me resurfacing and if my equipment failed, as it inevitably would, I could not survive more than a few seconds.

Even after two years' preparation, no words could express the beauty and majesty of the ice castles we witnessed floating surreally under water. Lights seemed to emanate from somewhere below the water. It was an unnerving and quite disturbing experience in this desolate place, a ghostly light show of incredible intensity, like some underwater Aurora Borealis. The phenomenon seems to result from a naturally occurring diffusion of light from the sun, refracting off the many crystal-clear ice formations under water and broadcast through the ever-moving cracks in the surface ice.

In the water, first to go were the rubber seals on my drysuit around my neck and left wrist. Freezing water seeped in [water temperature in the Polar Ocean is between -1.8 and -2.0C], sending the left side of my body into spasm. I signalled to the surface team and was hauled to safety from a depth of 20 metres.

I went down three times in total. On the third ascent, at about 20 metres, my regulator finally froze, forcing me to turn to my back up. After a few seconds this also failed, so I was forced to take it out of my mouth and signal with four sharp tugs that I needed to be pulled to the surface as fast as possible. I made a free ascent, expelling excess air. I believe it was Rozhkov's failure to do this, probably because

he was already unconscious, that killed him. The support team dragged me to the air-filled chamber we had set up, and revived me. Within ten minutes of the final dive being completed, the shifting icepack had covered the dive site permanently.

My fellow diver, Bob Wass, and I are the only two people to have seen these mystical lights and survived to tell the tale. They are another secret the planet has reluctantly given up.

We also saw jellyfish the size of a man's palm, and shrimp, both totally transparent in this new world, as well as brown and red seaweed. A seal swam by 100m from our dive position. Amazing to think that it would be there at all, but then again, why not?

Being the first group to dive the geographic North Pole was a life-defining experience.

Why do I do it? I don't know. Dropped on my head as a baby I guess. The real answer has something to do with the fact that even three years ago what we have done was impossible. There was an 80 per cent chance they would never even find our bodies again this time. Also something about free-falling onto the top of the world changes your view of reality forever. It burns itself into your soul somehow.

It is hard to explain, but technology has converged with man's ultimate spirit of extreme adventure to allow a lucky few to do things that no human being ever dreamed he or she could do on this planet. The days of the 18th century explorers have gone, but maybe there is a new generation of 21st century explorers waiting to be born. ■

Dr Brett Cormick was a research student from 1991 to 1993 in the Department of Accounting and Finance and during this period authored a university economics textbook, *Macroeconomics and the Development of Political Economic Theory*. He has spent over 12 years in the international investment banking industry in Europe and the US.

He currently lectures in international strategic corporate finance at the University of Cape Town, School of Management Studies, in South Africa, and serves as the chairman and CEO of MedTech Corporation, a company at the forefront of developing non-invasive HIV treatment. He is also establishing an international financial services group, specialising in international private equity and special investment opportunities in the global markets.

Dr Cormick complements his corporate and investment banking activities by serving as the director of polar dive operations for the Polar Dive Company, an organisation which specialises in arranging extreme world-record breaking dives and free-fall expeditions at the North and South Poles.

To further develop opportunities for underprivileged students in Southern Africa, Dr Cormick has established an Education Foundation for Africa, which currently funds students through primary and secondary school in rural African communities, and is in the process of establishing a scholarship scheme for a University of Cape Town postgraduate to study at LSE each year.

He is also arranging his next venture – a free fall over the South Pole, which at 14,500 feet is the highest, driest, coldest place on earth and has already claimed four lives on a previous attempt.

Email [brettcormick@compuserve.com](mailto:brettcormick@compuserve.com)  
[www.polardivers.com](http://www.polardivers.com)

