



AIN'T NO MOUNTAIN

THAT'S

ENOUGH

AS THE FIRST MAN TO CROSS BOTH POLAR ICE CAPS AND THE OLDEST PERSON TO CLIMB 8,850 METRES TO SCALE THE WORLD'S HIGHEST PEAK, IT IS SAFE TO SAY THAT SIR RANULPH FIENNES OBE, IS NOT YOUR AVERAGE SENIOR CITIZEN

written by FRED QUICK

"I'D LIKE MY TOMBSTONE TO READ THAT I RAISED £20 MILLION FOR UK CHARITIES. IF THE NEXT PROJECT COMES OFF I MIGHT JUST REACH IT..."

Heralded as "the world's greatest living explorer" by the Guinness Book of World Records, Sir Ran – as he's affectionately known – turned 71 this year but isn't showing any signs of slowing down: "I'm one of those people that just doesn't want to do nothing", he tells me with a roguish smile. We're sat upstairs at Chelsea's iconic restaurant Bibendum where the adventurer is the guest speaker for an evening with Quintessentially Wine. It's a rather more refined environment than Fiennes is used to, having spent most of his life leading major expeditions to the harshest territories on earth.

As such, I'd been expecting to meet a man of steely disposition, a veteran explorer, short on time for namby-pamby journalists like me. So, I was relieved to find him amiable and effortlessly charming. A towering presence at 6ft 3", with vivid green eyes, Sir Ranulph is physically imposing and unmistakably, powerfully ambitious, quickly making it clear that he isn't ready to retire: "I'd like my tombstone to say that I raised £20 million for UK charities," he says. "As of last year it's around £18.2 million, but Marie Curie reckons if our next project comes off I might just reach it."

As to his next project, Fiennes remains tight-lipped: "I couldn't even tell you if it's horizontal or vertical," he jokes, as there may be others who are vying for the same outlandish goal. I notice that his enthusiasm tempts a flicker of an impulse to tell me more, but his athletic sense of competition won't allow it.

Fiennes' expeditions took on their now hugely successful, charitable impetus in the 1980s at the suggestion of Prince Charles, who became his patron, but what was Sir Ranulph's initial motivation? "For me, it was to make a living," Fiennes recalls, as if scaling mountains were the most natural lifestyle choice in the world. "Initially I wanted to copy my father, who commanded a Scottish regiment for many years. He was killed in Italy four months before I was born so my mother brought me up on stories about him, with the result that I was very keen to do the same thing. Trouble is, if you want to be the colonel of a regiment you need to get a Regular Commission from Sandhurst, which requires a certain number of A-Levels. I didn't have those qualifications so I left the army after eight years.

"Following my time in the SAS, my late wife (Ginny Fiennes, the first woman to be awarded the Polar Medal) and I decided that I could make an income by doing what I did during the Cold War, which was teaching soldiers canoeing and skiing. That was called 'adventure training' and we decided to do a continuation which evolved into our expeditions in the late-1960s."

Over the next half-a-century Fiennes went on to overcome a quite unbelievable array of challenges. These include successfully leading the team that discovered the lost city of Ubar near the Yemeni border after seven previous search expeditions over a 26-year period, and – only a few months after a massive heart attack, three-day coma and double bypass – achieving the first 7x7x7 (seven marathons in seven consecutive days on all seven continents). Processing Fiennes' list of achievements is enough to induce a midlife crisis in a man such as me, but I remind myself, comparisons with a superhuman are futile.

This year, Sir Ranulph became the oldest Briton to complete the Marathon des Sables, a six-day, 251km ultra-marathon across the Sahara Desert. "After my heart attack about 10 years ago I was told my heart rate should not exceed 130 beats per minute. I thought because Marathon des Sables was slow-paced I'd be fine. As it turns out, the organisers remove people who don't keep up a certain pace at each checkpoint. Above you there's a helicopter called 'The Vulture' looking down and behind there are pacer camels that keep up a steady plod, whether you're in soft dune territory or not. There was a real dichotomy because I couldn't go too fast but I had to make sure the organisers didn't sweep me up. I also knew that if I succeeded we'd probably make £2 million for Marie Curie."

PREVIOUS PAGE:
*Portrait of Sir Ranulph
Fiennes by Martin Hartley*

THIS PAGE, RIGHT:
*The Nile expedition
hovercraft, 1968*



THE SAME DOGGED DETERMINATION
LED HIM TO CONQUER EVEREST,
FOUR YEARS AFTER HIS FIRST ATTEMPT
ENDED WITH A HEART ATTACK
1,000 FEET FROM THE SUMMIT



He's also a prolific writer, with over 20 books to his name. His latest book is 'Heat: Extreme Adventures at the Highest Temperatures on Earth.'

"In Heat I've included the longest expedition, which took my late wife and me 26 years. We had eight major four-wheel-drive expeditions into the greatest desert in the world, the Empty Quarter below Saudi Arabia, before we found the lost Sheeba city of Ubar. I've also included our 4000 mile journey up the Nile in 1968 using a prototype hovercraft and have gone into the three years I spent fighting for the Sultan of Muscat in tropical forests against superior numbers of Marxist terrorists."

What's striking is Sir Ranulph's unwavering equanimity when he recalls life-threatening situations and, evidently, when dealing with them first hand. It's this same stoicism that led him to ignore doctor's orders and saw off his own mummified fingertips with a fretsaw after catching frostbite in the North Pole. The same dogged determination led him to conquer Everest,

four years after his first attempt at climbing the mountain ended with a heart attack 1,000 feet from the summit.

As guests arrive for the event, I conclude our interview by asking Sir Ranulph if he feels more or less mentally resilient these days, to which he replies: "I'm just born non-philosophical and unable to be hypothetical or introspective." And I suppose therein lies the key to his enduring success. ©

Heat: Extreme Adventures at the Highest Temperatures on Earth by Sir Ranulph Fiennes is published by Simon and Schuster