My Student Elective

By brigantine across the Pacific

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Britain has always boasted her fair share of explorers, from Raleigh, Livingstone, and Scott to that colourful character Sir Ranulph Twistleton-Wykeham Fiennes, an aristocratic adventurer of recent years. The British explorer often seems tinged with madness: the daily papers recently reported that "Operation Drake," a British-led party, had discovered a stone-

age tribe in the central highlands of Papua New Guinea, an area renowned for cannibalism. I might have been tempted to dismiss the British group as a band of patriotic eccentrics had I not been a member of that same expedition just a few months earlier during my elective period.

Operation Drake is not a pack of crackpot explorers but a two-year expedition sailing around the world in a magnificent 100-foot brigantine (fig 1) to commemorate Sir Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the globe 400 years ago. Under the patronage of the Prince of Wales and backed by the Scientific Exploration Society, the expedition has two main objectives: firstly, to conduct a variety of research projects—archeological, botanical, zoological, and medical—and to carry out community aid work, while travelling to different parts of the world; and, secondly, to involve young people in the exciting spirit of travel and exploration, which offers a kind of personal challenge difficult to achieve in everyday life.

I first heard about Operation Drake when the venture was discussed on a radio programme. I caught only the words "expedition" and "exploration" but that was enough to capture my interest, and with 38 000 other hopefuls I applied to join the voyage. A selection procedure whittled down the numbers to a

few hundred, and as one of the group I was invited to attend a final "selection weekend."

A brief and mysterious letter instructed me to present myself one Saturday in early winter at a village in mid-Wales and to bring "equipment suitable for spending 24 hours or more in the open." There was no explanation of what would be expected of me, just a perturbing postscript cheerfully advising me to drop out if the strain proved too much. I imagined that all kinds of agonising activities were to come, and I wasn't far wrong. The series of tests lasted one and a half days, during which we were allowed no sleep and little food. The tasks were wide-ranging: everything from rock-climbing to public speaking, and from orienteering to acting and rifle shooting. Other more bizarre exercises challenged our powers of endurance to the limits. As I struggled blindfold through a waist-deep bog of mud, sat freezing for six hours on a precarious raft in the middle of a Welsh estuary, identified unknown substances including delicacies such as car grease and fish entrails by taste, and waded up to the neck in water carrying heavy equipment down to a river course, I had serious doubts about both my own sanity and that of the organisers.

Throughout the weekend observers assessed each candidate for adaptability, enthusiasm, resourcefulness, perseverance, and other traits that would enable them to benefit from, and contribute to, the success of a group expedition. Using these criteria for selection it was hoped to eliminate prejudice based on academic qualifications, social background, and occupation. In addition, generous sponsorship from commerce and industry covered all expenses of the expedition, enabling rich and poor alike to stand an equal chance of selection.

The expedition set off from Plymouth in October 1978, and I prepared to join the ship for the third phase of the two-year voyage, starting in Panama and crossing the Pacific with various landstops before reaching Fiji. I had some difficulty in obtaining the necessary equipment—understandably, Birmingham stores have little call to stock mosquito nets and jungle boots, but helpful assistants found suitable alternatives. I set about acquiring various skills that would be useful during the voyage and mastered sub-aqua diving, rope handling, and a smattering of Spanish for use in Panama.

At last, in April 1979, I flew to Panama to join the directing staff of the expedition and the 24 other young people selected for this leg of the voyage. We had come from all corners of the world—America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Britain—and in our three months together probably did more to promote international understanding than a dozen summit conferences.

We went through the impressive Panama Canal and then set sail for the shores of Costa Rica. I had no sailing experience so that even the most basic nautical terminology was a foreign language, and learning the complex system of standing and running rigging was as difficult as memorising the anatomy of the nervous system. With my heart in my mouth, I climbed the ship's rigging and was taught how to furl sails some hundred feet above the deck with only narrow, wobbling footropes for sup-

port—and live to tell the tale. Eventually such tasks become second nature, and we leaped around the rigging like agile monkeys.

In Costa Rica we trekked into the rain forests and spent several days hiking through the dense, luxuriant tropical vegetation. Lush green foliage stretched hundreds of feet above us and creepers twined round the huge trunks like a powerful boa ready to squeeze. Toucans and scarlet macaws created splashes of colour against the rich green backcloth while troupes of monkeys swung among the highest branches. We came face to face with poisonous snakes and a herd of wild pigs, but they were more alarmed than we and thankfully fled at lightning speed.

We sailed on to the tiny but beautiful island of Cocos and carried out a biological survey for the Ecuadorian government before travelling on to the Galapagos Islands. For purposes of conservation few people are allowed to visit this area, and it was a rare privilege for us to see the unique species of flora and fauna which inspired Darwin's thoughts on natural selection and evolution. Marine and land iguanas perched on sun-bleached rocks while giant tortoises lumbered over barren soil and mischievous sealions splashed noisily at the water's edge. Elegant flamingoes stood poised around a salt-water lagoon, and elsewhere on the islands we saw other exotic birdlife: snow-white tropic birds, blue-footed boobies, albatrosses, pelicans, frigate birds, and, of course, the famous Galapagos finches.

We worked with the Charles Darwin Research Station on several conservation programmes aimed at preserving rare species of giant tortoises and iguanas threatened with extinction. In the course of an extensive search for surviving iguanas, I was thrilled to discover, and capture, an adult female, which could then be used in a breeding programme to expand the dwindling populations. My ungainly dive on to the unsuspecting iguana, using an army shirt as a makeshift net, was more dramatic than it was effective, but at least I felt I'd done my bit for wildlife preservation. During our 10-day journey around the islands their volcanic origins became obvious to us. We trekked over wide lava fields composed of brittle, black rock etched with swirling patterns in which molten magma cooled and crystallised more than a million years ago. An active fumarole, emitting hot gas and water vapour, served as an uncomfortable reminder that the last eruption on the islands had occurred only months before our arrival.

From the Galapagos Islands we began a month-long passage across the Pacific Ocean without so much as a glimpse of land.

FIG 1—Brigantine "Eye of the Wind" in full sail.

FIG 2—Learning to navigate.

The weeks at sea provided time to indulge new interests—navigation (fig 2), seamanship, oceanography, radio operation, and astronomy—and we conducted a variety of marine biology projects with the aid of equipment in a specially constructed laboratory on board. I have many vivid memories of the days at sea roasting under the equatorial sun, my first dive overboard into the cool water of the mighty Pacific, sighting a mammoth whale alongside the ship, and spending hours in idle pleasure watching playful dolphins race along with us. In contrast, we also experienced a force-nine gale and were ordered, with rigging swaying perilously in the fierce wind, to clamber aloft and work on the sails—the freezing rain battering our hands numb and blue. The most idyllic memories are those of sailing at night, with moonlight softly lighting the ship, and hearing the sounds of the low voices of the night watch and the waves breaking as we sailed on through the darkness. Although an inexperienced sailor, I soon learnt to love and respect the sea and found the new environment, and totally different lifestyle, a refreshing change from formal academic study.

Our last two landstops, in Tahiti and Fiji, gave us the opportunity to sample Polynesian culture, traditions, and cuisine. In Tahiti I hitchhiked around the island and spent one night with a local family, who entertained me with stories of Tahiti myths and legends, cooked tasty dishes using local delicacies, and even dressed me in the traditional cloth or *pareu*. I learnt more about the island in that one evening than I could have gleaned from a hundred books.

Our arrival in Fiji marked the end of the expedition's third phase during which we had sailed over 7500 miles. Crew members like myself who had joined for only three months parted company and returned to their various homelands, but we all still follow the ship's progress with avid interest. The journey introduced me to a stimulating variety of people, places, and experiences and, although the elective may have spanned only a three-month period, the memories will undoubtedly last a lifetime.