A STEP TOO FAR
To Julia and Jay,

without whom I would not be here today – P.B.
FOREWORD

Usually we read of heroes without the stories behind them and their families, and the consequences of their actions. Peter Bland tells it all.

Great heroes like him face adversity with courage and a certain conviction. They accept the doctrine that ‘no great deed is done by falterers who ask for certainty’ or, as Kipling put it, ‘to take your chance in the thick of a rush’.

Peter’s adventures have been on a daunting if not epic scale. To my mind, he is really a Homeric figure. Understand that Captain Cook predicted that no man would ever venture to a land he believed lay to the south, yet the first reported sighting in 1820 started a fascination with the Antarctic that has since been unbridled. The heroics and dramas of the Mawson and Shackleton expeditions, plus the experiences of Scott, Amundsen, Herbert, Wilkes and others, partly explain why those of this day are drawn to it.
Our adventurer confides that Antarctica ‘exercises an excessive hold’ on those wishing to test their powers of endurance. Mawson’s return to Commonwealth Bay is a powerful illustration, but of course our modern day adventurer had no idea that he would also become involved in a saga of survival which had echoes of Mawson’s experience. So the boy from the land of droughts and flooding rains set his plans for a second time to tackle the ice continent of glaciers and forbidding crevasses where men have perished without trace. It’s a continent the size of Australia and Europe combined.

Peter’s family was always afraid of his fearlessness and was concerned that he had no sense of his own mortality. However, challenging himself in harsh and hostile environments is something he loves to do, with an inner spirit fashioned by Anzac histories and stories of Australian pioneers. They provided him with models of achievement and determination. Undaunted after two bouts of major heart surgery, the adrenalin rush continued.

In studying the man, we have this extraordinary catalogue of actions and adventures: windsurfing, trekking, shearing, sailing, fencing and paragliding. Conquering the two poles, sailing the oceans and traversing the Antarctic, we experience by word his perilous drama and desperate rescue, which he survived because of the stoic qualities within him and within his associates. Along with all of this, he communicates the romance of facing the elements and being off the beaten track at places like Gizo, Crookhaven, Horta, Guadeloupe, Canouan and Charcot Bay.

It’s a graphic account that leaves us in awe.

Tony Charlton
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Chapter One

THE GREAT WHITE CHAOS

Sleeping in can sometimes disrupt a day’s arrangements in unforeseeable ways, but for Peter Bland on 29 December 2000 it sparked a chain of consequences that were to prove almost catastrophic. He prided himself on planning and logistics, but the final month’s preparation for his two-man crossing of the Antarctic peninsula with his old Melbourne schoolfriend Jay Watson had been fraught with difficulty. There are two parts to an Antarctic campaign – raising the cash and putting in place the support team, and crossing the ice and braving the blizzards. In some cases facing the bankers was harder than facing the elements, and so it proved on this trip. A month before he was due to depart his main sponsor, a Melbourne commercial real estate agent, withdrew their $60,000 backing, forcing him back to square one. He was selling potential
A STEP TOO FAR

sponsors the message that he and Watson intended to become the first people to do the crossing unassisted. The British explorer Sir Wally Herbert had crossed the peninsula supported by a team of dogs in 1957, but for environmental reasons dogs had been banned from the great white land since the international Antarctic agreement of 1991. Now Bland and Watson planned to write themselves into the region’s history books by walking across the peninsula unaccompanied, hauling behind them kayaks doubling up as sleds, which would carry all their food and equipment.

The more people suggested to 32-year-old Bland that he shouldn’t be doing the trip, the more determined he became. People said he was mad to go, after having major heart surgery as a child of eight and again when he was 28. He couldn’t see what they were making such a fuss about. He was in good company. Sir Ernest Shackleton, the great British Antarctic explorer, fought to overcome heart problems all his life, refusing for most of the time to be examined by doctors. In fact, it was a heart attack that ended Shackleton’s life – in South Georgia Island, close to Antarctica, when he was only 48.

For Bland and Watson to visit Antarctica they had to obtain a permit from Australia’s Antarctic Division of the Department of Heritage and Environment, based in Hobart. A senior policy officer from the division, Martin Betts, had expressed concerns about the proposed expedition to Watson. Betts was worried about the insurance aspect; what if one of the pair had an accident, and they needed to be airlifted out? Who would pay for it?

Bland and Watson had been warned, but there was no stopping them. Bland had looked into insurance and had heard that it would cost $350,000 to insure the pair of them – a sum
that was way beyond his financial means. Instead, he and Watson had organised their own insurance – a back-up support crew aboard the yacht Tooluka, skippered by Gippsland fisherman and Antarctic adventurer Roger Wallis, who would sail along the Antarctic coast, as close as possible to where Bland and Watson were trekking. In an emergency, Bland could contact the crew with his high-frequency radio, and they could arrange to get help to an injured person.

In Hobart, Betts and the government’s Antarctic division were increasingly worried about the number of adventurers now sailing down to Antarctica to chase a new piece of history by becoming the first person to travel this particular route, or live for an entire year on that particular part of the Antarctic continent. Like the Himalayan peak of Everest with its competing teams of climbers, Antarctica had become the last great frontier for adventurers fuelled by ambition to confront nature at her most wild. Even as Bland prepared to leave Melbourne for Antarctica, a team of New Zealanders was making ready to paddle in kayaks along the north coast of the Antarctic continent.

Betts had 35 years’ experience of working in and on Antarctica, and he advised on all non-government trips. It was his job to weigh up whether proposed trips were feasible, and had sufficient back-up. The government couldn’t ban people from going, other than for environmental reasons, but it could offer advice, taking into account that Australia had a duty to be a responsible Antarctic citizen as a signatory to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty protecting the white wilderness. As Betts puts it: ‘We didn’t want to foist on other countries the responsibility for dealing with the consequences of a trip made by Australians.’
Bland and Watson were aware of the obvious perils of wind-chill factors which could drop to minus 60 degrees Celsius; winds that could gust at 200 kilometres per hour, and blizzards that could reduce visibility to a metre. With justification, it has been called ‘the great white chaos’.

Then there was the terrain they planned to cover. ‘What Peter and Jay were proposing to do was pretty tough,’ Betts recalls. A narrow, high plateau runs down the middle of the Antarctic peninsula, like a giant spine, and Bland and Watson had to climb up onto that plateau and get down off it again to reach the coast, where Tooluka would be waiting for them. The only person to have ever achieved that was Sir Wally Herbert in 1957. Bland and Watson knew they would face frequent white-outs and cloud, and that getting down from the plateau involved considerable difficulty. Either side of the plateau there are large drops with crevasses.

Betts set out his position in the Antarctic Non-Government Activity News on 25 October 2000, two months before Bland and Watson were due to leave. He predicted that the two adventurers faced ‘challenging conditions and a tight timetable if they are to complete their proposed trek in the four weeks scheduled’.

Betts explained that on the plateau, at around 1800 metres above sea level, Bland and Watson would spend most of their time enveloped in cloud and that they would have to contend with frequent, long-lasting periods of poor visibility, white-out, strong winds and snow. Therefore they would rely heavily on satellite-derived information to determine their position as they travelled southwards. The US-operated global positioning system (GPS) could provide their location to within
twenty or even ten metres, which was a critical factor given some of the terrain along the route.

Betts wrote: ‘The plateau along which they will traverse ranges between two and ten kilometres in width, the wider areas being named, from north to south, the Detroit, Herbert, Foster and Forbidden Plateaus. Each plateau is connected to the other by very narrow, exposed ridges, two of which have been given the descriptive names ‘The Catwalk’ and ‘The Wall’, as they are less than 100 metres in width and have steep drops on either side. Navigation in the vicinity of those features will need to be precise, particularly if poor visibility prevails.

‘The western and eastern flanks of each of the plateau areas are also marked by steep drops and there are few places where land parties can travel between the plateau and sea level, although even those that exist do not offer straightforward routes. A long ridge runs from Foster Plateau down the Recluse Peninsula to Portal Point at the northern end of Charlotte Bay and, while not easy, it is the only known route that the pair can realistically use to descend to sea level in that area.’

None of this was news to Bland and Watson. Watson and Wallis had both emailed Betts details of the trip and its likely environmental impact. Bland and Watson were under no illusions about where they were heading and they had planned accordingly. This was the ice continent, full of glaciers and gaping, plunging crevasses, formed where the ice plates crack and split. Sometimes the fall down these crevasses appeared bottomless; at other times simply the distance from the top of a city skyscraper to the bottom. Sometimes they gaped as wide as a river mouth, at others they were only a metre across,
and concealed by falling snow. The unsuspecting climber, if not alert to the perils ahead, could easily step onto one of these snow bridges and suddenly find himself dropping into the abyss.

That was what happened 88 years before to Belgrave Ninnis, a young English officer accompanying Sir Douglas Mawson on the Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1912. The party was based at Cape Denison in Commonwealth Bay, and from there Mawson sent out six expeditionary groups. Mawson himself led one such group containing Ninnis and Swiss explorer Xavier Mertz. Heading eastwards from Cape Denison, Ninnis suddenly dropped into a crevasse with his sled and team of dogs, and most of the party’s provisions. Mawson moved gingerly to the edge of the crevasse, and looked down to see one of the dogs whimpering on an ice ledge 50 metres beneath him. But of Ninnis, the other dogs, or the food and equipment there was no sign. Ninnis had been swallowed by the crevasse. For hours Mawson and Mertz knelt beside the edge of the hole, yelling Ninnis’s name, but no reply ever came. He had disappeared without trace.

Once Mawson had abandoned hope for Ninnis, he read the burial service and set a return course for Commonwealth Bay. Rations were eeked out because so much food had been lost in the crevasse, and eventually he and Mertz reached the point where, to survive, they had to kill the Greenland sled dogs for meat. Mertz by now was rapidly deteriorating, though whether it was from the effects of prolonged exposure, or vitamin A poisoning caused by eating the dogs’ livers, has never been conclusively established. Eventually, after suffering fits, stomach problems, and with the skin peeling off his legs, he could endure no more. Mawson was left alone.
Somehow he kept going, though his hair and beard was falling out and his skin was ulcerating. At times he had to crawl because walking was too painful with the skin falling off his feet. Once he fell into a crevasse, hauled himself out with a rope, but then fell back in. Momentarily he pondered giving in and allowing himself to fall to his death at the bottom of the crevasse, but he feared he would not die outright and be left suffering. Again he summoned up his remaining reserves of willpower and energy, and pulled himself out of the crevasse. So exhausted was he by the effort that he blacked out and nearly froze in the snow.

On 29 January 1913, almost six weeks after Ninnis had died in the crevasse, Mawson came upon a cairn of snow covering a supply of food left by a search party out looking for him, and which had left the spot only hours earlier. The search party also left directions to a snow cave used as a staging post by the expedition. Blizzards kept him stuck in the cave for a week, but on 8 February he decided to make one final attempt to descend to the hut at Commonwealth Bay. Staggering in at half the bodyweight he had been when he started the expedition, he was met by six joyful members of the expedition who had been left behind to wait when the main party sailed back to Australia. They radioed for the ship to return to pick Mawson up, but the winds were too strong to allow the boat back to shore and Mawson was left to recuperate in Antarctica for another year.

The young and independent Commonwealth of Australia was only twelve years old, and it was looking for myths and legends to secure its identity. The Gallipoli campaign was still two years away. In returning safely to the hut at Commonwealth Bay after the death of Ninnis and Mertz, Mawson
provided a legend of endurance and an inspiration to future Australian explorers. Australia was a pioneering country, built on endurance, and it had a new pioneering hero. Now that Australians had settled their own continent and charted all its coasts and valleys, the country’s explorers were drawn to the last great undiscovered realm on earth – Antarctica. It exercised an obsessive hold on those wishing to test their own powers of endurance.

Peter Bland was one of those. Since his early teens he proudly displayed Mawson’s classic tome on Antarctica, *Home of the Blizzards*, on his bedroom bookshelf. His father John, a Victorian County Court judge, kept repeating to him the story of Mawson’s return to Commonwealth Bay as an inspiring example of persistence.

His father, an iron-willed character who impressed determination upon his three children, had died in 1999, but Bland still found himself having to live up to his dead father’s expectations; still having to prove to him that he was a worthy son. When his father was still alive they had been like the old and the young bull, locking horns on how the farm outside Melbourne should be run, neither giving an inch.

Nor did Bland give an inch when the pleas and advice came in late 2000 not to go to Antarctica with Watson. The pair of them had been planning this for months, and he did not intend to lose face at this late stage because of the loss of his principal sponsor. He listened to the words of care and caution from those around him, like Betts, his mother, Jane, and wife, Julia, but in the end he chose to disregard their warnings. He had spent $45,000 chartering the yacht, and too much preparation had already gone into the trip to bail out now. And, anyway, as a statement of personal belief, he used to say to
friends: ‘What’s the point of being alive if you don’t live?’

His mother agonised about him losing his life. She had done all she could to dissuade him from going. She had already lost a baby daughter, Jennifer, through a cot death and Peter, the youngest of her three children, had twice had major heart surgery. In 1998, a year after that second lot of heart surgery, he was trekking to the North Magnetic Pole. No-one had ever been able to tell him what to do, though his father had tried.

Jane Bland had managed to hang on to her sanity after losing Jennifer, but questioned her ability to withstand the loss of a second child. She knew that emotional arguments would carry no weight with her son, so she tried to use more rational ones: that he had a responsibility to his job as marketing manager of the Multiple Sclerosis Society in Melbourne; he was needed to manage the family’s 340-hectare property north of Melbourne; and he was no longer young, carefree and single, but married, with a young daughter, and he had a financial responsibility to his daughter and to his wife, Julia. She was proud of his achievements, but afraid of his fearlessness and the fact that he had no sense of his own mortality. ‘Pete cannot abide negative energy. He has a real dislike of it. He doesn’t want other people’s doubts to contaminate him. It’s rather like having a dream and wanting to avoid other people destroying it or pulling it down.’ Despite his mother’s urgings, Peter hadn’t even made a will before leaving. He couldn’t see why people kept saying how dangerous it was; as far as he was concerned, you were just as likely to be knocked over by a car crossing the road in Melbourne.

‘I listened when they said I was mad to go to Antarctica, but I backed my own judgement. I had timed the trip for what
would be a quiet time for the MS Society, and I had put a
good team around me to manage the business in my absence.
My mother’s arguments had no emotional impact on me. I’d
met my obligations to my wife. The farm was being managed
responsibly and I’d secured a worker to look after it while I
was away. I refused to regard the farm as a yoke around my
neck. Whether Julia accepted what I was doing, or it was
something she admired, I don’t know.’

Julia, with a ten-month-old daughter, Olivia, and an unreno-
vated, uncompleted home, was not totally happy about her
husband going off on another of his adventures but she knew
the man she had married back in 1997. Their first date had
been a six-hour horseback ride up Mount Macedon in the
rain. The fact that he was unusual was part of his attraction,
as well as his geniality, his limitless self-confidence, which
some people took as cockiness, and his bright blue eyes. She
knew Pete was driven to achieve, and he wouldn’t take no for
an answer. The one thing she’d asked him was to make sure
the trip didn’t leave them up to their necks in debt again,
which had happened after his 1998 trip, when he became
the first Australian to reach the North Magnetic Pole. It was
90 years after Mawson had become the first Australian to the
South Magnetic Pole in 1908.

It now looked, with his primary sponsor withdrawing their
sponsorship only two weeks before the start of the trip, as if
the very thing that Julia feared most – crippling financial debt
– might happen. Her husband shared the concern and went
into action to save the expedition. What he could offer any
potential sponsor was the publicity stemming from the trip,
and the documentary he planned to make. A month earlier
he had attended the Melbourne wedding of his friend Stephen
Buxton, son of property developer Michael Buxton. A passionate yachtsman, Michael Buxton had expressed keen interest in the proposed trip to Antarctica and Bland remembered that as he desperately sought a new financial backer, with the trip due to begin in little more than a week. Stephen Buxton spoke to his father, who invited Bland to a Christmas barbecue at which he could talk about the project. When he arrived, Bland was greeted by Michael and his brother, Andrew, and by Paul McDonald, general manager of their development company, MAB. Michael Buxton told Bland: ‘You’ve got ten minutes. Shoot.’ ‘Now, have I got a deal for you,’ said Bland, smiling cheekily and winding up for his full bells and whistles marketing spiel. By the end of the ten minutes he had won a promise of $30,000 from the Buxtons. Bland gave an undertaking that if he did not have a documentary of the journey completed within twelve months he would pay back half the sponsorship. As soon as he left the barbecue he went into action to have the MAB logo of the Buxtons’ company attached to all of his Antarctic gear.

With the budget now cut by $30,000, he set about the final arrangements, trying to reduce costs where he could. He and Watson bought a cheaper kayak than they had planned, and borrowed a second one from Watson’s friend Eric Phillips, who had previously used the craft to cross Greenland. They only picked up the new kayak the day before they were due to leave Melbourne for Buenos Aires, en route to Ushuaia, at the southernmost tip of South America.

The last day in Melbourne was chaotic, checking they had everything, making last-minute arrangements and packing the two kayaks with equipment. Bland and Watson had done a sponsorship deal with Qantas, giving them a reduction on
their return air fares to Buenos Aires, and $1000-worth of excess baggage on the flight out. It didn’t strike them until the eve of departure, when they were packing the kayaks, that they would have so much equipment in the boats that they would far exceed their excess weight allowance.

They woke at 6 am for the 8 am Melbourne to Sydney domestic flight which would give them the connection to Buenos Aires. It was a 30-minute car ride from the farm to Tullamarine, and they arrived about 45 minutes before the flight departure. The other four team members, who were going to sail on the support boat, Tooluka, while Watson and Bland made their crossing of the peninsula, were there to meet them, excited at the prospect of the trip and only slightly concerned at Bland and Watson’s late arrival at the airport. That concern mounted to alarm when the pair of adventurers tried to check in the kayaks. The Qantas staff said they were way over weight, and the kayaks would have to travel separately as freight. Bland and Watson were told to take the kayaks over to the freight terminal.

Checking their watches, they rushed to the lift to take them down to ground level, where they hitched a ride in a ute to the freight office. Bland signed a blank cheque to pay for the boats to be shipped, and asked Qantas to fill the cheque in when they knew how much the freight would be. (It turned out to be $2700.)

By now, the Sydney flight was being called, and the other four members made their way inside the aircraft and stowed their bags in the overhead lockers. Then they sat anxiously counting the minutes before the cabin doors closed and the flight lifted off to Sydney. The stewards were just making their final preparations for take-off when Bland and Watson
The aircraft climbed and then set a course north for Sydney. As it did so, Bland momentarily stopped breathing. He’d left his passport in his jacket in the security x-ray machine at Tullamarine. Now what? Not one to panic, he called the steward, explaining the situation, and how the six of them had a Qantas flight to Buenos Aires to catch in three hours’ time. The steward, apparently used to such inflight crises, disappeared into the cockpit to ask the pilot to phone back to Tullamarine and ask the Qantas staff there to see if they could find the jacket and passport. The call came back from Tullamarine: the passport had been found by the security staff, and Qantas would send it on the next flight up to Sydney.

The party, comprising Bland, Jay Watson and his schoolteacher brother Andy, bushwalker and Esso geologist Nigel Collins, artist and boxer-short designer Mitchell McAuley, and geographer and adventurer John Kelsall, gave a collective sigh of relief. They were to be joined in South America by young Melbourne businesswoman Philippa Devine, who was at that moment completing the Murray Marathon, paddling the 404 kilometres from Yarrawonga to Swan Hill in a two-woman kayak. Each of the five had paid $8000 to sail on Tooluka in Antarctica, and they hadn’t expected such drama so early in the trip – long before they reached the four-metre swell going round Cape Horn on their way to Antarctica, let alone seen icebergs the size of Manhattan skyscrapers. McAuley, in particular, felt it was an ominous start. Nothing had gone right so far – the original sponsorship had fallen through; the business with the kayaks at the airport; and now the passport being left behind.
Everything seemed to be in a rush. But McAuley was impressed with how calm and joking Bland was through all the problems. The dramas weren’t yet over. As Collins, McAuley, Kelsall and Andy and Jay Watson boarded the plane for Buenos Aires, the passport had still not arrived from Melbourne. Bland made plans to meet the others in Ushuaia as he knew the Sydney–Buenos Aires flights were booked out, and it was unlikely he would reach the Argentinian capital before they headed south. But fifteen minutes before departure time the passport appeared. Never one to miss an opportunity for dramatic video footage of the trip, he filmed the steward running up to the gate with the passport. The steward gestured to Bland to start running, and Bland made it just as the cabin doors were about to close. They were off.

It was a time for reflection and sizing up the other party members. McAuley feels the artist’s need to be alone. He wondered how he would react to being so close to his fellow passengers over the next month. He was something of a reluctant adventurer, having been drawn to Antarctica by artistic curiosity and reports of its extraordinary shapes and colours. He had enlisted for the trip to fill canvases rather than undertake any great polar heroics, and because Andy Watson was his best friend and had suggested he come along.

Watson, a 37-year-old art teacher at Melbourne Grammar School, was going because he’d always been attracted to Antarctica and the legends of Mawson, Scott and Shackleton. Shackleton’s London advertisement for men to join him on his trip to Antarctica in 1914 had said: ‘Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success.’ Watson was
going not because of an advertisement, but because of his closeness to his brother and his desire to see the white continent. He had even thought of joining Jay and Pete on their trans-Antarctic peninsula trip, but he had suffered in the past from pericarditis, an inflammation of the sac around the heart, and he thought it unwise to put his health to such a severe test. He had no inkling that the trip would eventually test his health to the most extreme limit.

While still a teacher at Camberwell Grammar School, Watson had met Kelsall on a school sea-kayaking trip at Mallacoota, in south-eastern Victoria. Kelsall, who had been leading the trip, impressed Watson and it was decided he should be invited to join the crew on board Tooluka. Kelsall, at 40, was the most experienced member of the support crew, with trekking, kayaking and climbing experience in the Himalayas and South America. ‘The landscape is what attracts me to adventure,’ he said. ‘That, and being in outrageous places with good friends.’ Kelsall in turn asked his friend Collins, a 37-year-old geologist with Esso, who had done some cross-country skiing and climbing in Nepal and the Andes. Collins had always been interested in the early Antarctic explorers, and he had read about Mawson and Shackleton when he was a child. ‘It was the mystique of the place,’ he said. ‘I knew there would be some risk, but I wouldn’t say I was prepared for what eventually happened.’

The new travelling companions chatted through the fourteen-hour flight to Buenos Aires, asking Bland and Watson what they could expect in Antarctica. What would it be like, they asked anxiously. ‘Big and white,’ they were told by the two Antarctic adventurers, with their shared sense of stoic understatement. What would it be like going round
the Horn? Collins was nervous, having heard they were the roughest seas in the world. McAuley was soon to experience them, with racking intensity.

Back on the Murray River the very same questions were filling Devine’s mind as she paddled along the tranquil stretches of the Murray with her race partner, Justine Tonner-Joyce, the 1997 world lightweight rowing pairs champion. After school at Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School in Melbourne, Devine, 28, had been increasingly attracted to the world of outdoor activity – rowing, rock climbing, bush walking, sea kayaking and cross country skiing. While her day job involved managing the risks of modern business with accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, her out-of-hours recreation involved managing the risks of outdoor adventure. She, too, had been captivated by the early tales of Antarctic exploration, and the mirror it held up to human character and national conditioning. She’d always been fascinated by Britain’s Captain Robert Scott, in all his noble folly, marching his men to the South Pole and death in 1912.

And she’d noted quizzically, with the independence and self-confidence of a young woman of the twenty-first century, that polar exploration had always been presented as ‘secret men’s business’. When the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen retired from polar discovery his fellow countryman Fridtjof Nansen, who was the first man to cross the Greenland Icepack in 1888, offered this tribute: ‘Your work is man’s work, sprung out of a man’s will.’ When Sir Wally Herbert wrote his account of the crossing of Antarctica he called it A World of Men.

Devine was conscious that a certain macho ethic permeated the history and literature of Antarctic exploration, born
of a belief that men were the enduring sex. She disputed the notion. The daughter of a champion swimmer, endurance had always been her game. At fifteen she had participated in a 24-hour swimathon. ‘I kept plodding away while the older guys stopped for breaks and pies. I’m competitive. My philosophy is that women are better suited to endurance physiologically. They can endure for a longer time at a slower pace. The only reason they don’t get involved is because they drop out to have kids.’

Devine also believed social conditioning stopped women engaging in adventure activities. ‘It goes back to what you’re encouraged to do at school. Many girls do things like sport for social reasons, rather than the challenge. When I told women friends I was going to Antarctica they said they didn’t know how I could go without a shower for two days. They thought it would be uncomfortable and dirty. I think men are more inclined to take risks, while women concentrate on safety and comfort.’

In the endless hours Devine had spent paddling up the Murray, she gave much thought to the risk she had taken in agreeing to go on the trip. In mid-December, about two weeks before the party was due to leave, she had been rung by Kelsall, whom she had met in 1997 on a rafting trip to the Franklin River in Tasmania. He had been trip leader, and they had become friends. Someone else had pulled out of the Antarctic trip at the last moment, and she had an hour to make up her mind whether she wanted to go. She had heard about Bland, and was intrigued to know how he managed to balance adventure with his corporate role. So, holding her breath, she said yes, knowing she couldn’t die wondering what she had missed.

She had been planning to take holidays in January, anyway,
and had contemplated going skiing in Canada, or climbing in Chile. Antarctica had always been somewhere she wanted to visit. But, meandering along the Murray under the giant gum trees, she thought to herself, ‘What if I die down there? What if I can’t handle the seas in Drake Passage, between the Horn and Antarctica?’ It comforted her to know the boat’s 50-year-old skipper, Roger Wallis, was so experienced. She wondered what the other men on the trip would think of a woman coming along. Would they expect her to bring her hair dryer?

Back on the Qantas Buenos Aires flight, while the rest of the party dropped in and out of sleep, Bland caught up with all the financial housekeeping he had put off in the mad scramble of the last month in Melbourne. He dealt with his in-tray of unfinished business from work, the farm, sponsors and public speaking, wrote cheques for all the unpaid bills and put them in an envelope to post to Julia from Ushuaia.

From Buenos Aires they caught a connecting flight down to Ushuaia, and approaching the airport in clear, bright late-afternoon light they could see the town ringed by mountains. For Bland, the sight triggered a release of adrenaline: ‘You knew you were going somewhere awesome. It looked rugged, and tough. Everyone sensed they were in for a real adventure.’

But the party weren’t going anywhere. At the airport freight terminal there was no sign of the kayaks. They took the taxi to their hotel, the Hotel America, and Bland got on the phone to call Qantas in Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland (where the flight had stopped briefly) and Buenos Aires to see where the kayaks were. He discovered they were in Auckland. As one of life’s hyperactive doers, he steeled himself for a long, inactive wait for the kayaks’ arrival. In other circumstances the boats’ non-arrival could have given the party the chance to rest up
South America and the Antarctic peninsula
before a trek that was to test their powers of physical and emotional endurance, but they couldn’t afford the luxury of a delay. It was costing about $1000 a day to charter Tooluka, and every day it sat idle in Ushuaia Harbour, another $1000 was flushed into the South Atlantic. On top of the financial considerations, Tooluka’s paying passengers had limited leave, and had to be back in Australia by a set date. Andy Watson had to be back at Melbourne Grammar School by the end of the summer vacation. He had become engaged to Camilla Cuming, another art teacher, just before leaving for Antarctica. Also, Bland and Watson had only chartered the yacht from Wallis until early February. After that Wallis had agreed to pick up the New Zealanders engaged on the kayak paddle along the Antarctic coast. The pair were working to a tight deadline, and each day they lost waiting in Ushuaia increased the pressure on them to complete the rest of the trip on time and with no further mishaps. They were not even yet in Antarctica, but the clock was ticking down.

Bland was fuming that he had left the transport of the kayaks to the last minute, putting them on the plane as excess luggage rather than air-freighting them a month ahead. He blamed himself for the delay, and felt guilty about keeping everyone waiting. Using the Telstra satellite phone intended for use in Antarctica, he rang everyone he could to try to speed up the passage of the kayaks to Ushuaia. At the airport he made contact with Alejandro, the manager of Antarctic Freight, and sought his help. ‘I need them now,’ said Bland. ‘Mañana, mañana,’ replied Alejandro, getting on the phone to the Qantas manager in Buenos Aires, Carlos Moya.

But the kayaks didn’t turn up the next day, or the day after that.
Two days later, on 1 January, Bland discovered they had finally reached Buenos Aires international terminal, but customs wouldn’t release them to the domestic terminal for the flight down to Ushuaia. He kept hoping, and each day he went down to the airport to meet the three incoming flights in the hope of seeing the kayaks being unloaded from the cargo hold.

‘We kept telling the customs people that every day we sit here is costing us $1000 for the charter of the boat. People were on annual leave, and they didn’t want to be sitting in Argentina. The later we left, and the deeper into the Antarctic summer, the greater the risk of the ice breaking up, making the journey more treacherous. We should really have done the trip in November, but I had promised Julia I would be home at Christmas, and the MS Society had a big fund-raising day in early December that I needed to attend.’

Devine arrived on 31 December. ‘Peter was friendly, but distracted and slightly aloof. He clearly had other things on his mind. He and Jay were concerned about the kayaks.’ However, McAuley, cast as the artist-comedian of the party, did his best to lighten the mood. ‘If ever there was an anti-Antarctic explorer, it was Mitch,’ said Devine. ‘He’s got enough of a sense of humour not to be the macho Antarctic man. Some people think Antarctica is a very serious business, and they need to endure; Mitch would make a joke about it. There was always laughter. Perhaps it was people trying to make light of adversity.’

A rivalry had developed with the New Zealand party who were planning to kayak along the coast of the Antarctic peninsula, claiming another ‘first’. McAuley decided to make his own statement about that. He headed for the local yacht club and asked if he could borrow their lawnmower for a
while. He then headed for the pier where Tooluka and the New Zealanders were preparing for their respective trips. To roars of laughter from Tooluka’s crew, he declared: ‘I am going to make history by leading the world’s first expedition to mow Antarctica.’

Devine was forming her first impressions of the group: ‘Peter came across as a very strong personality. I got the feeling that a lot of it was Peter testing himself, and seeing if he was up to every challenge. Jay was incredibly quiet, and a dreamer. John lacked material ambition, and everything seemed secondary to his adventures; he was very confident in the outdoor world. Nigel was the practical doer; he’d give anything a go. Andy had always seen Jay as his little brother, and this trip was a kind of role reversal. He wanted to learn about his brother. Roger had this extraordinary humility and he was a dreamer, like Jay. If he got an idea to do something, he’d do it. There wasn’t a macho thing at all. Peter was probably the most blokey. Jay and Andy didn’t come across that way, and Nigel and John are both gentle men. It was an incredibly easy group to get along with.’

The dynamic of the group worked – which was vital to their handling of the later crisis. The days passed and finally on 5 January, seven days late, the kayaks arrived on the 10.30 am flight from Buenos Aires. Bland went to the customs shed and was told there was an irregularity in the accompanying forms. After negotiating for the rest of the morning, customs finally released the two boats, which were taken to the harbour and loaded straight onto Tooluka, a steel-hulled 47-footer especially designed for sailing in Antarctica.

Wallis had now made these Antarctic charters his living. Brought up at Lakes Entrance, in south-east Victoria, he had
been sailing since he was eleven, and a commercial fisherman for 22 years, both for the domestic market and the export market to Japan. The high seas were in his blood and during his days as a fisherman he dreamed of fulfilling four goals – crossing the Southern Ocean, sailing round the Horn, traveling up the Patagonian channels on Chile’s western seaboard and visiting Antarctica. He first sailed to Antarctica in November 1997 on Parmelia, a 46-footer that had done several Sydney to Hobart races and was better suited to ocean racing than nosing through the icebergs in Antarctica. But he was instantly attracted to the frozen continent. ‘It was the grandeur and cleanliness, and because it was so hard to get there, there’s a sense of achievement about being there. Just getting there is a challenge because the sailing is difficult all the time and you have to think constantly about the risks and the fact that the cold can kill you. You either love it or hate it and if you love it, you’re passionate about it.’

They were soon heading south with their fears of the impending journey through Drake Passage, and taking in the vast Argentinian estancias, or ranches, sloping down to the coast. They spent the night at the Chilean naval town of Puerto Williams, drinking in the sunken boat which served as the yachts’ bar, and headed off next morning towards Cape Horn.

By Wallis’s reckoning, these were moderate to rough seas, with waves of five to six metres. Wallis had seen ten to twelve metre waves in these waters. ‘It can be horrendously rough, but ours was just normal rough.’ Devine had imagined pitching up and down the giant waves, but it was the lurching she disliked. Lying in her bunk below deck she would hear the boom crashing from side to side. She felt surprisingly good, but McAuley was suffering. He had taken all kinds of
sea-sickness medication, but none of it seemed to work. Prostrate in his lower deck bunk, the nausea made him want to die. He would vomit into the bucket, and Jay or Andy Watson, the two ministering angels, would quietly remove it and tip the contents overboard. All he could feel was the rolling of the waves and the heaving of his stomach. He vowed that he would never set foot on the boat again once they reached Antarctica. He didn’t care what it cost – chartering a flight out or joining up with one of the cruise ships – he was not going back on that pitching, tossing boat. His sense of humour had sunk in the Southern Ocean. The fact that Wallis considered it one of the calmer passages to Antarctica he had experienced did not help McAuley.

Andy Watson had a more insidious problem, which was to become critical later in the expedition. He had come down with flu symptoms and was taking antibiotics as the outside temperature hovered around zero. Stoicism runs deep in the Watson family, as it does with the Blands, and he thought little of the fact that in the past he had suffered from pericarditis. He made light of the pains in his chest as he took his place on the two-hourly watches at the helm of Tooluka as it headed south towards the Argentinian military base of Esperanza, on the westernmost tip of the Antarctic peninsula, which is also home to the world’s largest colony of Adelie penguins. The temperature grew colder and colder, and on the fourth day out from Ushuaia they saw humpback whales and icebergs all round them. The icebergs were the size of whole apartment blocks, and Tooluka nosed carefully past them. She was a strong boat, but no ice-breaker.

A day later the sight of Esperanza gave Bland a thrill of anticipation: ‘The snow gave it a pristine white covering,
disturbed by the black-and-white figures of thousands and thousands of Adelie penguins. This was Antarctica, what I’d worked and planned for over the past eighteen months. I thought, hey, we’re here, we can see all the country, the mountains, the valley and the magnificent Detroit Plateau, and we’re going to be the first people to cross it unsupported.’

The officer in charge of the base was expecting Tooluka and when Bland called in on the radio he welcomed him warmly in Spanish: ‘Bienvenido, bienvenido.’ Bland and Jay Watson put all their equipment in the Zodiac dinghy that would take them the final 80 metres into the jetty and said goodbye to the rest of the party, who were staying on board Tooluka with Wallis. They paddled ashore past small icebergs – some the size of an Australian family room – all covered with penguins.

The Argentinian military extended their welcome to a lunch of soup, risotto and grape juice, and even an offer to Bland and Watson to use the base’s email connection. The rest of the day was spent in a shed by the wharf put at their disposal by the military, running through all the final details for the next day’s departure.

Watson had been mainly responsible for preparing their route, borrowing from Sir Wally Herbert’s journey in 1957. He had been in email contact with Herbert before the journey and heeded his advice. There was little room for error, as the trip that they had planned to complete in 28 days now had to be finished in 23 days because of the wait for the kayaks in Ushuaia.

If Wallis had any worries about the trip, it was the timing. ‘I had no doubts about them being able to do it because I knew their capacities, but I reflected later that the time frame was too limited. What they were going to do was very
dependent on the weather. It would have helped if they had a buffer of another couple of weeks so that they didn’t have to travel in bad weather.’

This was the plan: climb up from Esperanza over the Tabarin Peninsula and down the other side, through the Mondor Glacier to Duse Bay. From there the intention was to walk westwards over the sea ice to Pitt Point, on the Antarctic mainland. This journey over the ice was what Herbert used to call ‘the Milk Run’ – suggesting a humdrum degree of ease that Bland and Watson were not about to encounter. From Pitt Point they would climb up the Victory Glacier onto the plateau. The last part of the trek would be the descent from the plateau to Charlotte Bay, where they would be picked up by Tooluka. What was actually to happen over the next 23 days did not vaguely match the plan.

Departure day, 11 January, dawned steely grey, with a light breeze and low visibility. Bland and Watson packed the kayaks, weighing around 80 kilos each, and began the climb out of town over rocky ground with a light covering of snow. The going was hard, as the kayaks kept catching on the rocks, and the day became no easier. In the afternoon visibility dropped to 50 metres, and the pair walked for five hours in a white-out, up and over Mount Carrel. Bland was fighting inner thoughts telling him: ‘I can’t see anything, and I’m hurting.’ By the end of the day they had travelled sixteen kilometres, and they were dog-tired.

Sore from the previous day’s hike, Bland woke the next morning and unzipped the tent to discover a brilliant blue sky, and a view stretching down to Duse Bay, where they planned to get onto the sea ice. The air was so crisp it seemed he was taking the first breath on planet Earth. His breath was freezing
in the morning air, and his beard was stiff with ice, but he felt elated. If the physical and emotional challenge of Antarctica is one half of its magnetic appeal, the other is its exhilarating beauty. He felt vindicated. Even though he and Watson had been walking blind for five hours the previous afternoon, their GPS, resembling a large mobile phone, had worked well and they were now situated exactly where they were supposed to be. The equipment had worked and they were in good shape. ‘I felt fantastic – if stiff from the previous day’s climb – and convinced that I’d done the right thing in coming, for all the hassles and the wait for the kayaks at Ushuaia. My mother and wife didn’t want me to be here, but now we’d arrived it felt right.’

The equipment had stood up to the first night, and they had slept well in their sleeping bags despite an outside temperature of minus ten degrees Celsius. The tent, too, had withstood the previous night’s snowfall. And the food was to their liking: while they were forced to wait in Ushuaia for the kayaks, they had filled in time making up individual servings of porridge mixed with sultanas, sugar and milk powder and, now, eating their first breakfast of the trip, they liked what they tasted.

Wanting to make the most of the fine weather and the clear views, they set off down the Mondor Glacier towards Duse Bay, hoping there would be an easy descent. They had been travelling for twenty minutes when they realised that a sheer 40-metre drop lay between them and the bay, and they would have to find an alternative route down.

The day was so perfect and the landscape so benign that it was hard to contemplate danger and the crevasses which had lain in wait to trap visiting Antarctic explorers for the best part of 100 years. In 1912 Charles Laseron, an Australian
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zoologist accompanying Mawson’s expedition to Antarctica, quickly learned the perils of the crevasse. He wrote: ‘In places they must be hundreds, if not thousands of feet deep. They are very seldom open, but generally covered with a lid of ice, which may be quite solid or only an inch or so thick, and so rotten that it breaks with the slightest weight. Looking into them, all that one can see are two vertical walls going down into azure nothingness. Sometimes the walls consist of bare ice; sometimes they are coated with ice crystals or stalactites, with an occasional cornice or ledge of snow. They are the nightmare of sledging, not so much on the hard glacial ice where they can be clearly discerned, but where new snowfields lie, as they are then often quite concealed and are very dangerous.’

Laseron was struck by the hostile beauty of the Antarctic plateau, over which Bland and Watson were now traversing. ‘It seemed so bleak, so absolutely desolated, so lifeless. Later, when sledging over its surface, these characters seemed to merge into a relentless, resentful and definite personality, which ever waited implacably for the single false step that would hand the intruder into its power. One had the impression of fighting, always fighting, a terrible unseen force.’

Just before the Mondor Glacier finally sloped down to meet the open water, Bland made the false step of which Laseron had warned. He and Watson were prodding ahead of them with a ski pole to check the firmness of the ground, but this time Bland’s prodding failed to reveal the subterranean chamber gaping beneath him. His right leg collapsed under him and, looking down, he saw a hole in the ice stretching for ever. He threw himself onto the sled to avoid falling further, and then hauled himself out of the crevasse. Antarctica had given him his first warning.
Having made the frozen edge they now prepared to launch the kayaks for the short paddle across open water to the start of the sea ice. Loaded to the gunwales with equipment, they nosed out through the icebergs, which clinked against the bows of the boats like ice in a gin and tonic. Having reached the ice floe, they walked briefly before setting camp for the night. At the agreed time of 8 pm they called Tooluka on their high-frequency radio to pass on details of their progress, weather conditions and position. The arrangement had been they would radio every second day, and the reception was loud and clear. For Bland, it was the perfect end to ten hours in paradise.

That night he got down to writing up his diary for the first two days, and his mind was brought back to that day’s fall down the crevasse. He wrote: ‘We should have been roped. Lucky!’

But Bland’s luck was fast running out.
Chapter Two

INTO THE ABYSS

Part of the attraction of Antarctica for Bland and Watson was becoming part of exploration history that had fascinated them since they could read. Australia had played a leading role in Antarctica all through the twentieth century, firstly through Mawson’s early explorations and then through Dr Phillip Law’s leadership of the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition from 1949. While Law focused more on scientific and technical research, Antarctica continued to exercise a magnetic hold over explorers seeking to prove themselves to the rest of the world or themselves. Death or madness was no deterrent. In his book The Ice, Christopher Pyne wrote: ‘It was as though the object of [Antarctic exploration] was not to struggle to advance a goal, but to discover a goal that would justify struggle.’
Bland and Watson had discovered that goal: they wanted to make Antarctic history by crossing the peninsula unassisted – without dogs, ponies, tractors or anything else but their own determination. Sir Wally Herbert had willingly passed on his knowledge to the pair, but he was irked by the tag ‘unassisted’ that they were publicly giving to their trip. ‘On the claim to being the “first people to cross the peninsula unsupported”, I should point out that in the 1950s we had to lay depots of food and fuel for two years before we were able to make our one-way (pioneering) journeys with the dogs from Hope Bay to the Recluse Peninsula.

‘We actually had two dog teams; but it is a general misconception that it is easier to travel by dog team than by manhauling. Dogs haul considerably more food (and heavier sledges) and, compared with a party of manhaulers, are invariably slower than the manhaulers across rough pack ice or on steep climbs. True, the weight is hauled by the dogs rather than by the men; but the physical effort of getting those dogs and the weight across the pack ice is generally much greater than that experienced by the manhaulers (we were burning 7500 calories between our winter camp and the North Pole in 1969 – compared with 5500 for the manhaulers in the Antarctic). Also, it is infinitely more dangerous coming down an icefall (of several thousands of feet) by dog sledge than with a lightweight manhaul sledge – I know because I have experienced both.’

Herbert could understand the concern shown by the Australian Antarctic Division’s Martin Betts at the growing numbers of non-scientific adventurers seeking glory and headlines in the southern wastes. ‘So many stunts these days are taken on by men (and women) with practically no experience
at all and precious little interest in the history or the environment. You can actually count on one hand the number who have done a single serious observation that has been a contribution to science or to our general knowledge of the polar world. The sad thing is, the general public knows so little about the polar world that they are easily impressed by the latest claim – the “unsupported, solo, blindfolded, vegetarian, one-legged” journey to one pole or the other.’

Herbert said that in 1957 he and his three companions never gave a thought to whether they were doing the crossing unsupported. ‘In those days we were the pioneers. All the bullshit about the so-called “unsupported” journeys came much later – after all the pioneering journeys had been done and the adventurers were desperately looking for ways of getting into the Guinness Book of Records. What then happened was that every adventurer became fired with the same ambition. But there were not enough “unsupported” firsts left to make – and so they started to twist the truth (certain of the fact that the public would not spot the con). For example: it became the standard ploy to claim to have made an “unsupported” journey to one pole or the other, totally ignoring the fact that any man or dog who was evacuated from the ice during the journey broke the definition of an “unsupported” journey. They had, in other words, the “support” of a search and rescue facility. In fact, arguably, even the very existence of a “search and rescue” facility (regardless of whether it was necessary to use it) broke that definition for the obvious reason that psychologically the party had support.’

Bland and Watson were not seeking to deceive anyone. What Bland the marketing man was doing was ramping up the hype surrounding his journey to attract the publicity
needed to secure sponsorship. From the time explorers first started planning trips to Antarctica in the nineteenth century, they had sought to maximise publicity to raise the necessary funds, often from national governments keen to derive prestige from a representative of their country becoming the first person to set foot on a particular part of Antarctica. The era of appealing to governments for backing was well past, and now Bland had to appeal to the commercial world for his financial support. To do that, he needed to trumpet some aspect of the trip to get his voice heard above all the other would-be adventurers seeking backing for their journeys. He had to combine his passion for visiting Antarctica with the commercial reality of sponsorship, and that meant spruiking his activities to the rest of the world. If that seemed like grandstanding to some others, for Bland it was a means to the end of fulfilling his dream. ‘It’s the squeaky wheel that gets the oil,’ he would say.

Watson was not comfortable with all the marketing hype, and happy to leave it, and the spotlight of public attention, to Bland. To Watson’s fellow travellers on the boat down it was clear that he was there because he loved Antarctica in all its frozen, desolate splendour. The beauty he saw in it was reflected in his photographs. He found a curious inner peace in the frozen wastes. He felt in his element in Antarctica, and his thought processes became sharper when confronting the challenges of nature. ‘I’m a lot more content when I’m on these trips,’ he said. ‘There are no distractions, no pressures; it’s simply you and the elements, and dealing with nature. I think you realise the insignificance of humans when compared with the power of nature. There’s an incredible satisfaction when you achieve something out of your comfort zone.’
Bland appreciated the peace and beauty of it, too, but it also threw out a challenge to that part of his personality that refused to accept no as the final answer to anything. There was nothing in life, including Antarctica, and the corporate sponsorship world, that could not be overcome with the necessary willpower and determination. It was one of his basic philosophies of life. In his motivational talks to business groups around Australia before and after the trip he was fond of repeating his hallmark belief: ‘No is not a knockback; it is feedback.’

In 1772 Captain James Cook gave feedback to future generations of Antarctic explorers when he sailed south in search of the great white land. He thought it existed, but doubted whether man would ever reach it because of the inhospitable nature of the climate and the seas. He made it to South Georgia, which he named after his sovereign, King George III. But he saw enough in Georgia, with its barren, snow-laden land, and encountered enough giant icebergs during the voyage to wonder whether man could survive in any frozen land to the south. ‘The risk one runs in exploring a coast in these unknown and icy seas is so very great, that I can be bold to say, that no man will ever venture farther than I have done and that the lands which may lie to the south will never be explored. Thick fogs, snow storms, intense cold and every other thing that can render navigation dangerous one has to encounter and these difficulties are greatly heightened by the inexpressible horrid aspect of the country, a country doomed by Nature never once to feel the warm of the sun’s rays, but to lie for ever buried under everlasting snow and ice.’

Cook was wrong to predict that no man would ever venture to the land that he believed lay to the south – the Antarctic
continent. It became the object of imperial pride for explorers from Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Norway, Sweden, Russia and the United States, all of whom wanted to raise their national flags in the uncharted land of the south and claim it as their own. The continent was first sighted on 26 January 1820 by the Russian explorer Thaddeus von Bellingshausen. In January 1840 the young French naval officer Dumont d’Urville crossed courses in the southern ocean with the American expedition led by Charles Wilkes.

The Australian colonies also showed great interest in whether an Antarctic continent existed, prompted partly by the commercial potential of the whaling and sealing industries in the southern oceans, and partly by the curiosity of scientists eager to understand the geology and meteorology of the south. In particular, they wanted to know how the weather of Antarctica impacted on the Australian climate. The first ever landing on the Antarctic continent is credited to a party led by H.J. Bull, a Norwegian whaler who had put down roots in Melbourne in 1888. In October 1894 Bull and Carsten Borchgrevink, another Norwegian migrant, set sail from Hobart on the _Antarctic_, and in January 1895 a party of eight men from the ship landed in Robertson Bay, near Cape Adare.

The International Geographic Congress declared that Australia’s year of Federation, 1901, would be ‘Antarctica Year’. It was the signal for the start of the continent’s ‘heroic age’ of exploration. There had already been a Belgian expedition in 1897–1899 whose members included the Norwegian Roald Amundsen, who was to beat Scott to the South Pole by a month in December 1911. The Belgian boat explored the west coast of the Antarctic peninsula and was forced to winter in
the Bellingshausen Sea. Pyne recorded that: ‘During the Belgica’s long winter imprisonment, nearly everyone suffered anemia, lethargy, acute depression or paranoia; there was one death from a heart attack, and two men went mad.’

None of this was ever a deterrent to Bland, who had always been captivated by the pioneering spirit of Sir Douglas Mawson, who first visited Antarctica as physicist on Sir Ernest Shackleton’s British expedition from 1907 to 1909, and returned in 1911 leading the fated Australasian Antarctic Expedition on which Mertz and Ninnis were to die. Shackleton was to return in 1914 for the British Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition on the aptly named Endurance. How Endurance became trapped in the ice for many months, and Shackleton sailed for help to South Georgia, eventually saving all his men, has become one of the legends of Antarctic survival.

The explorers were competing to chart the fifth largest continent in the world, encompassing an area twice the size of Australia with an average ice cover 3000 metres in depth. A summer of almost unending daylight is succeeded by a winter of intense cold, severe storms and darkness. Even the penguins and seals migrate in winter. When Captain Scott arrived in 1901 with his first British expedition, the combination of isolation and geographic and climatic desolation caused him to reflect: ‘Oh, God, what an awful place. Could anything be more terrible than this silent, wind-swept immensity?’

Scott was not one of Bland’s heroes. ‘I never held him to be a heroic Antarctic explorer. Because of my family upbringing and Dad’s egalitarian views I grew up very anti-class, and it always struck me Scott was an English aristocrat doing it a
particular way. He came from a strict military background with a stiff upper lip tradition. That was the way gentlemen conducted themselves. My reading of Scott is that they knew that if they pushed on to the pole on that final journey, they would die. They should have stopped four days earlier, and that would have saved them eight days, and might have kept them all alive.’ He saw Scott as a classic example of ‘summit fever’ – where the climber is driven to reach the peak regardless of the difficulties encountered or the likelihood of him succeeding.

Bland had more admiration for Shackleton, even though it was qualified. ‘I admired his determination, tenacity and humility. He was a great leader, and he never lost one of his men but, having said that, he achieved none of his goals.’ He was remembered primarily for that extraordinary feat of survival in 1915 when *Endurance* was crushed in the ice. He eventually led all his men to safety, but it was a glorious failure more than a success.

Mawson was the one for whom Bland felt unqualified admiration. The Australian was in Antarctica predominantly for scientific research, rather than personal aggrandisement, and he pursued his research goals with determination and purpose.

That third day out from Esperanza, Bland and Watson were about to gain some insight into Scott’s Antarctic despair. But, unlike Scott, neither was given to literary introspection. It was as though both had left the case labelled ‘Emotions’ behind at Tullamarine airport. They were already hauling heavy sleds, and taking their emotions along meant excess baggage. They did experience certain emotions, like mutual trust and
friendship, but they were expressed internally. Outwardly, neither revealed the emotional companions you might have expected on such a trek – fear, anxiety, frustration, desperation or even blind panic. They had a job to do, and they meant to do it in a businesslike way.

You could even say adventure was their business. Bland had been flirting with risk since he walked up through South America when he was 23. He sailed a yacht across the Atlantic with Watson in 1994, and then advanced to the business of polar exploration. Watson sailed to Antarctica in 1995, while Bland went to the South Magnetic Pole in 1996 and the North Magnetic Pole in 1998, thus becoming the first Australian to reach both magnetic poles. Though he initially had a job with the stock and station firm Elders, and later with the MS Society in Melbourne, he kept being tugged by the call of the wild, and by challenges that grew exponentially.

Bland considered Watson, a friend since schooldays at Melbourne Grammar, the quintessential Australian quiet achiever. He was the strong, silent type, a great mate and always reliable, but gave little away about what was going on inside his head. Bland had always had external confidence and bluster and came across as the front man in the pair, while Watson quietly and effectively went about his business. Watson didn’t seek to be the centre of attention – he was happy for Bland to occupy that role. ‘Pete’s willing to ask anyone anything, whereas I’d cringe at some of that stuff. His attitude is, “If you don’t ask, you don’t get.” Sometimes I wish I had that ability to front anybody, but I manage on my abilities, rather than my talk.’

Bland might talk the talk, but he was equally a man of action, eternally restless. Watson had grown used to the invitations to
Bland’s farm. ‘It’s very hard to relax. You know every time you go up there he’ll have you rounding up sheep, or hay-baling. But he certainly draws you in with his enthusiasm.’

Opposites they might be, but Bland and Watson were great friends whose belief and trust in each other had been forged by shared adventures. Before the trip started the pair had talked of what would happen if one of them died. They had agreed to leave the body behind. Each knew instinctively he could stake his life on the other, but it never seriously occurred to Bland that within weeks he would have to do literally that.

Bland had married Julia Knight, the daughter of two Melbourne lawyers, in 1997, but Watson, who was considered a ‘good catch’, had defied the efforts of a number of young women to tie him down. Driven by wanderlust, he felt trapped if he stayed in one place for any length of time. He acquired the taste for adventure when he and Bland went to Western Australia for a windsurfing holiday in 1993. When Bland flew home to Melbourne, Watson bought a motorbike and rode round the coast of WA, through Margaret River, Albany and Esperance, before hitching a ride on a horse float across the Nullarbor to Adelaide. From there he rode to Melbourne. Before that he had tried out graphic art and horticulture, but the easy-riding motorbike trip across Australia had given him a sense of freedom and pointed him in the direction of a new career as an adventurer.

There were pointers to adventure in the family genes. His father, Clive, a wool-broker turned sales consultant, had driven round Australia in an old VW Beetle in his youth. His mother, Wendy, a nurse, had set off to walk across England in 1998, but had had to break off the journey because of her husband’s
ill-health in Melbourne. He died of a heart attack that same year.

According to older brother Andy, the Watson family had sometimes worried about Jay, wondering where his niche in life lay. ‘He didn't seem to have any direction in life. But from the moment he put his name down for his first trip to Antarctica in 1995 he seemed to find the direction. Photography on the trips gave him an expression for his artistic talents.’

Destiny had intervened in Watson's life one day in 1994, when he was listening to a radio interview with Don McIntyre, the Sydney yachtsman and adventurer who had competed in the single-handed round-the-world yacht race the year before. McIntyre and his wife Margie were seeking to follow in the footsteps of Mawson and spend a year in a hut at Commonwealth Bay. McIntyre told the interviewer that he was still looking for one crew member to sail his boat, *Spirit of Sydney*, down to Antarctica and then help to build the hut before heading back to Sydney. Watson made contact, and McIntyre took him on board.

Sailing down to Antarctica on another trip on *Spirit of Sydney* in 1997 Watson met Roger Wallis, the Victorian fisherman turned adventurer who was following his own Antarctic dreams. As soon as that trip was over, Wallis started planning for another later in 1997, on his boat *Parmelia*. Watson accompanied him on the voyage from Australia to Cape Horn, Antarctica and the Chilean channels, and again in 1999 on his new boat *Tooluka*. That journey took them from Antarctica to South Georgia Island, which Watson and three others traversed, taking 29 days and in the process crossing Shackleton’s Gap, whilst Wallis and the rest of the crew manned the support vessel. It was here that Shackleton had
climbed in 1915 to reach help to launch a rescue mission to save his stranded crew members on Elephant Island, off the Antarctic coast.

One of the areas of Antarctica Watson had not explored was the peninsula plateau, described by Herbert in his book *A World of Men*. Sailing along the shores of the peninsula he had often seen the plateau shrouded in cloud, withholding its mysteries. Watson had been fascinated by Herbert’s expeditions and the misadventures of Swedish explorer Otto Nordenskjold, whose boat was crushed by the ice in the Weddell Sea, to the north of the peninsula, in 1902. Nordenskjold and four other men had camped on one of the islands for several months. The challenges encountered by those men left their mark on Watson, and when he returned home from South Georgia Island with Wallis in February 2000 he needed little persuasion when Bland suggested a trip to the peninsula. The only remaining questions were what it should be, and how best to attract a commercial sponsor. What hadn’t been done on the peninsula? Because no-one had ever crossed the peninsula without dogs, they decided to tag their trip as the first ‘unassisted’ crossing of the peninsula – unaware that this claim might irritate purist pioneers like Herbert, who baulked at the use of the term, mindful of the fact that when he crossed the peninsula it really was unassisted, in the sense there were no maps and no GPS devices to identify your position precisely.

Technology had improved in the 40 years since Herbert crossed the peninsula. GPS devices working off American navigational satellites orbiting the earth and high-frequency radios were the main improvements. But in other ways the challenges of Antarctica had not lessened. Once men set foot
on the snow and ice, they found themselves engaged in an elemental struggle for survival.

By midway through day three, Bland and Watson were engaged in such a struggle. The day started off well enough, with no indication of the perils to come. The weather was clear, and their target for the day was to walk over the sea ice in Duse Bay to View Point. From there they would trek down the coast to Pitt Point, on the southern side of the peninsula. That was to be the starting point for their climb up the Victory Glacier and on to the peninsula plateau.

Travelling in the Antarctic summer was a mixed blessing. It meant hours of unending daylight and less fearsome weather conditions, but because the temperatures were higher than in winter, it also meant that the sea ice was not frozen solid. This had been a key concern in Ushuaia as the days ticked by waiting for the kayaks to arrive: every day they delayed was a day closer to midsummer and treacherous melting ice. The thin black ice posed less of a hazard because it was obvious that it would not take the weight of a human, but the danger lay in the patches of black ice disguised by a covering of white ice. The walkers could be treading over what looked like a solid sheet of white ice, when suddenly the surface could crack apart, sending them plunging into the freezing water beneath.

Progress was good that morning. They slipped easily into the rhythm of one taking the lead, tapping the ice for cracks, while the other followed behind. After 30 minutes the leader would drop back, allowing the other to take over in front. With some satisfaction, Bland reflected on the fact that after all the flurry of planning, financing, taking care of the family, and juggling his job – not to mention the near chaos of departure – they had finally arrived. He celebrated with some
internal choruses of ‘Waltzing Matilda’. Watson found other tunes or words repeatedly playing over in his mind. Fulfilled though he was, and exhilarated by the Antarctic landscape, Watson still found himself thinking back to domestic pleasures like sitting at home or walking on the beach. At home in Melbourne, he had dreamed of the liberating open spaces of Antarctica. In Antarctica, he dreamed about the comforts of home. It was a perverse reminder of humanity’s restless search for perfection somewhere beyond.

By early afternoon the ice had turned to slush in places because of the warming rays of the sun. Watson was leading when he heard a cry from Bland behind him. He looked round to see his friend up to his neck in ice. Bland’s response confirmed his mother’s belief that her son knew no fear. Instead of survival, and calling for Watson to drag him out, the madcap adventurer’s first thought was to ask his friend to grab the video camera and get some dramatic footage for the documentary they were shooting. The royalties from such a documentary were an important source of revenue for future trips, or paying off leftover bills from this one.

After receiving reassurance from Bland that he was fine and capturing the moment on the video camera, Watson hauled his friend out of the water. Bland’s clothing was soaked right through to his thermals, and the only way to dry it was from the heat generated by his body. As he stood shivering on the ice, the pair debated whether to camp where they were and get warm by making camp and cooking a hot pasta meal, or keep going. With the sun at its strongest, melting the ice and making it treacherous, they decided on a three-hour break and looked around for solid ground. They noticed a large hump of ice covered with sunbaking seals and made for the
spot, setting their tent up right in the middle of the animals. Their first plan was to make camp for the rest of the day until the sun had gone down and the ice had become more solid. But at 4 pm Watson received a shock when he looked out of the tent and saw that the strength of the current was carrying the ice floe on which they were travelling south-eastwards – not the south-westerly direction they wanted. They had been carried well past View Point, their intended destination, and were instead being taken towards Vega Island and the open sea. They were adrift in the Southern Ocean, as Shackleton had been with the crew of *Endurance* almost 90 years before. They packed up the gear and made a new plan to head west to Beak Island, midway between View Point and Vega Island. They were battling against the flow. While they walked west at around one knot per hour, the ice floe was carrying them south-east at two knots an hour.

Initially hauling themselves through the slush in the kayaks, they eventually managed to find enough clear water to launch the boats. After three hours’ hard paddling towards Beak Island they were hit by a fierce headwind which halted the kayaks and sent the waves splashing over the sides. Twice Bland had to stop on icebergs to prevent his swamped boat from sinking. They were getting nowhere. Watson began to experience the first moments of doubt: ‘We thought, “What are we going to do?” We were wet and cold and I knew I’d reached a stage where I couldn’t struggle any more against the wind.’ Abandoning hope of beating the wind into Beak Island, they decided to turn and run with the wind behind them ‘on starboard quarter’. Their new course was for Vega Island. They hoped to let the current take them close to the island’s eastern tip, and then paddle into the shore.
Four hours later, at 3 am on a grey-black Antarctic morning with their bodies aching from nearly sixteen hours of walking and paddling, the shore of Vega Island was within sight, but Bland was not going to make it. His boat had again been taking in water and now it was sinking. Yelling out to Watson, ‘I’ve got to go, I’ve got to go, I’m sinking,’ he heaved the boat furiously towards the nearest iceberg. ‘When I got to the iceberg it was tipping over, so it was futile to try and get out of the boat there. I knew Jay was behind me and paddling so I made for another iceberg twenty strokes away. I am not a religious person, but I said, “Dear God, please give me twenty strokes.” He gave me ten, then my kayak sank, with the tent, global positioning system, radio, sleeping bag and climbing equipment. I thought it was all over. Not only did I think the trip was over, I thought it would be a good outcome for Jay and I to survive. My goal then was not to cross Antarctica; it was to live.

‘The kayak kept sinking deeper into the water, but about one metre down it found its own buoyancy. I put my arms out wide and used them as paddles to skim the kayak towards the iceberg, like an Antarctic submarine. Jay by now was behind me, and I drove my hand down through the water to the deck of the kayak to get the ice axe strapped to the deck. I ripped it out and drove it into the face of the iceberg, to stabilise myself and the boat. I then hauled myself out onto the ice. Jay climbed out of his kayak and, on our knees, the two of us hauled my kayak out of the water. One of my boots, the sleeping bag and the kayak skirt cover had all gone, and we both knew that was the ballgame, unless those things were recovered. Without the boot, I could not walk. Without the sleeping bag, I would freeze.’
Quickly, Bland told Watson to grab the other end of the kayak and tip it upside down to let out the water. He then got back into the boat and told Watson to prepare him for a ‘seal entry’ into the water, with the kayak nosing front-first down the two metre drop from the iceberg to the water. Two months earlier Bland had not even known what a seal entry was when a Channel Nine Today Show crew had come to the farm in Melbourne to take some footage. The reporter had asked Bland to get into the kayak and do a seal entry into the dam on the property. Confidently, Bland said: ‘Sure, no problem.’ Turning to Watson, he asked: ‘What’s a seal entry?’ His friend explained it meant slithering nose-first into the water. With the aplomb and front of a veteran, Bland launched the kayak into the farm dam for his first seal entry.

If that first seal entry had been playing to the camera, this one was for real. Watson pushed from behind, Bland hopped in, and the kayak hit the water with a splash. It was effective, if less graceful than the glide of seals. Once in the water Bland paddled desperately to where the boot and sleeping bag were floating half-submerged. He recovered both, but didn’t have the energy to reach the kayak skirt cover.

He returned to the iceberg and, together with Watson, dragged the kayak up out of the water. Both he and Watson were shaking so badly from hypothermia they couldn’t set up the tent poles initially. Their clothes were frozen from the wet and cold and a layer of ice formed next to their skin. They were so exhausted they had to prop each other up to stop either of them dropping over the edge of the iceberg from fatigue. It was all they could do to put up the tent, but still Bland made a characteristically matter-of-fact entry in the diary. It massively understated the danger, but was starting to
come to terms with the enormity of the challenge. ‘Storm in bay. Fall through ice. Filmed this. Chilly. Stop on sealbergs. Eat. Re-group. Three hours later go again. Looking out the tent saw that the ice floe had broken free and was drifting into Southern Ocean. Fall through ice again. Worse. Now into survival mode.’

Next morning they had a hot meal, rested, and considered their options. Bland calculated that if the wind remained in the north-western quarter and they continued to drift at the same rate, they could remain safely camped on the iceberg for another five hours. Any longer and their raft would take them further out to sea, and away from Vega Island. The storm had blown over and conditions were clear and calm after the previous day’s winds. As they paddled along the edge of Vega Island they saw Antarctica at its awesome best, with steep rock faces and waterfalls thundering 100 metres from the top of the cliffs to the sea below. Eventually they reached a little bay at Cape Gordon, full of glaciers and fresh running water. Socks, sleeping bags, storm suits and books were hung out to dry on a makeshift washing line strung between a rock outcrop and the ski poles. After eating, they pondered the looming race across the ice to reach Charlotte Bay, on the other side of the Antarctic peninsula, by 2 February. Way off course, and far to the south of their original intended route, time was pressing. They faced a hard three-day climb over the island before they could commence the crossing of Prince Gustav Channel, which would land them on the peninsula’s southern coast.

On the morning of 18 January, leaving Vega Island behind them, they pushed the kayaks out into the Channel. The first day’s paddling took them to Cape Lachman on the north-
eastern tip of James Ross Island, and then they spent another day crossing the stretch of water between James Ross Island and the peninsula. ‘Another massive day,’ Bland wrote in his diary. ‘Spectacular crossing to Long Island. Definitely the most beautiful scenes for the film. Reached Long Island 5 pm, and pushed on towards Pitt Point, on the peninsula. That’s where it all got hard.’

Pack ice had jammed in between Long Island and the peninsula, making it impossible for Bland and Watson to paddle in to the mainland. They ended up having to jump, drag or crawl from one ice plate to another. In between the plates floated what Bland described as ‘slurpee’, a cocktail of crushed ice and slush.

At 8 pm they interrupted the slog to the mainland with a position call to Tooluka. Bland was perplexed by Wallis’s relayed message from Julia, saying ‘Jools says it’s all OK’. What did that mean, thought Bland, close to the end of his physical and emotional tether after events of the past few days. He had faxed Julia a list of instructions about the farm and the house when he reached South America, and he didn’t know if the ‘OK’ in the message referred to these various issues. Or was she saying it was ‘OK’ for him to selfishly pursue his high-risk adventuring, regardless of what other people felt about him leaving behind his wife and daughter? Used to placing his emotions after his goals, the message forced him to reflect and the doubt kept playing on his mind for the rest of that night and succeeding days.

Sensing Bland’s spirits were at a low ebb, Watson took the lead in the final push over the ice to Pitt Point. They made it at midnight, and set up their camp on a rock ridge about 600 metres from the water’s edge. They were too tired to
celebrate reaching the mainland and the start of the next leg of their journey, and collapsed into their sleeping bags.

They woke next morning to find themselves enveloped in ‘white chaos’. The white-out continued all day. ‘The higher we went, the less visibility we had,’ says Watson. ‘There was nothing but grey skies and white snow. Occasionally you would get a break in the cloud and catch glimpses of the mountains and the plateau. We travelled mainly in silence, changing the lead every half hour. Then we exchanged a few words about the view, or the weather. I was continually respectful of the natural forces at play. There wasn’t a lot of wildlife; there wasn’t a lot of anything out there – just us, and this inner peacefulness. I felt this contentment that came from challenging yourself in these harsh environments, and learning about yourself and the environment.’

Next morning the clouds had lifted sufficiently for them to see that they had taken the wrong course in the previous day’s white-out, and they faced a potentially perilous steep climb to the Victory Glacier rather than the steady incline they had expected. They decided to retrace their steps from the evening before, losing still more time. Nothing more could go wrong if they were to meet the boat by the agreed deadline.

Bland’s diary did not convey the growing sense of urgency. Even another fall down a crevasse was met with his customary lack of emotion. He was saved by one of his skis breaking his fall by catching on the sides of the crevasse. ‘Long day trudging uphill, roped up in our harnesses as I’d had a fall down a crevasse, and I went down to my head – just my arms out, ski caught, which saved me. Jay brought rope over for my right hand, and I removed one ski, and was able to work myself out of the hole. All well, but it was a lucky escape, and we stayed
properly roped up all day, with Jay leading and testing for crevasses and snow bridges.’ The lucky escapes were mounting.

In the tent that night the mood was a mixture of fatigue, irritation and excitement. The day’s climb had taken its toll, and tiredness quickly turned to anger when they turned on the radio for the call to Tooluka. Instead of hearing Wallis’s voice, they detected heavy New Zealand accents, belonging to the party of kayakers who were currently paddling along the north coast of the peninsula. Bland was annoyed with the New Zealanders – they must have been unaware of his and Watson’s scheduled radio times and were radioing at exactly the same time. Having paid $45,000 to charter Tooluka, Bland felt he should have priority use of the radio. But irritation was succeeded by anticipation, that tomorrow they might finally reach the top of the plateau.

The next day they climbed from 8.40 am to 9 pm, ending the day at an altitude of 1100 metres but still well short of the plateau.

When Bland wrote in his diary ‘A tough day,’ he meant it. The challenges changed from hour to hour. They started roped up, with Watson leading, feeling for the snow bridges that might indicate crevasses beneath. They changed the lead every half hour to relieve the man in front from the strain of constantly looking out for crevasses. Then progress was virtually halted when they became bogged down in fresh deep snow, which made it well-nigh impossible to haul the kayaks. They experimented with the stronger Bland trying to haul Watson’s kayak which, being shorter and wider, had proved harder to haul. Then both pulled the one sled, returning down the mountain for the other one. Finally, when all else failed, they used a pulley system, with Watson manning
the pulley brace at the top and Bland hauling down the rope as the kayak rose up on the other side. The exercise was repeated until all the equipment had been lifted up. They worked all the time in white-out conditions, and could only establish where they were by using the global positioning system. In the afternoon they could see enough to make out a giant crevasse barring their way to the top. The equipment was left behind and the two of them went on a reconnaissance to see if they could get round the crevasse and make it up to the plateau by the end of the day. They discovered four more large crevasses between them and the top and opted for prudence, leaving the difficult climb for the following morning.

The problems mounted the next day. Snow was falling hard, giving nil visibility. At breakfast – so essential to creating the energy needed for the long twelve-hour days of climbing and walking – they discovered some of the cooker fuel had been contaminated with water when Bland’s kayak sank off Vega Island. Like registered plumbers, they successfully adjusted the fuel bottle, the intake pipe and the cooker to overcome the problem. They needed all the energy they could muster to complete the one-and-a-half-hour climb to the top of the Victory Glacier. The final ascent to the top of the plateau was so steep that they found the only way they could climb up was to empty the kayaks and fit all the equipment in the packs, with the skis strapped to their sides. After two steep ascents they stashed everything at the top, marking the spot with crossed skis, and noted the position on their GPS. They then went back down the mountain to bring up the empty kayaks.

Bland described the return climb in that night’s diary: ‘There was a vertical section there for one hour that I think
was the toughest thing I have ever done in my life. Crampons on, slipping, Jay leading, me having to keep time with the rope between us. Made camp on top of the Detroit Plateau, which was our goal. Incredible wind and snow. Had to dig ourselves in for the night.

The weather worsened overnight, with the wind gusting between 30 and 40 knots and pulling at the tent’s ropes. In the middle of the night a frozen Bland got up to tighten the ropes, fearing the tent might be blown on top of them. Outside the wind cut right through him. He retreated to his sleeping bag, shivering through the night hours. Moving off proved impossible in the morning, and the pair of them spent the day in their sleeping bags, besieged by the wind and snow.

As time slipped by, Bland felt the frustration mounting. He and Watson alternated cooking duties, but that day Bland, after waking early, decided to help with Watson’s cooking. He went to put a brew on the boil and, because one burner was not working, he switched over to the other one, accidentally spilling fuel onto the stove. Flames spat to the roof of the tent, the fuel bottle rolled over, disgorging half its contents. In the general panic, Bland spilled boiling water over his hand. Antarctica had just given him another warning.

He had plenty of time to write his diary. ‘I find these days very, very frustrating when you are stuck in camp. Missing Jools and Olivia and home enormously. I am so looking forward to getting back there and making it so beautiful. In the evening I went out and set up the high-frequency radio and got things out for dinner. I felt a lot better for getting out of the tent for a bit. Communications with Tooluka good. Jools sent message about shearing/drenching all OK on the farm. Great to get message.’
The weather relented next day and they awoke to brilliant clear skies, but the same unyielding wind. During the night icicles had formed on the bow of the kayaks and snow drifts had formed around the tent ropes. There was one arduous two-hour spell traversing a rise, which required them to put on crampons for better grip, but once they were over that the ground levelled out and they settled into a steady rhythm walking westwards along the plateau.

They continued along the plateau the following day, which was again bitingly cold. The sunscreen tube froze and the tent poles were also frozen solid in the morning. They could not be dislodged until Bland and Watson had warmed them up by rubbing them furiously. The wind had blown the good weather away and they were again facing zero visibility. With no crevasses to worry about, or steep rock climbs, Bland found himself confronting boredom, walking hour after hour into the gloom. ‘I spent the whole time counting my steps to 300 in Spanish, to try and fill the time usefully, and then using the compass to check our course, which quite often varied from where we were supposed to be, because we couldn’t see anything.’

The same routine continued next day. ‘One of those mind-numbing days where you just have to keep on going. I found that by counting to 300 in Spanish and then looking at my compass I could make the sessions go quicker and control where my mind went better. Have really been thinking about how I am going to make some serious money, so Jools and I can go cruising at 45 in a 51-foot yacht, have sports cars and polo ponies and huge parties. Why? Just because if you are going to be alive you might as well be living.’

With nothing to fill his mind during the trek over the
plateau, Bland’s fantasy life flourished. He thought about property development, and working with his sponsors Michael and Andrew Buxton. And putting together his own team to sail in the Melbourne to Osaka yacht race. ‘I want to organise the trips myself with a partner like Jay, not be part of someone else’s trip. I want to be the PATRON.’

Bland’s head stayed in the clouds for most of the day, but around 5 pm he and Watson started the descent from the plateau. As they skied south-westwards along the Detroit Plateau it became apparent to the two of them that with the delays in Ushuaia for the kayaks, and their unscheduled journey to Vega Island, they would need everything to go their way if they were to meet Tooluka at Charlotte Bay on the agreed date of 2 February. It was relatively smooth skiing up on the plateau and they were tempted to push on to Charlotte Bay – the route Herbert had taken to get off the plateau on his peninsula crossing. But they both knew that Antarctica was not a place where you could rely on luck and decided to shorten the trip by descending into Charcot Bay in the north-western tip of the peninsula – even though no-one had ever descended from the plateau using that route. As they did so, dropping down below 1500 metres, they found themselves out of the clouds, and looking down onto Charcot Bay. The end was in sight.

The sting was in the tail. Bland wrote an optimistic diary entry for the next day, Sunday 28 January: ‘Well, another incredible day when you start off thinking it’s going to be quite ordinary, just straight hauling, but ends up being an epic. That is how things are in Antarctica. We placed ourselves beautifully last night and made camp so as to allow us to start early down the steep section. We abseiled down vertical drops with huge
crevasses all around. Poor visibility, sleetiing snow, both wearing windstoppers and quilted jackets to keep warm. Spent two hours doing a reconnaissance with Jay leading on the end of the rope. I came back and got the kayaks lowered down by rope. In the end got so steep had to stop and do another reconnaissance. Still snowing, 6 pm made camp and dug ourselves into very steep cliff wall. Jay cook, both extremely hungry. Did some good filming today of the kayaks being lowered down on the rope. I am really looking forward to seeing Jools and Olivia. Missing them a lot. I must admit while I am loving this trip I don’t want too many more obstacles between us and the boat.’

The hubris of the all-conquering Antarctic adventurer had given way to something resembling humility in the face of a daunting opponent. For once Bland had let down his guard to reveal his attachment to his family, an appreciation of his own mortality, and even a presentiment that the Antarctic peninsula might set one last challenge before he completed his goal.

As he wrote the entry the snow was whirling around the tent, driven by a remorseless, frozen wind. Captain Robert Scott had faced similar conditions on 29 March 1912, as he faced the end of his ill-fated expedition to the South Pole. Amundsen had beaten him to the pole, he had lost two men, Oates and Evans, on the trek back, and now he and his two remaining colleagues, Wilson and Bowers, were running short of food, energy and the will to live.

That night Scott wrote in his diary: ‘Since the 21st we have had a continuous gale from WSW and SW. We had fuel to make two cups of tea apiece and bare food for two days on the 20th. Every day we have been ready to start for our depot eleven miles away, but outside the door of the tent it remains
a scene of whirling drift. I do not think we can hope for any better things now. We shall stick it out to the end, but we are getting weaker, of course, and the end cannot be far. It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more.’

Eight months later a search party discovered the bodies of Scott, Wilson and Bowers, bringing to five the number who died on that British expedition. Scott’s death was later cited to British troops serving on the Western Front in the First World War as an inspiring example of bravery in the face of death. Bland had always been less impressed by the way the Royal Navy captain led five men to their death by insisting on continuing to the pole, rather than opting for safety and turning back. ‘Blind ambition is what Scott had, and it led to his death.’

At least Bland, with his pig-headed determination, could identify with Scott’s strength of will. As a child Scott was lazy and hot-tempered, but through determination he overcame both traits. His attitude to Antarctic exploration was informed by stoicism and a high-minded English patriotism, which showed in the choice of quotations he kept in his notebooks and diaries. As he trudged towards the South Pole in January 1912, knowing Amundsen had already reached there, he consoled himself with the lines of the romantic English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, which he kept in his notebook:

*To strive, to seek
To find,
And not to
Yield.*

Bland came from a different tradition, of blunt-speaking practical Australian bushmen who revelled in getting on with
the job and overcoming the odds. Where Bland’s diary style was the brusque report of a man of action, in a hurry to reach all his goals, Scott’s was literary, measured and understated, like his report of the death of expedition co-member Titus Oates, whose condition had been deteriorating badly. On 15 March 1912 Scott wrote of Oates, admiringly: ‘He did not – would not – give up hope till the very end. He was a brave soul. This was the end. He slept through the night before last, hoping not to wake; but he woke in the morning – yesterday. It was blowing a blizzard. He said “I am just going outside and may be some time”. He went out into the blizzard and we have not seen him since.’

As the storm picked up, Bland’s first reaction was not to pick up his pen and record the assault by the elements, but to get outside and reinforce the tent with additional pegs stowed in the kayaks that were carefully secured under the mountain face, just ten paces away. He unzipped the tent, which they had dug under a rock for protection, and stepped out into the blizzard. Before he had taken five paces he felt himself being swept away into a bottomless black abyss. This time there was no lucky escape.
Chapter Three

SCARRED FOR LIFE

THROUGH THE MISTS OF anaesthesia, eight-year-old Peter Bland felt he was being suffocated by the oxygen mask over his face. Against the urgings of the sister in the recovery room at Melbourne’s Alfred Hospital, he desperately tried to pull it off. Even at eight, no-one could tell him what to do.

It was not until he returned to the ward and the dressing had been removed from his chest that he could see what the surgeon had done to him in the operation to repair the hole in his heart – known in medical terminology as a congenital atrial septal defect. There was an angry red vertical scar that stretched from his neck to just above his abdomen. He felt a flush of shame that was to accompany him through childhood. The heart surgery gave him a normal outlook in terms of his expectations of sport and exercise, but the scar left him
feeling imperfect and inadequate compared to other boys. The psychic scar left by the surgeon’s knife was just as vivid as the physical scar.

‘I remember Dad promising me a watch in the corridor before the operation if I was a good boy and strong, and didn’t cry. I vividly recall waking up in intensive care trying to rip the mask off because I felt I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t cry once, and I was really, really proud of it. Then the nurse said the time had come to change the dressing on my scar. She pulled it off and I saw this 20-centimetre vertical scar down my front.

‘The only time I cried was when the doctor came round with a dozen medical students, talking about and over me as though I was a piece of meat. The second they left I cried and cried and cried. It was as though they were talking private medical business, and I didn’t like it. I felt it was belittling and humiliating. I was pretty pig-headed and proud, even then, and I didn’t like them talking about the condition limiting me, or being some kind of disability.’

When he got home after the operation he took his shirt off for his mother to see the scar and the way some of the ribs were sticking out because of the surgery. ‘It won’t always be like that,’ said his mother. ‘It will heal up.’ But it didn’t heal up, and Bland carried it like a capital D for disability stamped on his chest. ‘I wished I had a scar from a fall, or a shark attack, but not one like that, which felt like a disability.’

He began to impose limitations on himself. ‘I felt defaced and I wouldn’t take my shirt off because I was so ashamed of the scar. I hated going to the beach because it meant I had to take my shirt off. At the local football club I always had to play for “Shirts On” rather than “Shirts Off”. In the physical education class at Melbourne Grammar I used to sit with my
arm across my chest and my hand on my chin, and the master eventually said, “Bland, if I see you putting your arm across your chest and your finger in your mouth once more, I will tell the class you are covering up your scar.”

If people saw the scar, they might think less of him, and that made him determined to put himself to the test publicly to show he was as good as them. Hence his return to playing junior football almost at once, despite his mother’s fears. He shrugged off concerns about the lingering effects of open-heart surgery at the age of eight as he was subsequently to shrug off the concerns of wife and family about travelling across the Antarctic peninsula. His mother, shaken by how pale he had looked when he came out of surgery at the Alfred Hospital, didn’t want him to go back to playing football – at least for a while. Peter insisted, and at the end of his first season back playing for the Bullengarook under-11s in the Riddell and District Junior League, he won the award for ‘most determined player’.

His father, John Bland, was delighted, and sent his son a note of congratulations from his chambers. ‘Darling Pete,’ he wrote. ‘Congratulations on being awarded your trophy. There is no prize that I would rather you have won. To be regarded as “the most determined player” means that you have done your very best – and that is the standard we have always encouraged you to achieve.’

It was the soft side of John Bland that others rarely saw. Peter Bland was hewn from the same Victorian hardwood as his father. In John Bland’s youth he had suffered from hay fever, but he refused to yield to the allergic illness. Instead, one summer vacation he went to the Mallee to confront his adversary head-on. He signed up to work as a labourer during the wheat harvest, exposing himself to the very grass and seed
allergies that congested his eyes and nose. Each day, eyes and nose streaming, he would lug the dusty bags of wheat, fighting a battle of wills with the illness. He refused to give in, and by the end of the dry season, he had overcome his hay fever.

John was the son of Ewen Bland, who had gone to Gallipoli as an eighteen-year-old captain in 1915 and won a Military Cross and bar. Driven by the work ethic and a strong sense of duty, both of which he passed on to his son, Ewen Bland worked for Shell in Papua New Guinea and various South Pacific islands. He met his future wife Ruby as she stepped off the boat in Suva to visit her sister, who ran a secretarial college in Fiji. Ruby also came from tough stock. The story was always told by the Blands that Ruby’s family had walked the 2000 kilometres from Victoria to Queensland behind a dray carrying all their possessions. Ewen and Ruby Bland later moved to Melbourne, where they had John, and educated him at Camberwell Grammar School. He rose to become head of school, dux and captain of cadets, just as the Second World War was ending. One of his tasks was to read out the names of all the former Camberwell boys who had died in the war. It made him intensely aware of what they had been through, and what he had missed. Having been spared the wartime test of courage, he felt impelled to prove his manhood and bravery in some other way, and as such he took boxing lessons at the University of Melbourne at a time when veterans from the war were also returning to take up studies. In 1949 he became the intervarsity light-heavyweight boxing champion. Paradoxically, many years later, when he and Jane had their children, he refused to let the boys keep some boxing gloves they had been given as a present. He didn’t want to see them injured, and he didn’t want to encourage violence.
Born on 13 August 1927, and brought up in the city, John Bland nevertheless identified with Australia’s battling and egalitarian bush tradition. He loved the bush for the endurance it had promoted in the national character, as much as for its raw beauty. His bookshelves were filled with ANZAC histories and biographies of Australian pioneers and pastoralists like Patsy Durack and Sidney Kidman. These were the models of Australian achievement and determination he set for himself and his children. ‘He was very proud of his Australianness,’ says his wife. ‘He put himself through some rigid tests. He was tough on himself, and expected high standards of himself and everyone around him. Pete saw he was an achiever, and he wanted to be an achiever too.’

The youngest Bland son identified strongly with Kidman, who left home at thirteen with five shillings in his pocket and riding a one-eyed horse called Cyclops. By dint of determination, enterprise, and unstinting hard work, he built himself a pastoral empire that ranged the length and breadth of Australia. Almost word for word Peter remembered the passage in Ion Idriess’s biography, Cattle King, where the young Kidman and an older stockman are battling to find water in the face of the drought, which proved as pitiless in Kidman’s life as ice was later to be in the mature Peter Bland’s life. The older man, parched and weakening, can go no further when he reaches a creek bed and discovers it has dried up. Kidman prays aloud, ‘Please God, direct me where the water is,’ and keeps going. Drawn by the sound of chirping birds, he eventually finds a pool. ‘This taught Kidman a lesson: “Russ had given in,” thought Kidman. If he had given in too, they would never have found water; they would be dead. He let the lesson sink in. “Never give in!” he whispered. “I will never give in.”’
The young Bland was a restless dreamer, like the Kidman described by Idriess: ‘The boy had the vision of a dreamer; but in him, too, was developing a far-seeing mind spurred to action by a determined will. “I'll live and grow,” he murmured, “like a gum on a creek. And if I’m ever brought low I’ll spring up again, like the saltbush on the plains.”’ The judge’s youngest son might not be the most gifted footballer in the under-11 league, but he was the most determined, and always at the bottom of the packs, giving everything he had. The judge couldn’t ask more of him.

John Bland had thought of going into the diplomatic service after doing law at the University of Melbourne, but instead he pursued his love of the bush by working for a pastoral company, Australian Estates, in Queensland. He worked as a personal assistant to the general manager, Sir Stanley Coleman, and travelled widely through the large estates of northern New South Wales and Queensland. He returned to Melbourne to practise as a barrister in 1956, and soon after that his father had a windfall win on Tattslotto. Given some of the money by his father, he used it to realise his dream of a country property. He bought a picturesque 20-hectare farm north of Melbourne with a creek running through, and views of the Macedon Ranges. He called it Embru, after his mother’s and father’s names (Ewen Mackay Bland and Ruby). Gradually he built up the size of that farm, as well as buying other properties on the Sunshine Coast hinterland in Queensland and subsequently selling that to purchase a grazing property on King Island in the Bass Strait.

A year after he bought Embru, the young and handsome barrister specialising in criminal, industrial and compensation cases, met his future wife, Jane, a nursing sister at the Royal
Melbourne Hospital, at a ball in the local shire hall. He was going out with another girl at the time, but she couldn’t go to the ball and suggested he take her friend Jane. The former girlfriend subsequently joked that she knew she was taking a risk at the time she made the suggestion.

John and Jane Bland married in 1961 and brought up the family in the humble timber home at Embru. Just across the creek lay an old 1855 homestead, Elderslie, on 300 hectares, and the young barrister set himself the goal of one day owning the property, just as his pioneering heroes, the Kidmans and the Duracks, had set their hearts and minds on new properties. In 1978 he achieved his goal. In his way, he was as pioneering in his day as they were in theirs. In 1972, before Gough Whitlam had begun diplomatic relations with China, he went to the People’s Republic to try and sell wool to the Chinese. His venture never got off the ground but, fascinated by China’s culture, he returned to China a second time for a trade fair. It was his custom to go for an early morning run and he asked his Chinese hosts if that would be all right. From then on they addressed him as ‘the running peasant’.

In 1978 he was invited to become a County Court judge, and he accepted out of a sense of duty to the community rather than from any great professional ambition. Although he became part of Melbourne’s legal hierarchy, he was no friend of the establishment. He was a member of the Athenaeum Club in Melbourne and the Queensland Club in Brisbane, and had friends who were members of the establishment, but he chose them for who they were, rather than their money or position. In his days at the Bar he was a committed Australian Labor Party supporter, and he would occasionally quote the sayings of Mao Tse Tung, China’s...
communist revolutionary leader. He hated pretension, snobbery and the hereditary-based class system. He resigned his membership of the ALP when he became a judge because he felt it was important that he was seen to be impartial. He may have been a judge, but he prided himself on being able to talk to all strata of society. He purposely drove an HD Holden as a symbol of Australian egalitarianism and parked it in the judges’ garage next to the Rolls Royces belonging to some of his colleagues. One day he found his tyres let down, and he used to joke that one of his fellow judges had thought it was a workman’s car parked in the wrong spot, and the driver needed to be taught a lesson.

John Bland was born in the aftermath of the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the hardness of those years coloured his attitudes for the rest of his life. Living was about striving, giving it your best shot, seeking to achieve, and never giving up. ‘Life was for real, and life was earnest,’ says Jane Bland. What mattered at the end of the day was not so much how much money he had made (although that was important to guarantee the security of his family), but how he acted and behaved in attaining it. When Julia Knight began going out with Peter Bland in 1990 she soon encountered the judge’s work ethic: ‘The culture was that you came to the farm and you worked. You would never sit down, unless you’d been out working for nine hours. The judge ran the place like a fort; it had to be done his way. It was lucky I enjoyed the great outdoors and getting my hands dirty down at the sheepyard.’

John Bland ruled the property with a benevolent rod of iron. ‘Life is very black and white for the Blands – there isn’t any grey,’ says Joanna, his eldest child. ‘We’re all bulldozers. There’s one way and nobody else’s. Dad would come home
and say 30 acres was for sale nearby, and that was it. He wasn’t saying, “It’s for sale – shall we buy it?” It was a bit selfish, really.’ He did discuss the purchases with his wife, who occasionally helped to realise her husband’s property dreams by volunteering her savings. It was not so different from some of Peter’s later unilateral decisions about his Antarctic expeditions, despite opposition from his family.

As the family patriarch, the great task John Bland had set himself for life was to provide for his wife and three children’s future. For the children, that meant instilling the right work ethic into them, just as his father had instilled into him that ‘hard work never hurt anyone’. He left a task sheet to be filled in by the children each day, with jobs like washing the dishes, collecting kindling, feeding the chooks and completing homework. On the bathroom mirror he stuck a note that they saw first thing in the morning when they got up and last thing at night when they went to bed. It said: ‘Time lost can never be regained.’

The judge was just as strict with the staff and barristers at the County Court. Unlike some other judges, who let their assistants go home early if there was nothing to do, John Bland insisted that they stay until the dot of 5 pm. When you did a job, you did it properly. He wanted to instill that lesson into his children, so that they did not become slovenly. He confided to trusted legal friends that he did not want his children to be ‘laid-back’, an in-vogue expression of the time.

The disciplinarian was tempered by the charmer. Jane Bland says: ‘He had a very charming personality, though the downside was that if he was angry, the vitriol could be pretty strong. For the children, his praise was something to relish, and his anger was something to be avoided.’
A STEP TOO FAR

Peter recalls: ‘If you wanted to see a blue, you suggested where the flower pot should go in the garden. His attitude was, “This is my farm.” Mum’s role was to play mediator in the conflicts that would arise. She was the peacemaker.’ The angriest Peter ever saw his father was when a report came back from the local school that he had hit a girl in an argument. In the judge’s traditional moral code, men did not strike women. Peter recalls: ‘The anger was like a volcano, it would erupt. You felt he was going to explode. Then he would shrug his shoulders. He never hit me, but I remember this great rage, and him walking off.’ On another occasion Peter had been spinning his body round like a propeller on the shiny dining-room table at home, and his belt buckle marked the table. His father told him to go and get the axe and chop up the table because he had ruined it. The table stayed, but Peter never forgot the day he scratched the dining-room table.

Everything the judge did in relation to his children was meant to be for their own good. The greatest of his self-imposed duties was to raise the three children to become independent, achieving, and financially secure adults. Come rain or hail, two days a week he made the children walk to the local primary school to toughen them up and give them a sense of self-reliance. They were under strict instructions not to accept lifts from other parents. The rest of the week the Bland children rode their bikes to school, wearing the fluorescent safety jackets their father ordered them to put on to make sure they were visible to cars. ‘John wouldn’t back down,’ says his wife. ‘If he’d told the kids they were riding to school, they would ride, even if the weather was terrible. He was a man of his times. I felt he could have been gentler and more generous with the children. I think he was a very good
father, but it was hard for me to let him be so firm on some issues.’

The judge was also a stickler for fairness. In Peter’s late teens an aunt of his father died in Queensland. She left Peter some money in her will, believing he would need more money because of his heart surgery, but the judge was reluctant to let Peter have all the money. To ensure fairness and avoid favouritism amongst his three children, and with Peter’s agreement, he saw that the money was split three ways.

Peter was a happy, friendly child with striking blue eyes, a ready smile and a gift for making friends easily. His mother says: ‘He always had a pleasant temperament, and he could take people with him. John was more authoritarian, to the point of getting people offside. He wouldn’t shrink from being the disciplinarian if he thought it was for the best. I thought he could be really hard – harder than he needed to be. After Pete’s operation I would have been tempted to say “don’t play football”, but Pete wasn’t going to let the heart surgery dictate his life. He was always determined. He would have got that from John. When he got to Melbourne Grammar later his goal was to run for the combined private schools athletics team, and I remember him writing home to us saying he would have to train harder to get in the team.’

Sometimes Peter’s confidence was taken as cockiness. The scar from his heart surgery, which his father told him was ‘the best thing that had ever happened to him’, temporarily checked that cockiness. Instead of interpreting his father’s comment as meaning that overcoming the scar would provide motivation for him to achieve more, Peter took it as meaning that it might knock some of the cockiness out of him, which was no bad thing in his father’s view. ‘Dad didn’t like big shots,
and he thought I could do with a dose of humility. He thought
that carrying a scar like that, which I was ashamed of and
embarrassed about every day at school, would bring me down
to earth. But it just hardened my resolve to live life to the
fullest, and I carried that chip every day of my life.’

His self-consciousness about the scar was so great that he
saw a specialist about the possibility of plastic surgery. He was
told he was too young for corrective surgery like that, and
would have to wait until he was fifteen. Meanwhile his father
made sure he did the exercises prescribed by the doctors to
speed his recovery. The family could not go out in the
morning if Peter had not done his exercises. The judge
believed it was for Peter’s ultimate good, and that sometimes
he had to be cruel to be kind. It was the same on the long car
journeys north for family holidays on their farm near Noosa:
to keep the children fit and curb their boredom in the count-
less hours driving north, he would get them doing exercises
at petrol stations, and even running after the car. ‘He was an
unusual man,’ says his daughter Joanna. ‘He didn’t really give
a damn about doing the conventional thing.’

John and Jane Bland had a traditional marriage, where he
worked and she looked after the home and children and always
had a meal on the table when her husband returned from
court in the evening. He supported her returning to nursing
when Peter was eight and, with him spending much of his
available money on property, it was her income that bought
luxuries such as the television, freezer and antique furniture.
‘Dad had a very old-world view of the man as the patriarch,’
says Peter. ‘He thought children weren’t there to challenge
their father; but at the same time he raised us to be challeng-
ing, questioning children.’
John Bland lived according to strong moral principles. Shortly before Peter was planning one of his overseas trips, he was assaulted by a worker on the property at King Island. The man, who was later convicted on other charges and sent to jail, had been stealing hay bales and booking up diesel on the Bland account at a local garage, and Peter confronted him. Because he was just about to leave for overseas, he decided not to press assault charges against the man. ‘Dad was horrified I didn’t honour my moral duty to take him to court, but I figured if the man stopped me from going on my trip, he’d won. I wasn’t prepared to have my dream destroyed.’

On another occasion the judge was unhappy with one of the workers at the farm north of Melbourne who he felt had done a poor job. He was discussing the situation with Peter as they were droving sheep down the road when the same worker suddenly appeared, driving along the road with his family. Peter was surprised that his father did not give the worker a dressing down. ‘Never belittle a man in front of his children,’ John Bland told his son.

His father had traditional views on displays of male emotion: they were to be contained. If he could appear a hard man externally, perhaps it was because of his internal fears of showing the love he felt in such abundance for his children. He and Jane lost their first child, Jennifer, when she was only twelve weeks old. Whether out of fear of breaking down if he went to counselling, or his belief in traditional notions that Australian men show stoic endurance, not tears, in the face of tragedy, he bore his grief alone. Jane says: ‘He was terribly hurt by Jennifer’s death, and there was a lot of anger. But he would never allow himself to have counselling. He never wanted to read any of the Sudden Infant Death Syndrome literature. But, on the other
side, he held me together because he was so supportive. I think John had problems expressing emotion, or appearing soft. Yet there was a gentleness in the same man who would burst into tears if he heard the Twenty-third Psalm or the hymn “Once in Royal David’s City”, because we had those at Jennifer’s funeral. When Pete had his heart surgery we were both very vulnerable because of Jennifer’s death.’

Although his formal church-going faith lapsed in mid-life, he always carried a copy of the New Testament with him on the family holidays and he never lost his belief in Christian values. He once expressed his admiration of Saint Paul to a legal colleague. ‘That Saint Paul would have been a tough fella,’ he said.

Peter first learned he had a heart problem when he was three. On holiday with family friends, the Kellys, at Portsea, he was accidentally pushed off a balcony and his mother took him along to a local GP. The doctor said there was no damage from the fall, but during the examination picked up that Peter had a heart murmur. A specialist subsequently confirmed that he would need open-heart surgery but recommended that they wait until Peter was eight. Peter recalls that after that surgery was performed at the Alfred Hospital, his father broke down when he arrived home from the hospital. ‘We didn’t hug. He told me once down by the sheepyards that he wasn’t a “touchy feely” person. He put his children’s interests before everything, but he didn’t articulate that very well.’

For John Bland, getting on was a matter of hard work and careful planning. He believed that the first essential for children was earning a ‘ticket’ – a university or tertiary qualification upon which they could always rely. Together with the ‘ticket’ you needed determination and good planning. For
example, the far-sighted judge understood that Australia’s future lay in Asia, so after school he sent Joanna to Japan for six months to learn the language and the culture. He also gave careful thought to Peter’s career. Although he had gone to Camberwell Grammar, he sent Stuart and Peter as boarders to Melbourne Grammar School, because it was too long a daily journey into the city from the farm. Peter’s friends tended to come from the boarding house, but his father told him he should cast his friendship net wider to the day-school boys, who would one day form the nucleus of Melbourne’s business and political elite. The judge saw the value of networking and instilled it into his children. Peter had wanted to row at school, but his father said he should play tennis because it was a more social sport and there were better opportunities to network. When Peter reached Monash University the judge told his son he should be a resident at Richardson Hall, where the Asian students stayed. Every step had to be planned, with a view to its eventual worth as a step up the career ladder.

Persistence always topped planning in the judge’s list of essential character traits needed for success. While in his teens, Peter went on holiday with the family to Point Lonsdale and decided to teach himself to windsurf. He spent the first day in the water, climbing onto the board, hauling the sail up, and then falling over. Hour after hour he kept up the futile exercise, until it was time to go back to the house. Feeling an abject failure at windsurfing, he was surprised to hear words of praise from his father, who had spent the day watching his son’s endeavours from a deck chair. ‘Well done,’ said his father. ‘The most important thing is you didn’t give up.’

‘Dad’s view of life was that it’s about perseverance and achievement, and having a vision and remaining true to it.
For him, the world was a tough place, and you had to work hard. His vision was to bring up worldly-wise, self-sufficient children. He always wanted us to have a five-year plan.’ There were echoes again of Sidney Kidman’s attitude: ‘Life was a fight and the harder one fought the bigger the end would be.’

At fourteen, when Peter left the local high school and went to board at Melbourne Grammar, he also started playing a greater role in the running of the farm. In the holidays he would oversee the shearing, which gave him his first taste of management. One of his first acts was to sack one of the contract shearsers over his careless handling of the sheep, which left several animals with broken legs. The more confident he became, the more he would argue with his father. ‘It was a big issue even putting in a fence post. Once Dad insisted on putting in posts that were so big and solid that you could not drill them to put through fencing wire. He was so used to being in control, being a judge, and here was I, a fourteen-year-old, telling him how to do things. He thought I thought I knew everything. I used to ride the horses bare-back round the farm, and Dad used to think I was a complete show-off.’

Peter also became accustomed to the raw realities of farming. The family butchered its own meat and Peter often had to help his father with the ‘cut-ups’. This involved slitting a lamb’s throat, skinning and gutting it, hanging it overnight covered with a meat bag, cutting up the carcase, and then freezing it. To spare his children’s sensibilities, John Bland made sure they didn’t see him actually slit the lambs’ throats. Peter now carries out exactly the same task in front of his two-year-old daughter Olivia, seeing it as part of the natural life of a farm.

If Peter inherited determination, toughness and the work
ethic from his father, there were other genetic influences also at work. He had inherited adventuring and a willingness to take risks from his mother’s father and her grandfather, both called Dixon Robinson, who came from the rural gentry in Lancashire, in northern England. The elder Dixon Robinson was born in Clitheroe Castle in Lancashire in 1869, and educated at Sedbergh School. After school he sailed to New Zealand to join a friend, Houghton Jackson, who had a sheep station in the North Island. Before going out to New Zealand, Jackson had married a girl in England and he was returning to New Zealand to make the home ready for her arrival. However, word arrived from Lancashire that his wife had been told Jackson had only married her for her money, and that she was refusing to join her new husband. Jackson and Robinson turned round and headed back for England.

They were to become embroiled in one of the most infamous matrimonial conflicts of the late 1800s. Jackson and members of the Robinson family decided to kidnap the wife and return her to Jackson’s house in Blackburn.

The younger Dixon Robinson takes up the account of the ‘dastardly deed’ of his father and his friend in his diary: ‘The plan was to carry her off as she left Clitheroe church after Sunday morning service. However, things did not go exactly according to plan, for on the appointed Sunday she did not turn up at church and on the next Sunday she went out before the sermon. However, on the third Sunday all was well and my father picked the lady up in his arms and ran down the path to the street where his brother and brother-in-law were waiting with a carriage and horses and off they galloped to Blackburn. But matters did not work out satisfactorily for Houghton as his wife took the case to court and I believe the
case of Jackson v. Jackson, which she won, is still quoted as the one which altered the law so that husbands could no longer compel their wives to live with them.’

The elder Dixon Robinson’s parents ran a firm of family solicitors in Blackburn in Lancashire, and were keen for their son to join the firm, but he had neither the inclination nor the education to take up law. Instead, he married his wife, Adelaide, and bought a small farming property in Shropshire. Their son Dixon, Peter Bland’s grandfather, was born in 1900. He grew up with a family staff of four maids, a children’s nurse, two gardeners, a coachman and a stable boy. Dixon wrote of his father: ‘He played the part of a country squire to perfection. He rode well and was a first-class shot.’ The younger Dixon’s diary reveals the same delight in the rural life that Peter Bland was to show almost a century later on a farm at the other end of the world: ‘Threshing was a time of great bustle and activity with the golden grain running out into the sacks.’

He followed his father to Sedbergh School, as the First World War broke out. ‘At seventeen and a half years of age I would be called up for military service, given a few months’ training, and sent to France, where the expectation of life for a subaltern was three weeks. It was a depressing outlook, but seemingly inescapable.’

Destiny, and his willingness to take risks, intervened. A friend had recently met an officer in the Indian Army who spoke of the adventurous life out East, keeping the Indian independence movement and the Khyber Pass tribesmen under control. Dixon Robinson decided to sign up. He took the army entrance exams and when he passed, ‘rushed back to tell the exciting news to my mother, who promptly burst into tears’. It was a maternal reaction Jane Bland could relate
to each time Peter told her about his impending departure on another trip.

Dixon Robinson had a distinguished career in the Indian Army, winning a Military Cross and being promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He saw service throughout India and the Middle East, and was wounded once. He was a fine polo player, with a love of horses that his grandson Peter was later to inherit. Peter also inherited his grandfather’s skill with his hands and ability to build or repair almost anything. Raised with the Indian Army’s emphasis on uniform, formality and proper manners, Dixon Robinson instilled similar values into his children and grandchildren. Gentlemen opened car doors for ladies, and they walked on the outside of the pavement when they accompanied them.

He met his Australian wife Nell Watson in India in 1935. Nell had lost both her parents around the age of ten and grown up with her three sisters. Well-known in the family for her determination, she took her younger sister, Betty, on a trip to India to stay with a family in Bombay who imported Australian horses. Dixon Robinson also happened to be staying there at the same time because his cavalry unit, the Scinde Horse, bought their horses from the family. He was instantly smitten with Nell and arranged to take his leave in Melbourne later that year. He proposed almost as soon as he saw her again in Melbourne, and a few weeks later they were married in Christ Church, South Yarra. Nell went back to India with him, and although she returned to Melbourne to have Jane, she and the family continued to live in India until 1947, just before Independence was declared.

When he had to leave India, Dixon Robinson decided he would make Australia his home. With his happy memories of
rural life in Lancashire and Shropshire, he set about buying a small property with some cattle at Flowerdale in country Victoria. Near retirement age, he moved to a farm closer to Melbourne, which was only a few kilometres from John Bland’s Embru property. The Blands and the Robinsons came together when John met Jane at the shire hall dance.

Peter Bland knew his grandfather Dixon Robinson simply as ‘Fa’. When his mother went back to nursing before his open-heart surgery to take her mind of Peter’s impending operation, it was ‘Fa’ who would pick him up from the local school and take him home for the afternoon. Neat in dress and manner, Peter learned much from him. ‘Measure twice; cut once,’ he would say as they were preparing to do a carpentry job together. A product of his times and the Indian Army, he believed in the right behaviour. Tea, he used to tell his grandson, should be drunk in a cup with a saucer, not in a mug. Endowed with good personal skills, he could take people with him, just as he had taken the men from his Indian regiments, the Sixth Lancers and the Scinde Horse, with him. Peter always found it hard to imagine his grandfather fighting in the war and winning the Military Cross because he was such a gentleman.

It was apparent from the start that Peter had inherited a love of adventure and the outdoor life. The most significant pointer to his future direction in life came when he was made captain of outdoor activities at Melbourne Grammar. He was also head of his house. He performed reasonably in his final school exams, getting 282 out of 410, but he was still short of the entry requirement of 310 to do commerce at the University of Melbourne, or 290 to study at Monash. Not for the first – or last – time in his life, he refused to take no for an
answer. He went straight to the top – to the Vice-Chancellor at Monash University.

‘I camped outside his office for a week. After lunch one day I saw that the Vice-Chancellor’s secretary had gone out for a moment and I breezed straight into his office and said, “The secretary tells me you are reviewing my application.” He looked through the papers on his desk and said he didn’t have an application from me. I said that was funny because his secretary had told me to come up and see him. He called his secretary and she came back with my application. He said, “We’ll let you know,” and two days later I received a letter offering me the last place in the third round of student offers for economics. I had learned a powerful lesson that perseverance pays off.’
ONCE PETER BLAND was into Monash, his commitment to economics took second place to his new-found love of windsurfing. The moment of reckoning came at the end of the year, after his exams, when he was at the farm preparing for shearing. His friend Justin Harty rang, bearing the bad news that Peter had failed everything except philosophy, which he had clearly spent a lot of time thinking about while windsurfing on Port Phillip Bay. Because his exam results were so dismal he was called before the review board at Monash and advised that a place would not be held for him the following year. His father was not pleased. One day when they were working together on the farm, digging fence-post holes in the full mid-summer heat, the judge reminded his son that if he did not pull his finger out and apply himself to his studies
he would be digging a lot more holes in his life. There were veiled threats of withdrawing financial support if Peter did not work harder towards earning his ‘ticket’ in life.

Having been rejected by the economics department at Monash, Peter applied to the same university to do arts, knowing that he could take a number of economics subjects within the arts faculty. He hoped that if he did well in those he would be able to transfer back to economics. He studied hard and passed his exams at the end of the year. His goal all along had been a commerce degree from the University of Melbourne and a way to achieve that suddenly appeared. He learned from the commerce department at the University of Melbourne that the government was considering accepting Council for Adult Education courses as credits for a university degree. So he enrolled in CAE economics at the University of Melbourne, at the same time applying to do a part-time accounting course at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. With a view to earning some income, he also did a wool-classing course at the Melbourne College of Textiles. After completing this course he got a job labouring at the Wesfarmers Dalgety woolstore in Brooklyn, while continuing to study part-time.

He appeared to be closer to his goal of transferring full-time to commerce at the University of Melbourne, and was determined to do well in his end-of-year exams. With his old friend Colin Keane he studied all the accounting exam papers for the previous six years, and felt he had everything covered. The results, stating that he had failed, which meant that he would not be able to transfer to the University of Melbourne, left him in complete shock and disbelief. Storming in to his RMIT lecturer, he demanded that his paper be re-marked. The lecturer advised him that all failed papers were re-marked
by a second examiner and that no mistake had been made. Determined to prove that he had been wronged, Bland demanded to see his paper. Angrily, the lecturer went to find Bland’s paper and began flicking through the pages. He suddenly stopped when he saw that the marker had skipped from question 3 to question 5, mistakenly ignoring question 4, which was worth 20 per cent of the marks. The humbled lecturer offered a letter of apology, and a re-marked paper.

Armed with the letter and his new pass mark, Bland rushed across to the University of Melbourne to plead his case. Not content to leave his application at the reception desk, he delivered his letter in person to the Vice-Chancellor, who promised to review the application. A week later the university offered him a place in arts, with his CAE subjects being credited towards his final degree. A year later he transferred to commerce and graduated with the commerce degree that had been his aim. The road had been long and tortuous, but determination had finally taken him to his destination.

If 1990 stood out as the year he was finally admitted to the University of Melbourne, it was also memorable for the start of his relationship with Julia Knight, which led to them marrying in 1997. The two had known each other since schooldays, his at Melbourne Grammar, hers at Merton Hall, the sister school, but the friendship had not at that stage developed into anything more because both became involved in long-term relationships with others. Julia had the reputation of being the unattainable beauty and, for once in his life, Bland did not press his case.

‘Blandy was your good-looking, very, very nice, polite gentleman,’ she recalls. ‘Great on the dance floor. He was an absolute pleasure to talk to, and a flirt, but not ever in a sleazy
The status of their relationship changed in early October 1990 when they sat next to each other at the twenty-first birthday party of a mutual friend, Georgie Shea. They talked, Bland gave her a lift home, and the next day, emboldened by his progress the day before, he rang to say he had tickets for a show that night and would she like to go? It was a white lie. He had no tickets. ‘What’s the show?’ asked Julia, willing to be persuaded to drop her plans to cook an evening meal for her parents. Bland, phoning from the house he shared with his friend Johnnie Knights, ad-libbed to describe the non-existent show to which he had invited Julia. ‘It’s a, err, dramatic . . . musical . . . comedy.’ ‘Sounds good,’ said Julia. ‘I’d like to go.’ An ecstatic Bland put his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to his friend Johnnie: ‘She’s said yes. Grab the paper.’ Knights rushed to pick up the newspaper and turned to the entertainment guide. Bland noticed an advertisement for a musical comedy, Nunsense, at the Athenaeum Theatre. He agreed to pick up Julia at 6 pm, and put the phone down. With Knights driving, they tore off down Collins Street to the Athenaeum Theatre. While Knights double-parked, Bland rushed in and bought two tickets, and the pair of them raced back home to give Bland time to change before picking Julia up at six. He arrived in his most confident, urbane mood. It was episodes such as these which made his elder sister Joanna say ‘Pete has more front than Myer’.

The date was a success. They ate afterwards at Pellegrini’s spaghetti bar and Bland invited Julia to go horse-riding with him at the farm the following Friday. On that occasion, Julia
was to discover exactly what she was letting herself in for. After having only an hour's sleep the night before because of a nightclub visit, she spent a couple of hours riding round the farm. ‘Then we had lunch and he said, “Why don’t we ride up Mount Macedon?” Now, we’d already ridden for two hours, and I hadn’t ridden for about three years, so I was feeling a bit worse for wear. But I thought, “That sounds like a great idea.” We took off down the front driveway and my horse jumped the drainage ditch without me realising while it was turning the corner. I promptly fell off and landed smack on the road, and my horse took off down the road. Pete charged off down the road and brought the horse back and I got back on. He was impressed because he thought that was quite tough.’

Bland realised he had met his match. ‘My frustration has always been that I’ve tended to wear out the people around me. That’s why I was attracted to Julia. When she said, “Where’s that damn horse? I want to get back on!” I thought, “That’s the girl for me.”’

Appropriately for the would-be adventurer, it turned out to be an endurance date. It was a cold, drizzling October afternoon, and he kept her attention off the rain by reciting ‘The Man From Snowy River’ in its entirety. By the time they made it to the top of Mount Macedon, Julia was wet and cold. Gallantly, Pete offered her his jacket, and they decided to knock at the first house they saw with a paddock to ask if they could leave the horses there until they could be picked up. The plan was to ring Pete’s father and ask him for a lift back to the farm.

The first couple of houses couldn’t offer a paddock, though they did offer a welcome glass of whiskey, and finally they made it to the Mount Macedon Inn, which had a paddock at
A Date with Endurance

the back. Julia recalls: ‘We called Pete’s dad, and he came up in his yellow farm truck. I was cold and wet and looking like something the cat dragged in, and it had to be the first time I met him.’ Julia was driven to the farm while Pete rode his horse and led Julia’s back down the mountain, like the young Snowy River rider from Banjo Paterson’s classic poem.

Julia says: ‘I remember walking in the door of the farm, sitting down on the floor of this magnificent guest bedroom and wondering how on earth I was going to take off my boots. I was wet and sore, I could hardly move my arms, I couldn’t sit down, and my hands were red raw from the bridle. Eventually I crawled into the shower and put on a pair of tracksuit pants and talked to Pete’s dad while we ate the fish he had bought at the market. It was Friday.’

Julia was instantly struck by the rugged horseman who could recite ‘The Man from Snowy River’ in full. ‘I thought it was the most romantic thing – like the boyfriend you wish for. Not only was he good-looking and intelligent and fun and could ride and was physically attractive and very rural and healthy... he reads poetry. And it wasn’t pretentious. He was absolutely genuine in his love for this poetry. The first year we were together we did not have one bad word pass between us. We were so in love and riding this incredible wave of happiness. We’d just race around the farm on horses. It was this lovely, natural relationship and absolutely magical.’

Julia was to learn twelve months later that it was not another woman pulling Peter away from her, but the lure of adventure. One day after his final exams, with the shearing season over, he told her he intended going to South America. Taking stock, she decided she would go overseas as well, to France as an au pair. ‘When Pete wanted to go to South
America I was really upset because I wanted to be with him. That’s why I left the country as well, because I didn’t want to be here without him. I always knew Pete was wanting to travel. I was someone who wanted to travel as well. But I didn’t think I would go with him to South America. I don’t believe in being joined at the hip with someone. I don’t believe that when you become a couple you become one person. I always believe that you are two people together. I never wanted to change Pete, and he would never want to change me.’

If Julia was ultimately accepting of Pete’s South American trip, it did not go down well with his father, who felt his son should settle down straight away and start building his career. The two older children, Joanna and Stuart, had both begun their careers in secure professions – Joanna in nursing and midwifery, and Stuart in accountancy – but Peter opted to take a more adventurous route. ‘That trip was memorable because it was the first time I was totally my own man. I paid for it with the money I’d been left by Dad’s aunt, and I felt “It’s my life, my money, and I’m sorry if you don’t approve, because I’m going, anyway.” I think I’d been striving for independence since I was eight. Dad was such a strong, powerful man, and every argument used to end with him trying to reiterate his control. It felt like having a claustrophobic blanket over me.’

With characteristic brazenness, Bland contacted the head of the Australian Wool Corporation, explaining that he was a qualified professional wool-classer and asking if they could help him arrange a job on a sheep station in South America. A position was found for him as a station hand on Estancia el Condor, a large ranch on the Argentine/Chilean border.

He prepared for the trip with a ten-week crash course in Spanish, at the end of which he could say two things: ‘Hasta
la vista, bebe', and ‘yo soy de Sevilla’ (‘I come from Seville’ – which he didn't). The ranch manager had offered to fly him down from Buenos Aires, but he opted to see more of the country by taking a 48-hour bus trip. There was high excitement on the bus because there had been a volcanic eruption at Mount Erebus, in Antarctica, and the sulphurous cloud of smoke and gas had drifted across to Argentina, causing sheep to die. On the way down, all the bus passengers were trying to make clear to him in Spanish exactly what had happened. He couldn't make out everything they said, but he could pick up enough to know that Antarctica was a dangerous place.

He was told Estancia el Condor was one of the largest sheep stations in the world, with over 300,000 animals. It was a windswept desert, with icy blasts billowing in from Antarctica. It was a world of men on horseback, accompanied by faithful dogs, as he had imagined Sidney Kidman's outback Australia in the nineteenth century. It was also a world where men ate meat, and more meat. He had lamb chops for pre-breakfast; lamb chops for breakfast; lamb chops for lunch; and lamb chops for supper. After a week he had to go to the doctor in the nearby town of Rio Gallegos because his digestive system could not cope with the amount of meat it was being required to process.

Because the Welsh were early settlers in the region, the few people who spoke English did so with a Welsh accent. Two people at the ranch spoke English, but for most of the time Bland was forced to use his Spanish. He made friends quickly, and his willingness to chat to the other young station hands once caused the manager to rebuke him: ‘Mas trabajo, menos hablando’ (‘more work, less talking’). He could not initially understand the smirks of his fellow station hands when, as his
stomach grumbled with hunger before mealtime, he would tell them ‘Yo tengo hombre’ (‘I have a man’) instead of ‘Yo tengo hambre’ (‘I am hungry’). Eventually his error was explained and, in the macho world of an Argentinian sheep station, he did not forget.

Bland looked the part in his Akubra, R.M. Williams pants, work boots and red bandana tied in a knot around his neck in the style of the locals. He worked in a team of twenty shearers, shearing 4000 sheep a day. The locals were constantly testing out the ‘gringo’ to see what he could do, and Bland met all expectations. When the other wool-classers fell ill, he took over, checking the quality of the wool and placing the different standards in separate bins, as he had learned to do in Melbourne. It tested his Spanish as much as his wool-classing skills. The degree to which he had been accepted showed when the station’s second-in-command was faced with having to put down his old, infirm dog. The man could not face shooting the dog himself, and asked Bland if he would do it. It was a mark of great respect in that macho world where the pecking order was men, dogs, horses and women (in that order). Reluctantly, Bland agreed to do it.

Saturdays were red letter days at Estancia el Condor. When Bland first arrived he had been intrigued by the caravan standing outside the bunkhouse where all the shearers lived. What was it for? On the first Saturday he found out. At the end of the day’s work the station hands all gathered under the water tank, which was tipped open for them to have their weekly shower. Soon afterwards taxis began arriving carrying prostitutes from Rio Gallegos. The prostitutes disappeared inside the caravan, and the men formed a line outside, waiting their turn. Bland opted not to follow this local custom. When
he and Julia had agreed to go their separate ways that year – he to South America, she to Europe – it did not lessen the mutual commitment. ‘My attitude was, “Am I willing to risk that for this?” Despite all the testosterone floating around in this body, I didn’t go out with anyone else that year.’

The manager of el Condor asked his parents if Bland could work as a shearer for a spell at their property, Estancia Cullen, which was further south on Tierra del Fuego, the island jointly owned by Argentina and Chile. After a few days there, he hitch-hiked with an airconditioning repair man to Ushuaia, at the gateway to Antarctica. The man invited him to stay at his house and, visiting the sights, Bland went for a walk in the national park. He walked to a point where he could see the Beagle Channel, through which vessels travelled en route to Antarctica. Later, gazing at the giant Russian ice-breakers in the port, he set himself a goal: one day he would get to Antarctica.

Fittingly for a man addicted to living his life on the extremities, Bland now worked his way north up the western edge of South America – from Chile, back to Argentina, to Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. At each stop he made light of possible danger. At Calafate in Chile, opposite the Pacific Ocean, he climbed the giant glacier falling down from the Andes mountains. ‘I was enthralled by it. There was a big melt point, and I was told not to go near it because I’d fall straight down. I got somebody to hold my wrist while I leant over to have a look.’ At Bariloche in Argentina he got lost in the mountains. Outside La Paz in Bolivia he went trekking at an altitude of 5000 metres, and over the next five days descended into the Amazon jungle at Rurrenabaque where he went jaguar hunting. At Trujillo in northern Peru he shrugged aside the advice
that 'gringos' should not venture into the area because buses were being attacked by terrorists based in camps in the Andes. He got through safely, even though the bus before his was stopped and robbed in the middle of the night.

Central to all these adventures was the charge of adrenaline that Bland felt when faced with extreme stress. At the very time that Bland’s adventuring heroes, Mawson and Shackleton, were doing their journeys of discovery to the South Pole in the early 1900s, medical researchers in England were doing a different sort of journey of discovery, to work out exactly how the human nervous system worked. It had always been thought that the nervous system was operated by a series of electrical impulses, but the English researchers worked out that the nervous system worked by the release of chemicals. Faced by danger, the brain sent the body chemical messengers to prepare itself for ‘fight or flight’. One of these chemicals was adrenaline, manufactured in the adrenal gland on top of the kidneys, which sparked physiological changes in a human placed under stress. These responses included an increase in heart and breathing rate, an increase of the blood flow to the muscles, a release of glucose in the blood to raise energy levels, and a dilation of the pupils. For people like Mawson and Shackleton, facing extreme stress in Antarctica, the increase of adrenaline produced by their sympathetic nervous system made them more physically and mentally alert. They showed that some people were able to thrive in the face of such stress.

Almost 100 years after the discovery of how adrenaline worked in the human body, it has become the natural ‘high’ synonymous with the world’s growing adventure industry. The riskier the adventure – mountain climbing, white-water rafting, paragliding, sea kayaking, trekking in Antarctica – the
greater the release of adrenaline for many of the participants. The World Wide Web is now full of sites called ‘Adrenaline Junkies’ or ‘Adrenaline Rush’. The shared addiction is the release of adrenaline and the surge of energy and heart rate that comes with stepping beyond our daily existence and suddenly experiencing life on the edge. By his own admission Peter Bland is addicted to the rush of adrenaline. When others have warned him to step back from the edge, he has pressed on regardless. ‘I’ve never done drugs,’ he says, ‘but I am an adrenaline junkie.’

Bland’s journey north began in the boat from Puerto Natales, in Chile’s south-western tip, to Puerto Montt. Money was so tight that he travelled in budget class, which meant sleeping on a mattress in the ship’s hull. The well-off ‘gringos’ had comfortable cabins up on the top deck. The aim was to get from Puerto Montt to Bariloche, a town in the Andes where there is a 135-kilometre trek through the mountains. Bland had met up with an Englishman called Alan, and they agreed to do the trek together. It was as well, because four days later Bland found himself lost in the bush, on the side of a volcano.

‘It was cold, because we were quite high and, because Alan was a slower walker than me, and I was getting bored waiting for him, I charged off ahead at my own pace. It was a mistake, because there was heavy fog. The clouds started rolling in and so I sheltered behind some rocks, thinking I’d just wait for him. But he never came.’

Bland was lost without the map, which Alan had. All he had was his backpack, a tent and a compass. He’d learned a lesson that was to prove invaluable later in Antarctica: never separate from your walking companion. Trying to remember
what he could from his last sight of the map, which indicated he had to get back down into a valley, he set off. When the scrub became impenetrable, he found the creek and walked along it. He continued until nightfall, but there was no sign of Alan. Frozen, he put up the tent and considered his options. He decided he would try to retrace his steps the next day.

The next morning was wet and foggy, and when it became too dangerous to continue, he camped at the base of the crown of the volcano. ‘I remember I was cramping up badly and there were no matches to light anything with, so I ate raw pasta with salt and chocolate powder, all mixed together. I was so cold I wore my wet clothes while walking, keeping my other clothes dry in a plastic bag in my pack. I got into my sleeping bag and did sit-ups and push-ups to get warm – a trick I’ve used since in Antarctica.’

Bland woke next day to find the side of the volcano still hidden by fog, making it impossible for him to climb. He went back inside his tent and waited until midday, when the fog lifted. He was packed up and ready to start the climb when he spotted people descending towards him. It was a rescue party, alerted by Alan the night before. Proudly, Bland declined their offer of help, and the suggestion that he descend on a donkey. ‘I said, “No, thank you. I walked in here by myself, I’ll walk out by myself.”’ But he gratefully accepted the offer of soup, and they walked down together the next day.

‘That was one of the first times I’ve been lost in the wilderness. I learned some lessons about always carrying your own navigation equipment. Secondly, if you’re walking at a faster rate, find other ways to even it out. For instance, put some more weight on the faster person and take it off the slower person, so the whole team walks together. Don’t get apart.'
and I really benefited from this experience in Antarctica. We had photocopied, laminated charts of each sector, and we each carried our own GPS and compass. We also had our own cooker, fuel and lighter. While one of us carried the main tent, the other carried a bivouac, so we knew we could survive independently if anything happened to the other person.’

Bland had arrived in South America with just two contacts, at Estancia el Condor and at Estancia Carlota, north of Buenos Aires, which belonged to Harry and Susan Jefferies. Their son was studying at agricultural college in Australia with a friend of Bland’s called Nigel Watson. Watson asked whether Bland could go and work on the Jefferies’ cattle property while he was in Argentina. The Jefferies said yes, and Bland made his way there by bus after climbing the mountains at Bariloche.

At Carlota, Bland became close friends with Segundo, the second son of the owners of the neighbouring property, called ‘la Julia’. Segundo (literally meaning ‘second’) taught Bland the local sport of ‘Pato’ (Spanish for ‘duck’), a variation of polo where the riders try to score goals by picking up a soccer ball with leather handles strapped round it. It derives its name from the way Argentinian workers used to throw the dead ducks they bought at the market to one another. They played at weekends, and the weekdays were spent from dawn to dusk on horseback, rounding up the cattle. Bland acquired the nickname of ‘the bear’ because typically he would be the first to arrive at the calves and he would then jump onto them and pin them to the ground for castration and branding. When he left, the Jefferies gave him a present of a green lasso made of cow hide. Segundo later visited Bland at the farm outside Melbourne, where he, too, became known as ‘the bear’, for his ability to carry three lambs at the same time.
From the highs of companionship at Carlota, Bland now descended to the depths of depression when he arrived at the hotel in Buenos Aires. He was tired and lonely. Missing Julia, and the activity which had stopped him dwelling on her absence for much of the trip, he hit the emotional depths. Sitting on his bed, enveloped in gloom and loneliness, he decided he would leave next day and fly to Europe to rejoin Julia. His mind was made up: he would go to the airport first thing in the morning. But overnight his mood lifted, like the fog on the Andes peaks, and he felt reinvigorated and determined to continue his journey. Bland hadn’t forgotten what Sidney Kidman said when he was searching desperately for water in the drought-stricken outback: never, ever give up. He had also learned another lesson, just as he had when he made the mistake of separating from his English companion in the mountains at Bariloche. He vowed that he would never again make a major decision without first sleeping overnight to reflect on the consequences.

Back on track, Bland took the train from Buenos Aires north to Bolivia. Having seen the silver mines there, he boarded a riverboat at Rurrenabaque, in the Bolivian Amazon delta, and was amazed to see living people being swept along in the current, in the direction of the goldfields. ‘They had their worldly possessions, which were nothing much more than a gold pan, strapped to them and they clung on to logs. They tried to get the driver of the riverboat to stop and pick them up, but he refused, so we kept on passing all these people bobbing down the river.’

After the river journey he joined a week-long expedition into the Amazon, where the main adrenaline rush came from the hunt for jaguars, monkeys and snakes. ‘We went out one
day hunting a jaguar and we had the option to carry a gun or
carry a camera. We all said, “No, we’re not going to shoot it,
we’d like to take a photo if possible.” All day we were slowly
circling this jaguar. We could hear him roaring in the distant
jungle. We got so close that when the jaguar roared you could
feel it right through you. We heard sticks breaking and the
foliage moving, but we never saw the jaguar. We must have
been so close, but we never actually saw it.’

From the Amazon delta he travelled to Lake Titicaca, the
highest navigable lake in the world, situated on the border
between Bolivia and Peru. The highlight of his visit to southern
Peru was a trip to the celebrated Inca ruins at Machu Picchu.

Bolivia was the place of exile for the legendary American
outlaws Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, but Bland
found the outlaws in Lima, Peru. He was put on edge from
the moment of arrival when he discovered tanks on the streets
and a 10 pm curfew. Next day he walked downtown to find
the bus station, and asked a woman for directions on how to
get there. She said she would go with him, and as they set off,
a man crossed the road and joined them. Bland by now was
aware he had been set up. ‘I’m wedged between the two of
them and we go round the corner when suddenly, bang, this
other man grabs me and grabs them. He throws the guy
against the wall and starts beating him up. The woman was
pretending to be hysterical.’

The assailant said he was a policeman, hailed a taxi, and
told the three of them to get in. Bland found himself wedged
between the man and woman in the back seat, while the
policeman sat in the front. ‘He leaned back and started frisking
the woman beside me, and pulled this great big wad of mari-
juana out of her bra. Then he frisked the guy and took the
money out of his wallet. Holding it up to the light, he said, “This is counterfeit money.”

Now he turned his attention to the money belt Bland wore beneath his shirt. There was only US$30 in it, and a small piece of gold jewellery he had bought for Julia. ‘Be careful, please, it’s gold,’ Bland told the man. Unimpressed, the man opened his mouth and pointed towards his gold fillings. Then he asked for the bribe. ‘This is very bad,’ he said. ‘Drugs, counterfeit money, and a gringo. We’re going to the chief magistrate immediately. But this whole matter can be resolved right now for US$30. We can fix it now for US$30. Do you understand?’

Bland understood exactly what was being suggested, and he wanted no part of it. Instead, he called the man’s bluff. ‘You take me to the chief magistrate and the police commissioner and I’ll tell them exactly what happened.’ The phoney policeman gathered together all the things he had taken out of Bland’s pockets and money belt, told the driver to stop, and ordered the ‘gringo’ out of the car. Once the car had disappeared Bland ran through the maze of streets to make sure they could not find him again.

He resumed his journey northwards through Peru towards Ecuador. His itinerary included a visit to the Inca site at Cajamarca, where the Norwegian Thor Heyerdahl, one of his adventuring heroes, was engaged in an archeological dig. But he was disappointed to find that Heyerdahl was temporarily away on a speaking tour in Europe, so he could not meet his idol face to face.

From Guayaquil, in southern Ecuador, he had hoped to catch a boat to the Galapagos Islands, beloved of naturalists and adventurers, but it proved beyond his meagre budget. Instead he spent two weeks surfing on the beach at Manta,
teaching English to a local Ecuadorian boy in exchange for the loan of his surfboard.

He also had a wrestle with a six-metre long python which had wrapped itself round his neck after a local had shown the snake to him. He had been told to hold the snake behind its head. Unfortunately, it responded by wrapping itself round his neck and gripping tightly. He learned an early lesson in the art of negotiation. He figured that if he let go of the python's head there was a chance it would let go of his head. With the blood rushing to his face and his heart pounding, he let go of the python, and breathed again when it, too, released its grip. He had just used up one of the nine lives his sister Joanna swears he has been given.

Bland was starting to make a name for himself with the locals. On the flight from Guayaquil to Quito he had been befriended by an Ecuadorian born-again Christian, who invited him to stay at his house. As part of the man's hospitality he invited Bland to a service at the Evangelical Christian church he attended. He thought Bland would be interested to hear the visiting American preacher.

Sitting at the back of the church, Bland suddenly heard himself being addressed by the preacher. ‘Peter, we’re told you’re an adventurer with a very strong and powerful spirit. Will you please come up to the front? We understand that you have an aura about you.’ Always happy to work an audience, Bland walked up to the front of the church and stood while 30 ecstatic congregation members laid their hands upon his head, praying for him. The preacher intoned: ‘God has put this power into this man and we pray for him and his adventurous spirit as he travels through our country.’ Inexperienced in the laying on of hands, Bland was unsure
quite how to react. He contemplated springing up and crying out ‘Hallelujah’, but resisted the temptation. The congregation gave Bland, a non-believer, a present of a pocket-sized Bible to take with him on his future adventures, and some friends and family believed that from then on he travelled with God’s hands over his head.

He had booked to fly from Quito to Amsterdam on KLM, and as the plane neared the end of the flight he was surprised to hear an announcement over the intercom: ‘Will Peter Bland please come to the front of the cabin?’ When he did so the stewardess looked him up and down in surprise. She had expected someone in short pants. ‘You’re big for your age,’ she said. Bland replied: ‘Well, I am 25.’ The picture became clearer for the stewardess. ‘Your mother called our office in Amsterdam and asked us to give you a message. She’s changed hotels.’

Bland spent three days with his mother in Amsterdam and then, as Julia was with her sister Megan in Italy, he decided to go to London to stay with his brother Stuart before meeting up with Julia in Paris. Like many highly anticipated and emotional reunions, it didn’t go to plan. Their original agreement was to meet at the bus station in Paris, but a strike by French lorry drivers on the day Peter was due to arrive meant that he could not travel from London to Paris by bus. Instead, he had to take the train. The message he had sent telling of the change of plans never reached Julia, and she spent all day waiting at the bus station, growing more and more frantic, imagining the worst, while he spent the day waiting at the hotel. Finally, at the end of a long, despairing day, he was sitting in the cafe across the road from the hotel when he saw Julia and Megan coming out. After an eight month separation, the story had its happy ending.
From Paris they went on the Australian pilgrimage to the Greek Islands. A friend in London, James Clubley, had suggested there was good windsurfing on Paros and, equipped with a windsurfing magazine that reported Golden Beach on Paros was the ultimate windsurfing paradise, they caught the ferry to the island from Piraeus Harbour in Athens. Following another of Bland’s golden rules, that necessity is the mother of invention, he and Julia made a living at a beachside taverna. Julia worked as a waitress and painted pebbles to make into necklaces to sell to the tourists. Peter, alias Mr Practicality, built a shed to hold the windsurfers belonging to the taverna owner. He did the job so well that the owner asked him to renovate his stone and concrete home out in the country. The house had no roof, so they slept under the stars until September. With his eye always open for a deal, Peter also set himself up as a windsurfing instructor, using the owner’s windsurfers. He took 60 per cent of the money, and the owner took 40 per cent. Life settled down to a euphoric daily rhythm of renovation in the early morning, windsurfing lessons in the late morning and sailing in the afternoon. There were occasional high points, like the arrival of the luxury 90-foot yacht formerly owned by George Bush, and now belonging to a New York property developer. Never one to be slow coming forward, Bland sailed up to the yacht on his windsurfer and shouted out to the crew: ‘Do you want to come to a full moon party tonight?’ They turned up and everyone partied all night. The only time Bland was not in his element was when the owner of the yacht invited Julia out to the boat, and she sunbaked on his deck for the day.

John Bland was unimpressed when Peter sent him a fax saying he and Julia were having a great time on holiday in
Santorini as a well-earned break from the windsurfing school in Paros. First of all, John Bland objected to faxes, believing letters were the correct way to correspond and, secondly, he thought it was time Peter applied himself to a serious job. ‘What do you mean, holidays?’ he replied. ‘Your whole life is a holiday.’

Like all idyllic summers, this one had to end, and it did so after Peter had a row with the taverna owner, who accused him of pocketing all the money from a windsurfing lesson. Peter, a moral stickler like his father, was affronted and went for a twenty-kilometre run – the longest of his life – to pound his anger out on the beach. The taverna owner made light of his accusation, saying he had been joking, but Peter and Julia decided to leave. On Paros they had met two Austrians, Klaus and Gabi, who invited them to stay in Vienna. So, as the European autumn set in, they hitched a ride with their Austrian friends to Vienna, the city of the waltz and the Blue Danube. After touring the sights and the Spanish riding school, they borrowed bikes from Klaus and Gabi and set off along the Danube into the countryside. In Passau they met an Austrian called Martin who owned a bicycle shop, and it was there that they purchased their transport for the rest of their European journey. While Peter bought a top-of-the-range racing machine, Julia bought a sedate but reliable woman’s bike with a basket on the front. The two bicycles were to transport them to Germany, Luxemburg, France and Spain as they camped their way around Europe. The only time they left the bicycles behind and borrowed the Kombi van belonging to Martin, it broke down in Czechoslovakia. They still managed to breathe in the liberated air of Prague, only two years after the end of communism. There were buskers playing Beatles
songs on the Charles Bridge, and they drank Budweiser beer, named after a little town near Prague.

Having returned the Kombi van to Austria, they resumed their bicycle tour of Europe. Although a car came round the corner one day in Germany and rode over the wheel of Bland’s bike as it lay on the kerb, the wheel was soon repaired and the couple resumed their journey. As Julia was to concede, ‘Pete’s pretty unstoppable.’

They wanted to be home by Christmas 1992, and wound their way back up through Barcelona to Versailles, where Julia had spent time as an au pair, and finally Paris. Julia flew back alone while Peter made his way to Amsterdam to catch his return KLM flight to Melbourne. He had now done Europe on a bicycle and US$10 a day. On the long flight home from Amsterdam, as he gazed vacantly up the aisle of the semi-darkened cabin, he daydreamed about his next goal – becoming a sailor. He had learned to sail in his teens with John Collingwood, father of his former girlfriend Sarah and his schoolfriend Stewart, but now he wanted to do blue-water sailing. He would do navigation and seamanship courses, and obtain his yachtmaster’s certificate. In South America he had met a Dutchman who put in his mind the idea of sailing across the Atlantic. That’s what he meant to do next. At the very thought of it he felt his adrenaline start to run.

Reality returned in the customs hall at Tullamarine. With long blond hair and his passport showing stamps for South America and Amsterdam, the customs officer considered him a high risk for drugs. He was also intrigued by the bicycle Bland was wheeling beside him, and what was inside the tube. He began by rifling through Bland’s luggage and in the course of the search he came across Bland’s diary, with
a Melbourne Grammar sticker on the front. ‘Ah, you went to Melbourne Grammar, did you?’ said the customs officer. ‘Yes, I did’, said Bland, wondering whether his admission would incur the annoyance of a non-private-school-educated customs officer. Instead, the officer replied in a superior tone, ‘Well I went to Scotch College.’ The rivalry between Melbourne’s top two private boys’ schools was simmering into the customs hall.

Bland raised the temperature further by countering: ‘Well, a fat lot of good your education did you!’ The incensed former Scotch College customs officer pointed to the bicycle, and said: ‘We’re going to cut the tyres.’ ‘You can’t do that,’ said Bland. ‘They’re $200-dollar tyres, and if you cut them then I want to know NOW, before you cut them, that you or the government will replace them.’ The officer said there was no obligation upon customs to do that, and Bland asked for his superior.

The supervisor appeared and looked at Bland’s passport. ‘Peter Bland. You’re not John Bland’s son, are you?’ Bland confirmed he was. ‘Ah,’ said the supervisor. ‘My wife Joan used to babysit your brother and sister. There’s no way the judge would let you do anything bad. Through you go.’ Melbourne Grammar had won the argument, John Bland had conclusively proved the value of networking, and Peter Bland went through the arrival doors to be welcomed home by his brother Stuart.
Chapter Five

WHEN NO MEANS YES

One of the problems for Peter Bland was that, however many things he was working on at any one time, his mind kept searching for still more challenges. So, as he adjusted to life back in Australia, working on the farm with his father and doing navigation and seamanship courses in evening classes and by correspondence, he decided to try his hand at some real live commerce, as opposed to the theoretical variety he had learned at university. He knew he wanted to be running his own business, and not be a cog in someone else’s wheel. He believed you never made any money working for someone else. Sometimes he looked enviously at his friends in Melbourne’s corporate world, in stockbroking and accounting, and wondered what their lives were like. When he ventured the opinion that you never made money working for someone
else, his friend Justin Harty would respond: ‘Let the big corporations pay you whilst you learn, and then go off on your own.’

He tossed around business ideas with his childhood friend Colin Keane. ‘We talked about this CD-ROM concept where you could do a tour through an art gallery and walk up to any painting and press the button for the appropriate spiel. Fifteen years later they’re very popular and I wish we had persevered with that, but we did spend $1000 registering the idea and getting modules made up, but it didn’t really take off. I wish I’d had the money to keep going with the idea.’

Keane happened to mention he had a great original shortbread recipe, handed down from a Scottish family. Toss in a shortbread recipe with a dash of Australian bush tradition, and what do you get? Settlers Shortbread. Bland and Keane cooked the first batch in the oven in the unrenovated servants’ quarters at the farm, and took it nervously down to the local deli for approval. Yes, said the deli owner, he would buy a case. The fledgling company was up and running.

Bland’s father had a long-standing legal friend called John Allen, who had been highly successful in business outside his law firm. He was street smart and experienced in business and John Bland liked him to mentor his three children in their careers. When Allen first heard about Settlers Shortbread he thought it must be a joke. How could Peter hope to compete against the large companies by baking in an old oven at the farm? The boy must be stupid, or pig-headed.

He was also determined. Others might think Peter was mad, but he was deadly serious about Settlers. Keane’s parents-in-law owned a kitchen rangehood company, and they had a large industrial oven they no longer used that had been
When No Means Yes

used to bake enamel. After removing all remaining toxic fumes and paint stains, Bland and Keane set up the oven to bake the shortbread. They went to a company in Tullamarine to do the packaging. Keane looked after most of the logistics and production, and Bland was the salesman, getting into his car and cold-calling all the delis and gift shops on the Calder Highway. By the time he had finished no deli from Castlemaine to Daylesford was unaware of Settlers Shortbread. There were three knockbacks for each yes, but he kept going. He learned to deal with sceptical shop owners saying, ‘Oh, yes, and what are you selling? Can you come back another time? This is a bad moment.’ Persevering, he progressed to the large Melbourne department stores – Myer, David Jones and Daimaru – which all took the shortbread, and then to the fashionable suburban shopping strips – Acland Street and Fitzroy Street in St Kilda, Toorak Road, Burke Road in Camberwell, Maling Road in Canterbury, Glenferrie Road in Hawthorn, and Lygon Street in Carlton.

Every day was tough, in-your-face, door-to-door selling. His most notable failure was the Hilton Hotel. ‘Where else have you sold it?’ asked the hotel’s food purchasing manager when Bland went to see him. Bland, thinking exclusivity was the best sales pitch, said, ‘Nowhere else, you would have it exclusively.’ The purchasing manager wanted assurance, rather than exclusivity, and knocked him back. Bland learned a corporate lesson. ‘Very few organisations are prepared to pave the way,’ he says. When he and Keane drove up to Sydney as part of a largely unsuccessful Settlers push into New South Wales, he was primed when he went to see the purchasing manager at the Intercontinental Hotel. ‘Where else have you sold it?’ asked the manager. Bland reeled off the list of outlets
in Melbourne and made his sale. Sydney didn’t prove a fertile market, but he refused to limit his operation to Victoria. He began planning how to export Settlers to Asia, just as his father had tried to sell wool to China twenty years earlier. To get himself going, he enrolled in a $1500 international marketing course in Melbourne.

Bland’s father might have reservations about his son’s venture, but he gave backing where he could, stepping in to help with the packaging when there was a backlog of orders. Because Settlers was only turning over about $20,000 in the first year, Peter supplemented his meagre income by working as a labourer on the farm.

John Bland had attempted to introduce the rudimentary lessons of business to his three children when they were all young. He bought each of them a cow and told them to look after it so that they could later sell it at a profit. When they later did so, they were thrilled at how much they had made, but their father then brought home to them a further lesson – that net profit is what you make after all your costs are deducted. Their father made them deduct from their gross profit the costs of feeding the animals, vets’ bills, transport and auction fees. When the costs were all taken out, not much was left of their profit, but they had learned an invaluable lesson.

Bland wasn’t content just to work on his father’s farm; he wanted his own sheep. He wanted to get the glow of pride and satisfaction that the young Sidney Kidman had when he was put in charge of his first herd of 500 cattle. If Bland needed any more fuel to throw on his fires of energy and ambition, it was always there on the bookshelf at home – the biography of his hero Kidman, an inspiring example of how initiative, willpower and resourcefulness could lead a boy of thirteen with
five shillings in his pocket to become the greatest pastoral owner in the land. Kidman was prepared to have a go at anything as he built the foundations of his pastoral empire. ‘He would learn to drive his mind as he rode a horse, with a loose rein when all was going well, firm when difficulties loomed ahead,’ wrote Idriess. At thirteen Kidman started as a drover; then he ran a butcher’s shop, where he sold beef which he rounded up from a cattle station 130 kilometres away; he became a horse trader; he ran a store on the gold diggings at Tibooburra; he ran an outback stagecoach service; and that was just the prelude to his acquisition of pastoral holdings stretching all across Australia, worth millions of dollars, leading to him being crowned Australia’s ‘Cattle King’. Peter Bland could relate to Idriess’s judgement that: ‘With Kidman, to think was to act.’

Bland didn’t have to read a book to see a living model of determination: there each weekend, after a full week’s work at court, his father would be out from dawn to dusk working on the farm. Whatever he set his mind to on a particular day had to be completed that day. ‘He was always determined to finish a job in the yards, whether it was clipping the sheep’s feet for footrot, or drenching them. We’d do 500 in a day, and it was bloody hard work, and I’d say, “Let’s finish it tomorrow,” and he refused to stop until the job was done.’

Peter wanted to run his own show. Using some of the money his father’s aunt had left him, he bought 1000 merino sheep from Gosford, in New South Wales. He had arranged grazing for the animals on the property next to theirs and he meant to run them himself, without any involvement from his father. When his father heard about it, he thought it was a good idea, but suggested that his fat lambs should have first
go at the neighbouring pasture, and Peter’s merinos should go into the paddocks after that. Peter couldn’t fault his father’s farming logic, but it missed the point: he wanted to run his own show, independently of his father. ‘I said I wanted to do something on my own, and I said, “This is my plan, my agistment, and these are my sheep.” Eventually a compromise was reached and Peter ran his sheep independently on one part of the adjoining property, ‘Bolobek’, while his father ran his on a separate part. ‘We were very happy working alongside as long as we each had what we wanted,’ says Peter. ‘I’m very easy to get along with; just don’t tell me what to do!’

According to Julia, both the judge and Peter shared a love of the land, but they differed about the way it should be managed. She saw the judge as someone who was essentially conservative and reluctant to move forward with change, while her husband craved change and fresh stimulation. ‘Pete’s always looking for a new way to do a crop on the farm, or a new way to work the sheep in the yards. He’s looking for the best, most efficient way of doing something. They both got pleasure from the land, but while his father liked doing things the long way round, Pete did them quickly and efficiently, wanting to move on to the next task.’

Knowing of Peter’s growing love of the sea, the judge gave his three children a sailing book as a Christmas present in 1992, but it was no ordinary sailing book. Called So Ends This Day, it was the autobiography of Captain Sir John Williams, an Australian achiever. Born in Wales in 1896, he went to sea on sailing ships when he was fourteen. After meeting his future wife on a voyage to Australia, he migrated and worked in the port of Townsville. From there he moved to Melbourne, where he built up a stevedoring business which
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later diversified into freight, salvage and engineering. During the Second World War he served with the Salvage Board and up until his retirement in 1971 he was chairman of the Australian Coastal Shipping Commission. This was the kind of model of achievement the judge wanted his children to read about.

Bland was not wasting time. When he was not out on the road selling shortbread, he began his days on the farm at 8 am. He settled into the farm calendar of clipping the sheep’s hooves for footrot in January; putting the rams in with the ewes for mating in February; drenching the sheep in March to rid them of worms; crutching the sheep in April, which meant cutting the dags off their backsides to keep the flies away; marking the lambs in September; and shearing them in November. Each day’s completed labour left him with a profound satisfaction. Nothing beat the satisfaction of branding his own 1000 merinos with his initials of PJB, and then sending off 25 bales of high quality wool for sale at the Brooklyn woolstore in west Melbourne. ‘I felt like a real farmer. I was running my own show, and it was terrific.’

While Bland was the salesman/farmer by day, he was the would-be sailor by night. Gradually he learned the techniques of navigation and became impatient to put them into action. One day he went down to the Royal Melbourne Yacht Squadron in St Kilda in the hope of finding a place on a crew. He went into the office to volunteer his services to any skipper who might be looking for a crewman. A man with a 20-footer was waiting for a crewman to turn up. When the crewman failed to materialise he asked Bland if he wanted to come out with him. Out on Port Phillip Bay Bland started his crash course in practical seamanship. ‘The skipper was saying to me,
go to the starboard side, go to the port side, pull this halyard, pull that sheet, and I’m going, “What?” Because, although I had been out a few times with John Collingwood, I had no real idea about sailing. That was where my learning started.’

As ever, Bland had grand visions. Not content with sailing a 20-footer, he looked across Port Phillip Bay to the majestic 50-footers plying past him. ‘How do you get onto those boats?’ Bland asked the skipper, as a big, yellow 50-footer called Rock Star sailed past. ‘I wanted the yachts bigger and faster, and the voyages longer. The toughest water in the world was in the Southern Ocean, so that’s where I wanted to be.’ The skipper said he would see what he could do.

The conversation eventually led to an invitation to sail on the Ben Lexcen designed 49-footer Yoko, owned by Robin Hewitt. Berthed at Royal Brighton Yacht Club, it had taken part in thirteen Melbourne to Hobart races. Bland had arrived in the big time, and from the end of 1992 he sailed regularly on Yoko. He was aching to get out of the bay and into the ocean, and when Yoko was entered into the Portsea to Port Fairy race, he asked Hewitt if he could be part of the crew. Hewitt initially said no, indicating Bland still lacked experience, but when another member of the crew dropped out, Bland was given his spot. ‘All the time I was up the pointy end of the boat my mind was in the back end saying, “Well, how do you get to the back end where the brains are, doing the navigation and the tactical stuff and the steering.”’

In November 1993 Bland was given his chance. Yoko was entered in the Melbourne to Burnie race, and he asked Hewitt if he could enter the Ocean Racing Club of Victoria’s Stars and Compass Competition. The trophy was awarded annually for the best piece of nautical celestial navigation in the race,
using traditional instruments like sextants and dividers. Bland won it that year for his navigation on board Yoko. His father glowed with pride when Peter brought home the trophy, having become, at 24, its youngest-ever winner. He had beaten the Navy into second place.

If farmwork gave him a sense of satisfaction, ocean racing gave him a prolonged release of adrenaline. Two months after the Burnie race he joined the crew of Yoko for the Melbourne to Hobart. Where others might quake at the ten-metre drops as the boat surfed down from the crest of the wave to its trough, Bland was exhilarated. While other crew members huddled in the cockpit to shelter from the wind and waves, Bland clipped his safety harness to the mast and let the video camera run. The opportunity to get some dramatic race footage in rough seas was too good to miss. ‘All I could feel was adrenaline, not fear. It was full-on. We were screaming along. At one stage I was sitting on the bow with another guy and we were completely submerged as the boat hit the bottom of a wave. It was unreal. I loved ocean racing, with the wind against your face and the slap of water against the hull.’

During the course of the race Hewitt was asked by an ABC reporter in Hobart if he thought Yoko, then second, could overtake the leader, Fast Forward, owned by Simon Kellett. With the wisdom of the ancient mariner, Hewitt replied: ‘In order to win, you must first finish.’ Yoko did not win, staying second to Fast Forward, but at least Bland had the satisfaction that on that night’s ABC television news they played his video footage of the storm scenes.

Just as he wanted to run his own mob of sheep, Bland wanted to run his own boat, preferably across the Atlantic.
His dream now was to become a delivery skipper, flying across the world to pick up boats that had finished their races and needed to be sailed home. He inundated Melbourne's best-known skippers with personal requests or letters asking them to consider him when next they wanted their boat collected. The advice he received was that to become a delivery skipper he would need to get his yachtmaster certificate. To get that he needed to continue the night-time study of navigation, and the postal seamanship course.

At navigation night school he met someone who was sailing on an English friend's boat in the following year's Atlantic Rally for Cruisers. The race was from the Canary Islands, off the north-west African coast, to St Lucia, in the West Indies. The Englishman, Richard Stain, was looking for someone to sail his 29-footer, Kwik Decision, back from St Lucia once the race was over. He worked for the English subsidiary of a large French company, and could not afford to take the time off to sail round the world. Stain himself had been bitten by the sailing bug comparatively recently, and without the total support of his wife. He told a yachting magazine: ‘One of the biggest obstacles [to sailing in the ARC] was that my wife is not at all keen on sailing. I think if you asked her what she thought about me doing the ARC, she’d say we should sell the boat and get a washing machine or something. I suppose it is a bit selfish of me.’ Nevertheless, he was determined to pursue his dream, and committed $15,000 and five weeks to preparing the boat, the race itself, and some post-competition R&R. He still had this problem, though, of how to get the boat back to England from St Lucia.

Stain had always wanted to visit Australia, and initially he thought that Bland might be able to sail the boat from the
West Indies to Australia. But later in negotiations Stain decided that he didn’t want the boat sailed to Australia because it would incur luxury goods tax if it stayed there for two years, and he couldn’t build up enough leave to get to Australia before the two years elapsed. Just as the deal was about to founder, Bland raised the stakes by declaring that he had taken on an extra employee to look after the shortbread company for the six months he would be away, in the belief that the deal to bring the boat to Australia was done. It wasn’t strictly true, but the tactic worked, and Stain proposed an alternative: Bland could sail the boat back from St Lucia to the UK, and also have it for six months for his own use. Bland accepted with delight.

His plan was that Julia would fly out to St Lucia with him so that they could sail around the West Indies. Julia would then fly to Europe and Jay Watson would join him to sail *Kwik Decision* from the West Indies across to Horta, in the Azores Islands, off the north-west coast of Africa, and from there to Holyhead in Wales, via Ireland.

Before they could do any of that they had to raise some money. Bland worked as a shearer on both the Victorian and King Island properties, while Julia worked as a shed hand. After a day’s work on the farm they would head back to the house to work on the Settlers Shortbread orders. To cash in on the Christmas demand, Julia also made mince pies to sell into shops with the shortbread. By January 1994 they had reached their financial target, and they were ready to fly to the West Indies to pick up the boat.

Not everyone thought Bland was doing the right thing. His fellow crew members on *Yoko* were sceptical about his chances of crossing the Atlantic in that particular boat, which as a
29-footer was the smallest yacht in the ARC race. ‘That’s twenty feet too short for me,’ said one crew member. ‘It’d be too small in those rough seas. I wouldn’t do it.’

Once again, Bland declined to take no for an answer.
Chapter Six

ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE

The ten-metre waves in the previous month’s Melbourne to Hobart yacht race seemed a piece of cake to Peter Bland compared to what he encountered in Miami, en route to St Lucia. The American Airlines flight was friendly enough, but the problems started at the inappropriately named Happy Inn Hotel. ‘You wanna eat?’ said the manager. ‘We’ll drop you down at the local steakhouse. Make sure you call me when you come back because it’s very, very dangerous round here. A lot of people have been mugged lately.’ Welcome to Miami. Peter and Julia landed with a bump after their 30-hour flight from Melbourne. They took a ride down to the steakhouse and at the end of the meal, feeling full and bloated after all the time spent sitting on the plane, they decided to ignore the hotel manager’s warnings and walk home. They arrived safely
back at the hotel, only to be mugged verbally by the manager. ‘You’re my responsibility when you stay at my establishment, and I gave you my card and told you to ring me when you wanted to come home. Why didn’t you do what I said?’ Chastened, Peter and Julia went to their room, after the manager had spelt out exactly how many people had been raped and mugged in the area in the past month.

From Miami they flew to St Lucia. From the aeroplane window, the view was everything they had imagined of the West Indies – boats with white sails island-hopping from port to port, sheltered bays, blue-green water and white sands. They sipped ‘sundowners’, the local Caribbean cocktail of fruit juice, nutmeg, cassis and rum, as the plane flew over St Lucia, with its lush vegetation crossed by deep gorges and ravines. They had arrived in paradise.

Financial reality soon set in. Richard Stain’s boat *Kwik Decision* was moored in Rodney Bay on the north of the island, which was a US$50 taxi ride from the airport, situated in the south. Irritation at the cost of the ride and the suspicion that it was part of the local game of ‘milk the tourist’ were soon forgotten once they found *Kwik Decision*. At last Bland had his wish to be skipper of his own (borrowed) boat. Julia took the role of first mate. Although the boat was smaller than they might have wished, it was their boat and they were proud of it.

That night they learned there were devils in paradise. David and Maggie Beckley, an English couple who had their boat in the marina close to *Kwik Decision*, and who were to become good friends, were mugged at knife point on their way back to the boat from a restaurant. Maggie had her bag stolen. Julia remained on her guard for the rest of the trip.
The big moment approached when Bland would finally get to skipper the boat out of the harbour. As he looked around the other yachts in the marina, he was conscious that he did not wish to lose face with their crews. Each time a boat came into the harbour, the crews watched for a slip-up that might betray the arrival of a novice with more money than sailing experience. ‘One stuff-up and you can end up knocking into a million-dollar yacht. I didn’t want to be the new skipper who made a fool of himself the first time he brought his boat into the marina.’

In windy conditions, he eased the boat out towards the open sea. Julia recalls: ‘The look on his face at the helm was one of pure joy to be skipper of his very own vessel.’ But embarrassment came perilously close a few days later. They took *Kwik Decision* out of the marina and sailed around the fringes of the island, practising anchoring. Although the sailing might have appeared easier than that of long crossings, the challenge lay in negotiating reefs, shallow sand bars and other craft. Returning to their place in the marina they had everything meticulously arranged to come in with the wharf on their starboard side. The ropes had all been made ready to make it appear to bystanders in other boats that they were sailing veterans. But their well-laid plans disappeared to the bottom of the harbour when they motored towards their berth, only to find it was already occupied by another boat. Carefully, and without any loss of face, they berthed the boat at another spot in the marina. No-one would have known that Bland was a novice when it came to skippering a boat.

And he was an old hand when it came to adapting to the Caribbean way of life, which included walking around everywhere in shorts. On one occasion when he was wearing his
boxer shorts he went to see the local fisherman haul his boat in and sell the day’s catch. Bland recalls: “Everyone squats around as the fisherman unfurls his nets and puts his fish in front of you. I’m squatting down, with a whole crowd of people around me, and the fisherman looks at me and says, “Hey mon, your penis is hangin’ out.”’ Bland adjusted himself and changed the subject to the price of fish.

Everywhere he went he took his sailing bible, *A Cruising Guide to the Caribbean*, which shows currents, winds, anchorages and everything needed for a yachting holiday in paradise. Flipping through the pages on St Lucia, he came across the entry for the Two Pitons, two 600-metre mountains that rise side by side out of the sea. Under the heading ‘Approach’, the guide said: ‘The anchorage actually lies below Petit Piton. When coming from the south, round Beaumont Point and head for Petit Piton. Everywhere in the bay the water is very deep. Close the shore and head for the anchorage under Petit Piton in front of the cluster of palm trees.’ Under ‘Anchorage’, the guide said: ‘Drop anchor in depths of 20 to 25 metres and send a line ashore to a coconut tree.’ Finally, under the heading ‘Ashore’, it reported: ‘Nothing except an elephant that belongs to a nearby hotel.’

This exotic island life was becoming addictive: heat, throbbing cicadas, jungle vegetation and showers under tropical waterfalls. But Bland still accepted challenges, like climbing the Petit Piton without a guide. He was determined to manage on his own and after an all-day climb, and cut and scratched from the rocks and local vegetation, he and Julia made it to the top to glory in the magnificent view. On the way down they drank milk from coconuts that had dropped from the trees.
Another Day in Paradise

It was in the mooring under the Two Pitons that Peter and Julia again met the Beckleys, who were accompanied by their son, John, his girlfriend, Rowena and another friend, Mark. Peter and Julia were to spend much time sailing round the islands with them in the next four months. Attracted by the sight of Julia lazing on the deck in her bikini, John and Mark made their way over to Kwik Decision and introduced themselves. Julia negotiated the exchange of the two sets of flippers from Kwik Decision for the temporary use of the barbecue from Sancho Panza, the Beckleys’ boat. The fish that Peter and Julia cooked on the barbecue that night was so good that they decided to buy their own barbecue for the rest of the voyage.

The plan was to sail south from St Lucia to St Vincent, the Grenadine islands, Tobago and Trinidad, before heading west to the mainland of Venezuela and then north-east across the Caribbean Sea to Antigua, the departure point for Peter and Jay’s Atlantic crossing. St Vincent was the stopping-off point for the Grenadines and the exclusive island of Mustique, former holiday destination of the late Princess Margaret. The rock stars Mick Jagger, David Bowie and Bon Jovi also had properties on the island. From there they sailed to the island of Canouan, where they met an American couple who had arranged for sirloin steaks to be specially flown down on dry ice from New York. It made a welcome change from their normal diet of fish, bread and bananas. The fish also had a habit of biting back. While they were anchoring in Canouan, a fish hook that had become tangled round the anchor went right through Bland’s thumb. Julia cut the fishing line to save the thumb from being severed, but the hook stayed embedded until Peter had had the chance to video the drama. He was given antibiotics that evening at the island hospital.
The number of people they were meeting from the international yachting fraternity was growing all the time. In the Grenadines they had encountered an Australian yacht called *Mary Lou*, which was also doing the clockwise voyage around the Caribbean islands. It belonged to Hans and Mandy Hoffman, who were travelling with their three children. For Peter and Julia, the Hoffmans seemed the perfect model for the great Australian dream family voyage. The children studied and kept up with friends over the radio while sailing around the world on a never-ending geography lesson.

Peter and Julia vowed to keep in touch and, sailing into Trinidad in mid-February, they called *Mary Lou* on the radio. The Hoffmans advised heading down to Port of Spain, where the carnival was in full swing. The island was in the grip of an endless, rhythmic, night-and-day party. Bland noted the fact in his diary with a fine sense of understatement: ‘Life is pretty good in the Caribbean.’

Julia found it could also be menacing, as the unending flow of alcohol released people’s inhibitions. ‘All the locals (not to mention many yachties) were drunk day in, day out, and the noise was deafening as people pounded the street drinking, dancing and openly caressing each other in various stages of undress. We were warned not to leave valuables on the boat or to lock them up, because it was considered too risky to carry them on you. The people on the boat next to us were mugged and pretty badly beaten up, and someone from the *Mary Lou* had a broken bottle shoved into his stomach.’ Bland had other reasons for wanting to get out of Port of Spain. After his South American adventures two years before, he was keen to make it to Venezuela and practise his Spanish, and feel the Latin life once more. He and Julia were also desperate for a
steak after weeks of living on rice, fish, coconuts, bread, bananas and a little grapefruit. They hit the coast at a small fishing village called Cristobal Colon, named after the fifteenth-century Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus, who discovered America and sailed through many of the West Indian islands. They shopped, bought a new gas bottle and settled back into the languid rhythm described by Bland: 'Lazy day. Basically did nothing until 2 pm. Just lay and read windsurfing magazines on the yacht. Then we swam ashore. I wanted to climb a coconut tree to get some coconuts. I tied a rope between my feet, like I'd seen the local boys doing, and used that to climb the tree. Came down with a heap of coconuts. Sat there on the beach with a big machete and shelled them. Then we rode into town, bought some barbecue steak, more coal and bread from our friendly baker in the village.'

Across the world in Melbourne, Bland's sister Joanna, reporting each day for nursing duty, reflected on how different her younger brother's lifestyle was to her own and the one their father wished for them. Peter had purchased himself a ticket to ride the seven seas rather than the ticket for a lifetime career that their father wished. But she still had a sneaking admiration for his determination to follow his dreams: 'It takes quite a lot of confidence in yourself to live that kind of life, island-hopping in the Caribbean, and not think that you're going to be a beach bum for the rest of your life.'

The same kind of confidence, in fact, that it had taken to believe he could set up a shortbread company based at home in Melbourne that could compete with the biscuit multinationals. Just before they left Trinidad, Bland had received a fax from Colin Keane, his business partner in Settlers,
updating him on developments and full of an optimism that John Allen, the Bland family friend and business adviser, might have considered misplaced. When Allen had seen the old washing machine that Bland was using to knead the dough for the biscuits, his first reaction had been ‘get real’.

Bland and Keane pressed on regardless, however. Everything was going fine, Keane said in the fax: ‘Spending a lot of time setting up and improving our communication lines. Business cards completed and looking good. New fax machine $850 installed, along with new telephone line. The flour cabinet is finished and is sitting in the kitchen. We had to finish this because the flour was being eaten away by the mice. I made a new stainless steel table top which has cut down the preparation time by fifteen minutes per batch. A new rolling bench for the dough, which is three feet long and about one foot wide. For one batch I only need roll three times – WOW!! New bench tops for the kitchen have been made. New cutting board for the cutter has been purchased. By the end of February I hope to have finished upgrading the kitchen and have it operating smoothly. It is starting to look like a clean kitchen. The office is well decked out, too. Money! Income is steady. Collected outstanding debts and all is well. Using money to produce new packaging. Estimated $2000 to $3000. Had a snap visit from food inspector. We passed (close one). Have a great time. Don’t get lost. Your partner. Colin.’

Back on the Venezuelan islands, Bland was so short of money after one visit to the local store that he had Julia hand back the flour and bread because they didn’t have enough to pay for it. Nevertheless, the locals still saw them as wealthy westerners coming to feast cheaply on the treasures of the Third World. One day a fishing boat appeared alongside
the boat, with an injured girl on board. They wanted to exchange medical supplies for fish. Bland happily supplied some medical supplies, but turned down the offer of fish in return.

The hours spent flipping through the windsurfing magazines had revealed a resort called Playa el Yaque, on the island of Margarita. It was supposed to be a magnet for local windsurfers, in much the same way that the beach in Paros had been two years earlier. Certainly there was no shortage of wind in the area. They flew around to el Yaque under mainsail and spinnaker and there, bobbing on the sparkling waves, were 200 windsurfers. They were back in windsurfers’ heaven, as Julia recalls. ‘As we came round the point the wind hit us hard and we had so much sail up that the boat went flat on its side. We made it into shore, and tied up to the only pier after negotiating some very shallow sand banks. The wind was so strong it made a screeching sound in the rigging.’

To make some money, Peter and Julia chartered their boat and took parties round the islands. When they ventured into Porlamar, the commercial and nightclub centre of Margarita, they combined the business of distributing flyers for their yacht-chartering business with the pleasure of drinking and dancing.

There were even some of the same cast of international characters they had met in Paros, including a German called Stoffle, who was working in a beach bar. There was Nick, an Australian goldminer who had made money in the Amazon and was now investing it in property development in el Yaque. His wife, Siria, was a Venezuelan doctor, which helped when Julia injured her foot coming in to dock at the pier after taking some tourists across to a sand bar where you could speed sail.
The throttle was playing up and the boat could only advance or reverse at full throttle, which made docking a challenge. The jolt of the rope catching on the pier sent Julia flying from the helm into the cockpit, where she landed on a sharp piece of metal protruding from the harness. Blood dripped everywhere, but she was still able to take to the dance floor that night, albeit heavily bandaged.

Whatever Bland did, it was full-on – out on the waves, or on the dance floor. By the time he and Julia had been there for two months they had become part of the international windsurfing community, and they knew everyone on the beach. For Julia’s birthday, on 20 March, Bland arranged a surprise party and invited all their friends. He and Julia had a quiet dinner. On their way back to the boat Julia lamented the fact that they couldn’t kick on at El Pirate, the local nightclub. As they walked past the club the lights were all out, but Bland guided Julia through the doors into the darkened bar. The lights came on, and the packed club celebrated her birthday in style.

Life was lived with the same intensity out on the water. On one particularly windy day, Peter took out a windsurfer with a 4.5-metre sail when everyone else was using a 4-metre sail. The potential to move faster over the water was there, but so was the potential for spills, as he found in the afternoon. His diary tells the story: ‘Unreal! Had a huge jump, landed nose first, got knocked out and floated downwind for ages. Had to rest for two hours.’ Not even being knocked unconscious could dent his zest for life. The entry ends in a matter-of-fact fashion: ‘Had chocolate pancakes.’

Julia, too, had caught the windsurfing bug. ‘I wasn’t as fast as the boys, but still fast enough to frighten myself to death
on a few jumps over the reef. On one occasion the mast wedged itself under some coral, holding me underwater in my harness. I swallowed enough water to scare me off for the rest of the afternoon, but I’d regained my confidence by the next day.

If life seemed to be progressing too perfectly, with no care in the world beyond where to anchor for the day, Bland was now faced with imperfect reality. They had arranged to leave el Yaque on 13 April, and organised a dinner the night before to say goodbye to everyone they had met during their stay. The following morning they packed the boat with supplies and prepared to head off. But there was no wind. Then, as they went to leave the mooring, the line caught around the propeller, ripping the bearing half out of the hull and bending the propeller shaft. A fishing boat towed the now lame Kwik Decision back to the pier.

Bland recalls: ‘I organised a heap of helpers from the beach to try to lift the boat higher up the beach during high water, so that when the tide went down we could expose the shaft. We did this, but it was very difficult to work on it from there. So I went in to the marina at Porlamar to find out if we could haul the boat out there, but it was too expensive. I found out that the marina fees would be less at Chucacura, near Playa el Yaque.’

The boat was hauled up onto a cradle, and Bland went in to town to pick up parts. He asked Julia to stay and look after the boat while he was away, and told her to pull up the rope ladder to deter troublemakers. After he left, some local fishermen began calling out ‘Julia, Julia’, and she readied herself for any eventuality. Five hours later, long after dark, Bland returned to the boat and called for Julia to let down the rope
ladder. He called and called, but there was no reply. Pulling himself up onto the boat, he found Julia asleep with a large knife across her chest, to ward off any attackers. He shook her awake from a troubled dream about devils in paradise.

For about US$200, Bland had a new propeller shaft fitted and he and Julia prepared for a second departure on 23 April – ten days after their planned departure. The days were passing fast, and only a week remained until their scheduled meeting with Jay at the Admiral’s Bar in Antigua’s English Harbour on 1 May. To get there, they had to cross the Caribbean Sea. The last port of call was Guadeloupe, the French-administered territory split into two islands by the River Salee, which ran vertically down the middle. Once Kwik Decision had sailed along the river, the next stop was Antigua.

Bland and Watson had made their agreement to meet at the Admiral’s Bar in Antigua over a beer at the Argo Hotel in Melbourne in mid December. They were to meet at noon. At 11.50 am on 1 May, after a six-day sail from Venezuela across the Caribbean Sea, Bland and Julia arrived in English Harbour. They dropped anchor, rowed ashore, cleared customs and headed for the hotel. Dashing through the door of what resembled an old English pub, they found Jay sitting alone at a table with three full beers in front of him. After a quick glance at his watch, Jay broke into a grin and said: ‘You’re late!’

Bland’s pleasure at seeing his friend gave way to anticipation of the next leg of the voyage – across the Atlantic – and reflection on their four-month idyll in the Caribbean. ‘Julia and I had by then spent an unforgettable period of time island-hopping around a yachting paradise. We had sailed in warm turquoise and emerald seas with myriads of brightly coloured
fish; we had anchored next to sun-bleached coral sand, with palm trees rustling gently in the trade winds; we had shopped in markets where people spoke the Creole language; we had danced under the stars to steel bands and reggae rhythms; we had drunk “sundowners” with friends on boats moored in some of the most beautiful marinas in the world. Each island throughout the chain had offered something unique and different from the last, ranging from sophisticated resorts to ramshackle towns where the occupants still relied on paraffin to cook meals and heat their simple timber homes.

In this island paradise there was only one sour note: the resentment felt by the black inhabitants towards their former white colonial rulers, and the extent to which they relied on the white man’s money for their living. The yachts sailed in from the United States carrying loud, noisy Americans with plenty of dollars. Julia would note the locals’ resentment that they had to make their money from tourism, selling fruit and crayfish for exorbitant US-dollar prices to tourists. Those well-heeled tourists did not include Peter and Julia, who lived on $10 a day and shopped at the cheapest stores.

Julia had given plenty of thought to joining Peter and Jay on their Atlantic crossing but in the end she had decided against it out of consideration for her parents. They had expressed concern when she first announced her intention to go sailing with Peter in the Caribbean, and she was not prepared to pursue her wishes with the same single-mindedness as her boyfriend. John Allen, a friend of John and Jane Bland and mentor to their children, had noticed how his friends suffered because of their youngest son’s determination to pursue his goals, regardless of the emotional cost to those around him. ‘The judge used to say to me, “Here I am, lying
awake at night with worry, while Jane is beside herself wondering what's happening to Pete.”

Julia made up her mind to spare her parents more worry. ‘I would have liked to have done the crossing, but I was picking up the signals from home and I didn’t think it was fair. I’d already put them through enough. They had expected me back a long time before I actually came back. They were really concerned about us floating around in a 29-foot yacht, and not being able to contact us. For them it was probably very frustrating and frightening, but I remember my father telling me when I got home how proud he was of me to have done what I did. They might have said they were afraid for me, but they didn’t stop me from doing anything. I decided not to do the Atlantic crossing because I’d had a cracked knuckle from windsurfing, but I used that as an excuse because I knew that if I did do the crossing my parents would panic so much that it wasn’t worth it. I was having a great time and I didn’t have to prove anything. I wasn’t out there to prove I could do a large ocean crossing, so I decided not to put my parents through that, and I flew to the UK instead.’

It was then a West Indies immigration requirement that travellers flying into the Caribbean had to purchase a return ticket for one pound more than the one-way fare. The government did this to ensure that people did not become unwanted permanent immigrants. Jay had bought a return fare in London, knowing that he would not use the return section and hoping that Julia would be able to travel on it. On departure day, 3 May, the three of them went to the airport, after Julia had prepared for the flight with an impromptu wash and shampoo in a rockpool near the boat’s anchorage. Jay checked in Julia’s luggage with his return ticket and, armed with Jay’s
boarding pass, Julia left it to the last minute to board the plane. ‘I was pretty scared I would get caught, so the boys stayed at the airport until the plane took off. As I dashed onto the tarmac and up the stairs, the stewardess stopped me and started to say something about my ticket. Convinced I’d been caught out, I started to make an excuse until I registered what she was saying: “I’m sorry, madam, but there are no more economy seats left, so we will have to put you here.” The stewardess pointed across to a large and comfortable seat in first class. I said no apology was necessary and settled back with my complimentary champagne. I still had to be cleared at the other end once I arrived in the UK, but what could they do to me? I would have had to pay a fare, but Pete had given me money to cover that.’

As Julia flew out, Peter and Jay went to the harbour to ready the boat for their voyage to the Azores. They had hoped to find a third person to share the sailing with them, but in the end the crewing offers were bigger and better from other boats and they reconciled themselves to there being just the two of them in the boat. They did, though, erect a self-steering system named Erica, after the third crew member that never was. On 5 May they sailed out of English Harbour.

The previous four months’ sailing in the Caribbean had been preparation for this Atlantic crossing. Bland now had confidence in his skills as a skipper, and that confidence conveyed itself to Jay Watson. They set off into the unknown as unconcerned as a couple of old sea salts. It was plain sailing until 20 May, when Bland wrote in his diary: ‘Real shit of a day. The worst day we’ve had, indeed the only non-pleasurable day of the whole trip. Rained consistently all day. Big seas and squally winds. Boat rocking too much and batteries low. The batteries,
which we use for the radio, positioning equipment and navigational lights, were so low we took sails down and motored. After two hours the propeller shaft snapped off the coupling and left a one-inch diameter hole in the hull. Water was pouring in and Jay tried to hold it off by pumping while I unscrewed the floor deck in the cockpit and plugged the hole with a wooden bung. Then the self-steering mechanism snapped and went overboard.’

Bland dived overboard to see the extent of the damage, and cursed the Venezuelan ship repair yard at Chucacura which he had paid US$200 to fix the propeller. The old problem had repeated itself, with a drifting piece of rope wrapping itself around the propeller, causing its shaft to break. The motor was now out of action, and they would have to sail to the Azores relying solely on wind power. But instead of being blown across a bucking Atlantic, they found themselves virtually becalmed in a windless sea.

*Still Waters*, a vessel they knew from Antigua, appeared on the horizon and came over for a chat in the middle of the Atlantic. They were motoring and tried to attach a line to Peter and Jay’s boat to tow it out of the doldrums, but the line kept jolting and they were forced to abandon the operation. *Still Waters* motor-sailed away, leaving them waiting for the wind. They filled in time cleaning the boat, sealing the small leak in the hull and fishing with a line hanging off the back. Eventually the wind picked up from the north-west, and they began to move.

They had regained radio contact with their English friends, the Beckleys, on *Sancho Panza*. The Beckleys had already arrived in Horta, and were moored alongside a 90-foot luxury cruiser owned by the French travel goods company Louis
Vuitton. Bland told the Beckleys about the problems they were having with the propeller and pointed out that he would be unable to bring *Kwik Decision* into the Horta harbour under its own power. The Beckleys had established a good rapport with the crew on board the Louis Vuitton boat, who offered their 30-foot dinghy (bigger than Bland’s whole boat) to bring *Kwik Decision* into harbour. They arrived in style, after a 24-day crossing from Antigua.

Horta was a yachts’ paradise to rival the West Indian playgrounds they had just left: cobbled streets, bars, a restaurant called Hotstones where the waiters brought the food and you cooked it over the hot stones, bikes for hire to ride over the island, chicken barbecues, drinks on other people’s boats, Portuguese red wine and breakfasts of fresh milk, cornflakes and ham and cheese croissants, after nearly a month of marine rations. There was even an invitation to a party aboard the Louis Vuitton luxury yacht. It was also a relief to be welcomed by the local Azores inhabitants after the mood of resentment they had sometimes encountered in the Caribbean.

Rest, recreation and beers at Peter’s Cafe, the local bar in Horta, were interspersed with repairs to the boat. Bland fitted a new propeller shaft to replace the one that had cracked in the storm at sea, in preparation for the next leg of their voyage to Crookhaven Bay on the southernmost tip of Ireland, where they were due to meet Julia. In between there were minor crises to overcome, such as when Watson’s hired bike fell off the gangplank into the harbour. The ever-resourceful Bland put on his wetsuit and dived in to haul it out of the water. Then they prepared the boat for the crossing to Ireland.

There was still one local custom to be honoured. Tradition had it that all seafarers must leave their mark on the seawall
in Horta or they would encounter bad luck at sea. So Watson, the artist, set to work with his paint brush to leave behind an emblem of their 1994 Atlantic crossing. The superstition appeared to work, as Bland and Watson reached Crookhaven in twelve uneventful days. No floating rope fouled the propeller, and no-one put a fishing hook through their fingers.

After visiting friends in France and the UK, Julia had flown to Dublin and caught the train as far south as it went. She went into the pub of the town where the train had dropped her, and asked for the bus timetable to Crookhaven. The barman said there were no buses to Crookhaven, but suggested that Sean, one of the hotel guests who had a Guinness in his hand, would be happy to drive her. When she asked Sean when he was leaving, he replied: ‘After a couple more pints.’ She declined the offer, and walked for a couple of hours before two young men in a ute gave her a lift. ‘Bang on the roof when you want to get out,’ they said. ‘Coming into Crookhaven I could see Pete’s boat, so I started banging on the roof and they kept driving and I thought, oh, no, they’re not stopping. What does that mean? In actual fact they drove me round to the other side of the inlet to save me walking any further. You couldn’t really call Crookhaven a town; just a pub, a telephone box and a post box. They dropped me off and I whistled out to the boat and all of a sudden three heads appeared, belonging to Pete, Jay and Justin Harty.’

Harty had decided to join the boat when he met Julia in London, and he had made his way down the east coast of Ireland for the reunion in Crookhaven. It was a night of celebration, because Ireland won their World Cup soccer match against Italy that day and the Crookhaven pub was hosting a giant party. At closing time, the landlord simply closed the bar.
door and started serving Guinness through the window to the crowd, who had moved outside. The cheering went on all night.

Early in the morning, Watson and Harty stepped gingerly into the dinghy to make their wobbly way back to *Kwik Decision*, and narrowly escaped being swept out to sea by the offshore breeze and the outgoing tide. Bland and Julia departed for the more secure destination of a rented room over the post office. When Bland awoke five hours later he was hung-over and sick before he had even set foot on the boat. But, true to character, he didn’t give in. He had made up his mind to sail out to the storm-ridden Fastnet Rock, an icon of British yacht racing, no matter how rough the seas were or how delicate his stomach after the previous night’s alcohol consumption. ‘I was absolutely determined to go to Fastnet Rock because it was so famous, even if it meant going against the wind, in rough seas, on an upset stomach.’ Julia says: ‘Pete was so ill that he was throwing up bile, but he still insisted that we should press on to windward to Fastnet Rock. We were going nowhere fast as the seas were big and the wind strong, but Pete’s determination was not enough to get us there. We all felt sick so we outvoted him after a number of very tedious hours.’ Bland agreed to take a photo of the rock with his telephoto lens. Having done that, they changed tack from south-east to north-east.

They set a course to sail up the east coast of Ireland, stopping at Waterford, home of the famous cut glass, to drop off Harty. Then they crossed the Irish Sea for the Welsh port of Holyhead, where the boat was to be left for the owner, Richard Stain. They cleaned it up and, with heavy hearts at leaving their floating home for the past five months, Bland and Julia caught the bus to London, while Watson headed north to walk in England’s Lake District.
Another Day in Paradise

That golden northern summer was still not quite over. Loaded down with their Caribbean windsurfers, they flew to Athens and took the ferry to Paros. It was an old haunt, but Bland already had a new sailing challenge in mind. Having graduated with honours from the marine school of 29-footers, he wanted to progress to bigger boats, and bigger seas.
Chapter Seven

NEXT STOP JAPAN

Peter Bland began 1995 by again proving the value of persistence. For much of the previous six months he had been lobbying yacht skippers entered in the 1995 Melbourne to Osaka yacht race for the job of delivering their boats back to Melbourne after the race. He met a lot of knockbacks, as he had when he started trying to sell Settlers Shortbread. At the end of the Melbourne to Hobart race in December he had gone up to Simon Kellett, skipper of Fast Forward, winner of the race, and introduced himself. 'I'm Peter Bland. I wrote to you asking for the delivery skipper job in the Melbourne to Osaka race. I've just been on the crew of Yoko.' Preoccupied with radio commitments resulting from his win, Kellett found it difficult to think ahead to the Osaka race: 'Oh, yeah, OK. Good to meet you. I'll look at all that a bit further down the track.'
Bland didn’t forget, but the months ticked by without word from Kellett. Come the start of the race in May, Bland was down on the cliff at Point Lonsdale with his friends Justin Harty and Charlie Read, farewelling the fleet as they prepared to line up in Port Phillip Bay. Harty and Read asked him how he had gone getting a job delivering one of the yachts back to Melbourne. Bland said he’d had no luck. Ruefully, he watched Kellett’s boat *Fast Forward* get a flying start on its voyage to Osaka.

Even with the fleet out of Port Phillip Bay and heading north up the eastern seaboard, Bland did not give up. ‘I rang Simon that afternoon on my mobile to his mobile at sea. He was still within range and I thought he might have it on until he was right offshore. I left a message and went home to the farm to finish the mustering. Riding along on my horse, Cisco, my mobile phone rang and, honest to God, it was Simon Kellett. He was sailing somewhere off Merimbula, going up the New South Wales coast. And he said, “Peter, I meant to get back to you and tell you, yes, you’ve got the job as delivery skipper.”’ Kellett had tapped into the sailing network and spoken to Gordon Reid, who examined Bland for his yachtmaster’s certificate examination in 1994. The instructor had given a glowing recommendation of Bland, who didn’t have to think twice when Kellett asked him: ‘Would you like the job of bringing *Fast Forward* back?’ ‘Right,’ continued Kellett, ‘we’ll see you there in about thirty days!’

Bland moved frantically into action mode to put together a crew to bring back the boat. Julia would go for part of the voyage, while she was on vacation from her arts course at La Trobe University. Watson also agreed to go, but they still needed someone else. They put ads around all the yacht clubs
asking for expressions of interest. One of Bland’s friends, Sam Coates, eventually put him in touch with another friend, Ben Green, who had just quit his job in advertising. He had little experience of sailing, but was keen to go. It was arranged to meet him at the Botanical Hotel in fashionable South Yarra for an interview with the three-person assessment panel of Peter, Jay and Julia. Good-looking, well-dressed and enthusiastic, he made a good immediate impression.

Julia recalls: ‘Pete and I had a signal which was a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down”, to be displayed under the table when Pete went to the bar to order the beers. I took one look at Ben, his navy polo-neck sweater, good looks and tall physique and I thought to myself “looks good”, and automatically gave Pete a very enthusiastic “thumbs up”.’ But it was Ben bringing out a huge marlin fishing knife – a purchase he had made in case he landed the position – that decided he would be a resourceful member of the crew. Ben won unanimous approval, though there were some reservations about whether he would last the course.

Not content simply to achieve his goal of sailing the boat back from Osaka, Bland decided he could use the time in Japan to sell Settlers Shortbread. He had failed in his application to the Japanese export trade organisation, JETRO, for sponsorship to show his product at that year’s food fair in Tokyo, so a sales push in Osaka seemed the next best thing. JETRO offered him office space in their business development building in the port at Osaka, and an interpreter for a week to help set up meetings.

Packed to the limit and beyond with sailing gear, clothes and shortbread samples, Bland flew to Osaka on a Japanese Airlines flight in mid-May and headed straight for the Hokko
Next Stop Japan

yacht club, which hosted all the crews in the Melbourne to Osaka race. A celebration was in progress, with the crews of two boats – *Wild Thing*, owned by Grant Wharington, and the futuristic New Zealand ketch, *Yamaha*, skippered by Ross Field – both believing they had won line honours. Because their radio had been out of action, the New Zealanders did not know that *Wild Thing* had beaten them through the night.

Bland introduced himself to Kellett again, and made the most of the opportunity to promote his shortbread to the assembled crews. When demand became so great that it seemed his samples might all be consumed before he met any of his Japanese clients, he stowed them away in a locker.

Come Monday morning, Bland donned his export executive’s suit after showering at the yacht club and took the bus across the port to meet his Japanese interpreter in his temporary office on the north wharf. Together they set off for the first of his three daily meetings with retail buyers. His big sales pitch was that the shortbread was handmade, and that he could absolutely guarantee the consistency of the product. (He did not say that in the early days of Settlers the dough had been mixed in the tub of a washing machine formerly used by Julia to wash the lambskins she put in her bed as winter foot warmers.) With expressions of interest coming in from Japanese buyers, Bland excitedly faxed his partner Colin Keane to find out how many packets they could put onto a pallet, and how many pallets they could put into a container. They now had an inquiry which would fill ten pallets. ‘I was thinking big business, and it really looked pretty good. I believe the business could have grown so much bigger and quicker if I’d remained focused, rather than constantly thinking about the next adventure. My real reason for being
in Osaka was to deliver the yacht *Fast Forward* back to Australia.’

After a week of successful meetings, Bland put his executive suit back in the case and reverted to life as a yachtie. Watson and Green arrived on a flight from Melbourne and met him at the Hokko yacht club, with more sailing gear and windsurfers. ‘Everyone thought I was pretty crazy around the yacht club. Here is this guy who hangs around with all the yachties, then all of a sudden he gets up each morning, puts on a suit and goes to work in Osaka. Then at the end of the week his crew rocks up with windsurfers.’ If the locals considered Bland exotic, he considered the local game at the yacht club equally exotic. A crowd watched as a blind man had to split open a watermelon with a stick. Everyone shouted directions, like ‘Port, port, starboard’, to tell him where to hit.

With Kellett flying back to Melbourne, Bland’s thoughts now turned to sailing *Fast Forward* out of Osaka Harbour, the busiest port in Japan. ‘It was daunting, to be honest. Here I was skippering a very, very flash 47-footer, *Fast Forward*, when the biggest boat I’d skippered up until then was a 29-footer. I was the skipper, responsible for the crew and this very expensive boat, and for taking it all the way back to Australia. My commitment to Simon was that I would have it back to Australia by the end of July. To win his division of the race, it had taken him 36 days, and we were taking two and a half months.’

Bland, Watson and Green would never forget the 24 hours it took them to sail out of Osaka and across the sea lane to the north Pacific Ocean. ‘They say about 800 vessels go past the entrance to the port every day – vessels going in and out, or heading up the Japanese coast towards Tokyo and the northern
ports. Conditions were rough and the boat was crashing from the top of one wave to the bottom of the next. We all felt pretty sick, and Jay and I just tried to push and steer the boat through all these other vessels. It was a hellish night. In the end, we feared we might do too much damage to our yacht, so, once we were through the sea lane, we hove to, and sailed with a reduced headsail backwinded and the mainsail lowered.

Bland and Watson were exhausted after the 24-hour crossing and they turned the helm over to Green, telling him to wake them if any other boats came dangerously close. They had learned that the trick for long journeys like this was to conserve their energy. Green survived the test, and continuing bad conditions, and Bland and Watson awoke refreshed the next morning to a calm sea and a celebratory breakfast of pancakes. It was a feast compared to the rations they had bought themselves before they left Osaka. Kellett had agreed to pay half of the delivery fee up front, with the balance payable in Melbourne on arrival, and there was little surplus cash for gourmet food supplies. The boat was filled with Salada biscuits, tinned tuna, flour, milk powder, rice and containers of water. Dinner every second night was tuna and Salada biscuits, preceded by a treat of a beer and Pringles chips, consumed while play continued on the backgammon board. Pringles and backgammon had become part of the Bland adventure tradition the year before on the voyage round the West Indian islands. The cost of living in each island could immediately be assessed by comparing the price of Pringles with the previous stopping point.

The first port of call, after nine days’ sailing, was the American territory of Guam. Watson knew people there who
Osaka to Melbourne
showed them around, but there was a menacing feel to the island. ‘It seemed to be populated by people left over from the Vietnam War wearing bandanas round their heads and telling stories about military occupation. There were rusted-out cars abandoned everywhere, even on the cliff tops.’ Guam’s chief claim to fame was the largest K-Mart in the world. Bland and the crew went there to restock the vessel for the next leg of the voyage, to the coral island paradise of West Fayu in Micronesia.

In Osaka they had met Cliff Wilkinson, the skipper of an Australian boat called *Mulloka III*, who had recommended sailing to the island of Kapingamarangi, which was surrounded by a horseshoe-shaped reef. Getting in to the island was not so easy, according to Bland: ‘It was a west-facing entrance and the sun was in our eyes, so we thought it prudent to stand off for the night. While I steered, Jay went up the mast wearing Polaroid glasses so that he could see down through the water to the reef beneath. The tide was ebbing strongly as we approached, and to try and beat the flow of the tide we had the engine going full-on, trying to weave our way through these very narrow channels. Suddenly, we smacked into “bomby”, a growth of coral, that was sticking out. I said to Ben, “Quick, get down below,” because it sounded like we’d cracked the yacht open. In fact, the keel had scraped against the coral, so we reversed and went back out to sea and radioed *Mulloka III*, saying it was too hard to get in without local guidance.’ *Mulloka III* radioed back to say the local chief wanted them to come in, and a fishing boat would come out to pilot *Fast Forward* in through the reef. ‘They boarded our yacht and took the helm and steered us through. We just left them to it.’

If the Guam K-Mart had brought them face to face with
twentieth-century reality, they were now to face Micronesian tribal hospitality from a timeless age. In Kapingamarangi (population 50) the local policeman’s duties included making sure that all the children were in bed and all the local pigs were tied up before nine o’clock at night. The local custom was that all visitors had to introduce themselves to the chief. After meeting him, Bland and the crew found themselves besieged by children seeking cigarettes and lollies. They could only offer rice, reserving enough for themselves until they reached their next stop, the Solomon Islands.

They decided to move on in a sea convoy with Mulloka III, which was heading back to Gippsland. With a trade wind blowing from the north-east, Bland and the crew had their chance to test the mettle of Fast Forward. ‘She was built like a racing boat, and visibly lacked most creature comforts. While she was wide and beamy, the galley was small and every little space was stuffed with sails, spinnakers, ropes and wet-weather gear.’ Bland raised all the sails and felt the boat leap over the waves. It surged ahead of Mulloka III. Wilkinson, Mulloka III’s skipper, had a policy that when the boat’s speed dropped below six knots he would put on the engine, as he had plenty of storage space for diesel fuel on board. With only 80 litres of diesel oil on board, Bland had to save the fuel for going in and out of port. On this occasion, Wilkinson had the last laugh. After a couple of days the wind died down, and Fast Forward found herself becalmed in the doldrums, while Mulloka III came chugging past on her diesel engine.

The time had arrived to alert Julia to catch a flight from Melbourne to meet them in the Solomons. She was in the flat at the farm when she heard the judge calling her name. It was Peter on Fast Forward, asking her to fly to Gizo to meet the
boat. The call of the adventurer proved irresistible. ‘I was heading for the malaria capital of the Solomons, but it was such short notice that I didn’t have time to take the preventative tablets. Instead the doctor gave me the ones to take once a week, which I think were supposed to cure malaria. I was told they were fairly strong and could be hallucinatory, though I didn’t really think about that till later.’

Gizo was too small to have its own landing strip, so Julia’s light aircraft had to land on the airstrip on Nusatope, the next-door island. Boys from the island sunbaked on the beach at the end of the runway so they could watch the planes come flying in, just metres above them.

When Julia stepped off the plane she was still recovering from the vibrations as it came down through the thunderclouds. Then she had to adjust to life on the ground. Pairs of men held hands as they walked down the street. ‘I hadn’t read anything about the Solomons, or the culture of the people, so I thought this must be the gay capital of the Coral Sea.’ An American diver called Rob assured her it wasn’t, and helped her to find accommodation at Phoebe’s Guest House, where she waited for five days for Fast Forward to arrive.

After one false start, when she rushed down to the harbour only to discover that another boat had come in, the boat appeared on the horizon, enveloped in a storm cloud. ‘There was this little black dot up the mast, which was Jay guiding Pete through the reef in the storm. He’s just so confident and nimble. Watching Jay walk around the boat is like watching a circus performer on a tightrope. The boat came in, and I remember thinking when I got on board, “Gosh, this boat is so big,” and I was really impressed that Pete had sailed it all the way from Japan.’
The film *Jaws* and the word ‘shark’ had always been lodged in Julia’s brain, so when Rob suggested to Bland and Watson that they should go diving at a spot 38 metres down in the ocean she declined, preferring some more secure snorkelling on the surface. Bland recalled the view he saw 38 metres below, at the bottom of the coral cliffs. ‘It was called Grand Central after Grand Central station in New York, because it was so busy with marine life. I was holding on to the reef with my fingers and looking to my left, and there was Jay just next to me, using his flippers to stop himself being dragged away in the two-knot current as a three-metre bronze whaler came gliding past us. It was the most incredible sight. There were scores of sharks, barracuda, octopus and squid. I looked up from where I was, feeling very comfortable surrounded by sharks, and I could see Jools snorkelling high above us. She seemed much more exposed to the perils of a shark attack – if there were any perils – than we were. When we told her about the sharks afterwards she was horrified.’ Julia temporarily retreated to the safety of the deck, where she and Green alternated reading high-brow classics like *Moby Dick* and low-brow classics like *Woman’s Day*.

Green found a use for his specially purchased knife when the crew went marlin fishing off the island of Simbo. Sailing in to the island they were greeted by children floating about in handmade bamboo rafts, and frangipani blossoms bobbing along on the top of the water. An Australian youth group was helping to build a school and the crew were invited to a meal of fresh fish, rice, yams, pawpaw, coconut and other local delicacies. The local chief gave permission for them to climb the island’s volcano, with a guide who introduced them to the practice of cooking local birds’ eggs in sulphur holes in the surface of the volcano. It was more environmentally
friendly than cooking with gas bottles, though smellier.

If it came as a shock to see skulls above the burial sites in Simbo, it was nothing to the shock awaiting Julia back on the boat. She was due to do the night watch as they headed back for Australia. ‘I was out there by myself in the middle of the night, after taking the malaria tablet, and I swear to God I heard a voice behind me saying hello. I was steering at the time and, as we were heading back to Australia, I threw the malaria tablets away because I didn’t want to be hearing voices saying, “Why don’t you just jump in?” With the phosphorescence in the water it was just so mesmerising. I could suddenly understand all those legends about the sirens calling to sailors that had been at sea for six months, and trying to will them to jump into the water. It was pretty compelling stuff.’

Julia refused to conform to any gender stereotypes on board, just as she had the year before on the West Indies voyage. She was determined she would not be seasick, and that she wouldn’t totter precariously round the deck. In any case, by now, after the West Indies experience, she was becoming a hardened sailor.

They had steered a course towards Townsville and reached Magnetic Island, just off the coast, around midnight. It was too late to go through customs in Townsville because the charges were high outside of regulation hours, so they anchored off Magnetic Island. The smells of Australia wafted over Julia like the warm spices in a Christmas cake. ‘It was great because it was just Pete and I on deck. It was really special. We were playing the song “Mustang Sally” out on the deck, and I’ll never forget that moment. Every time I hear that song I think of us and I can smell Australia. You can’t smell Australia when you’re on the land, but when you’re at sea you can smell it, and it’s a really nostalgic thing.’
If the smell of romance and warm spices was in the air off Magnetic Island, the customs officer who went through the boat centimetre by centimetre was sniffing for other substances. Used to offering a drink to the customs officials they had encountered on the various islands on the way down, Bland offered the Australian customs man a cup of tea. He declined politely and proceeded with his search, showing special interest in the uneaten bags of dehydrated food. When he could find no drugs or illegal items after searching every space in the boat, the crew were told they could re-enter Australia.

The port at Townsville was full of stories of other boats returning from Osaka which had lost their masts or hit reefs in the Solomons or off the Great Barrier Reef. To celebrate their own safe passage, Bland and the crew satisfied their hunger with a $19.99 ‘all you can eat’ dinner, and then set sail for the swish holiday resort of Hayman Island. The problem was, they didn’t have the budget to live up to it. They looked the part, sailing into the resort harbour, but then, embarrassingly, they had to turn straight round because they couldn’t afford the $100-a-night mooring fee. They sailed round to the public waters on the north side of the island and dropped anchor, intending to walk the six kilometres across the island to the resort. There was, however, a problem. They were dressing up for the occasion, but first they had to get to shore from the anchorage, and deal with the problem of Julia’s dinghy.

Before she left Melbourne to join them in the Solomon Islands, Bland had rung and asked Julia to buy a dinghy as there wasn’t one on board Fast Forward. She went into the army disposal store and bought what she thought was a
suitable one. Bland told her he would help her with the dinghy when she arrived on the flight. ‘When we finally met Julia, I said, “Where’d you leave the dinghy? At the airport?” And she said, “No, it’s here in my rucksack”. She pulled out a dinghy that was no more than a kiddie playschool blow-up suitable for a three-year-old playing in the backyard, not four adults trying to get between a yacht and the shore.’

It had yellow plastic paddles. To stop the plastic dinghy buckling in the middle and capsizing, they devised a system whereby one person went in the bow, one in the stern, and one perched precariously in the middle. The fourth person had to swim ashore. On this occasion it was Bland; he stripped naked, swam to the beach, and collected his clothes from Julia. It was rather a different arrival from the swim-up bar across the island at the resort. ‘When we got to the resort we were surrounded by privilege,’ says Bland. ‘It was so beautiful, and so beyond our budget.’

Having been turned away like paupers from the beach barbecue being held that night for the resort staff, they walked into town and headed for a restaurant on the water. ‘Everybody looked at us – these rough sailors coming ashore. The waiter came over and gave us a menu and each main course cost more than we had collectively, so we ordered an entree each. Ben, with great aplomb, grabbed the wine menu and perused it like a Barossa Valley connoisseur. Dressed in his Calvin Klein clothes, he ran his finger knowledgeably down the wines, looked at the waiter, and said, “Yes, a bottle of your very cheapest, please.”’ The bill might have been expensive, but it was worth every cent for the luxury of the restaurant’s bathrooms. After weeks of marine toilets, they luxuriated in the fluffy towels and the scented oils and soaps.
They passed idyllic days swimming and sailing in the Whitsundays until Julia had to return to Melbourne to continue her studies at La Trobe University. She hopped on the ferry from Hayman Island to Airlie Beach, and from there caught a bus and plane to Melbourne.

*Fast Forward* headed south for Maroochydore and Bland made a mental store of the breathtaking images he saw along the eastern coast, like a night-time sugar cane burn-off. ‘Under a full moon, as we sailed under full spinnaker, all the sugar canes were burning on the shore, and amidst the smoke and flames there was this lingering smell of cane.’

They did repairs to the boat in Maroochydore, hired an old Ford Falcon, and drove up to Noosa Heads. For Bland, who had spent so many childhood holidays at Noosa, it was like a sentimental return home. Everything came back to him: those summers spent at the property between Eumundi and Noosa; working in the cattle yards till two in the afternoon; visiting their family friends Charlie and Jean Battersby at their apartment in Noosa; cooling off in the sea; and then walking through the national park.

After calling in at Sydney, they prepared themselves for the final leg home to Melbourne. Bass Strait granted them no favours, as a storm was blowing through, but they pushed on. *Fast Forward*’s owner, Simon Kellett, had not expected them home so soon. He had planned a weekend away skiing until a friend rang to say he’d heard on VHF radio that *Fast Forward* was about to enter Westernport Bay. He abandoned his skiing plans and drove to Westernport Marina at Hastings, 80 kilometres south-east of Melbourne.

Bland wanted a perfect finish to the voyage, and he got it. Entering Westernport Bay was difficult as there was a narrow
channel and they were coming in on an ebb tide. There was a
danger that *Fast Forward*, which drew about three metres,
might go aground on one of the shallow sandbanks. But the
teamwork developed between Bland, Green and Watson over
nearly three months met the challenge. ‘I was in the bow with
the channel chart showing the deeper water, Ben was amid-
ships to pass on the messages, and Jay was steering. I would
flash the torch at each pylon and get its numbering so we could
look on the chart to see exactly where we were as we entered
the channel. There was a deep-water line that ran between the
particular pylons and we wanted to stay on that line. It worked
very well coming in. Hardly a word was spoken, but the
communication was fantastic.’

Kellett was waiting on the marina with pizza, beer and Coke,
which was consumed over a long night of stories. The next day
everyone’s families came down to see the boat. The judge
welcomed his son back proudly. ‘It was very significant,’ says
Peter. ‘It was the first time I’d ever seen a sign of respect from
my father for what I was doing. It was like an acknowledge-
ment that his son was a very good sailor who had brought a
47-foot yacht and the crew safely back from Japan. He didn’t
actually say any of that, but his facial expression said it. It was
very significant for me to have his affirmation that what I
was doing was good and right.’

No sooner was Bland back in Melbourne than he started
planning a return visit to Japan to sell Settlers Shortbread. He
contacted JETRO again, seeking sponsorship at the giant
Japanese international food exhibition, Food Ex, in Tokyo in
March 1996. After dipping his toe into Japan at Osaka, Food
Ex would provide the perfect launching pad for Settlers into
the main Japanese market.
Bland learned that to be shortlisted for JETRO help he had to have his factory premises inspected by a Japanese inspector. The problem was, he had no factory premises. His solution was to take over someone else’s premises for the visit, and pass them off as his own. He had been doing his packaging with a company in north Melbourne, and he called the owner and explained his predicament. ‘I went and saw him and said, “Listen, I’m being shortlisted to be one of ten companies in Victoria to be promoted in Tokyo Food Expo next year. The Japanese guy’s coming out in October and he wants to see my factory. Can we pretend when I bring him out here that this is my factory and this is where we do business?” He said, “Well, yessss,” and I promised him that if I was shortlisted I’d do all the manufacturing at his place.’

He had a large factory with walls 30 metres long, packed with his own stock. Come October and the JETRO visit, Bland strategically placed a couple of boxes of his shortbread amongst the factory’s stock so that while he was showing the inspector round he could stop and show him a box of Settlers.

Before the visit Bland went around the factory workers to make himself known. They were perplexed to hear three Japanese export officials were coming to visit their business, which had never exported even a box to Japan. Upon arrival the officials looked suitably impressed, particularly as Bland had enough Japanese to introduce himself in their language. ‘Aahhh, you speak Japanese,’ they said. ‘Well, no, nothing really,’ said Bland, modestly. ‘I came in and started to show them round the factory and one of the Japanese guys said, “Aahhh, big machine. What do?”’ I had no idea what the machine was but I assumed it was something to do with mixing up dough, so that’s what I told them. Then I went
over to another machine and said to the factory worker, “Good job, well done,” and patted him on the back. He looked a bit startled and he was just about to say to me, “Yes, can I help?” when I quickly turned and walked away.’

Bland continued his factory tour, showing the packaging and sealing sections. Then he carefully pulled out the box of Settlers Shortbread he had earlier placed among the cartons, making it appear as though he had picked out the packet at random. ‘Aaahhh, lot of packaging,’ said the main Japanese official, and Bland nodded.

The JETRO executive asked to go into Bland’s office. ‘I turned to the factory owner and he nodded, and we went to his office. We sat down and the Japanese official said, “Aaahhh, very good. You use additives?” And I said, “No, no, no. All natural Australian cookies. Butter, flour, sugar. Nothing else.” He said, “You give me fax that says you not use additive, and we take 1000 boxes for Japan.” I said, “Just one moment, please,” and went round the corner to the office secretary and said, “Hello, my name’s Peter Bland and the factory boss has just asked me to ring the butter company and tell them to send you a fax confirming the butter that we buy from them has no additives. Immediately.”

Bland sat with the Japanese delegation making small talk until the office secretary returned with the fax saying the butter contained no additives. The head of the delegation confirmed he’d take 1000 boxes, which was the biggest order Bland had ever received, and that JETRO would sponsor Settlers at Food Ex in Tokyo in March 1996. It was all systems go for Settlers.
Chapter Eight

ONE BELOW ZERO

Peter Bland did not know which way his life was going to turn in January 1996. Settlers Shortbread was full on, as he had bought out Colin Keane’s share of the business, and the first consignment of export biscuits for Japan was just about to leave Tullamarine. His sailing ambitions hadn’t abated, and he was pondering flying to Hong Kong to try to pick up a cheap boat, as he had heard the prices had dropped there in anticipation of the Chinese takeover of the British territory. He had also applied for the position of chief executive of the world sailing championships which were being held on Port Phillip Bay the following year.

Instead his life turned in a different direction – south to Antarctica. On 28 January the phone rang as he was heading home from Point Lonsdale, where he had been staying with
his friend Justin Harty. It was Jay. He had injured his back and could not take his place in the crew of *Spirit of Sydney*, which was about to leave Hobart for a trip to the South Magnetic Pole. Could Peter take his place? Bland accepted without a second thought.

The party was being led by British adventurer and Everest climber David Hempleman-Adams, who was seeking to add a further adventurer’s scalp to his already impressive collection. Having climbed the highest mountains on each of the world’s seven continents, he was now seeking to achieve the ‘Grand Slam’ of reaching all four poles, geographic and magnetic. Only a month before he had completed his 63-day solo trek to the Geographic South Pole, and he still had frostbite from that trip when he arrived in Australia for this new challenge. He had arranged to charter Don McIntyre’s boat *Spirit of Sydney*, with three Australian crew and six paying passengers. The skipper was Steve Corrigan, otherwise known as ‘Nig’, and the veteran of twenty Sydney to Hobart races, and the crew was completed by his girlfriend Ez and Bland. The passengers were a Swiss doctor called Oliver Houseman, a diesel engineer called Roy Lewington, Hempleman-Adams’ father-in-law, Ron Brooks, a BBC sound man called Graham Hoyland, a newspaper reporter called Julian Champkin, and Rebecca Stephens, the first English-woman to climb Everest.

Hempleman-Adams was barely back from his trek to the South Pole when he committed to sailing to the Magnetic South Pole, and he wrote that his wife, Claire, and their children were less than impressed to see him leaving again so soon: ‘I suppose she had long resigned herself to putting up with me and my ridiculous adventures.’
Bland was in a state of high excitement that, at last, he was about to visit Antarctica. His father wasn’t happy that Peter was again putting adventure before his career (although he expressed pride in his son’s enterprise and achievement to other people). Bland pressed on regardless.

The boat was due to leave from Hobart on 1 February: Bland had 36 hours to get his affairs in order at the farm before flying to Hobart on 30 January. When he reached Constitution Dock there was concern amongst the crew about an electrical fire on the boat the day before, and among passengers about the impending voyage through the mountainous seas of the Southern Ocean. ‘A lot of talk of seasickness amongst the clients,’ wrote Bland. ‘Basically the clients seem very wary. I have to encourage them to gain confidence.’

They managed to get underway on 1 February, but had to return when they realised they had left some provisions on shore. They set off a second time but at 4 pm the engine cut out, and they anchored at Dover, trooping into the local pub en masse for sustenance. When they got to work on the engine they discovered a leak from the battery was burning a hole in the aluminium hull. Corrigan rang McIntyre, the ship’s owner, in Sydney, who promised to send down Nick Flanagan, one of his top maritime engineers, as soon as he could get him on the plane. They turned the boat round and headed back to Hobart, arriving at the Royal Hobart Yacht Club early the next morning.

*Spirit of Sydney* finally sailed out of Hobart on 5 February. As it entered the Southern Ocean and the seas began to rise, the crew all threw flowers overboard, the traditional ceremony for yachts heading south, in the hope of placating the elements and guaranteeing a safe passage. Even Bland went along with
the superstition. ‘When you’re at sea you do whatever it takes. You don’t take any chances. I always touch wood before I leave.’ He had had no formal faith since his early days at school, but his mother always prayed for his safety and gave thanks for his safe homecoming at the beginning and end of his trips.

The gift of flowers to the sea gods was only partially successful. Seasickness struck several of the passengers and Brooks was soon knocked off his feet by one huge wave, cutting open his head. The wound required five stitches from the doctor, who also had to insert three stitches in his own head after a rogue wave threw him against the side of the cabin.

They had to contend with the cold as well as the waves. The snow began to fall five days out and Bland found it impossible to go out with his video camera in his bare hands for more than two minutes. The spray froze as soon as it hit the deck and the crew spent more and more time chipping away with axes to lessen the weight of ice on the decks. Icebergs began to appear on the radar.

Bland was impressed by Hempleman-Adams, who had achieved in his life most of what Bland aspired to. ‘He was a very capable, strong person out of his area of competence. He was a climber, not a sailor, and he didn’t claim otherwise. I was surprised he could be so accepting of our advice about how to sail the boat. He was prepared to yield the leadership role to others. I was in my element, and he wasn’t. He always made sure to clip on to the safety lines in the boat.’

Listening to Hempleman-Adams talk to Houseman, the Swiss doctor, gave Bland ideas. The Englishman had asked Houseman to be the doctor on his trip to the Magnetic North Pole the following year, and Bland immediately wondered
Journey to the South Magnetic Pole
how he could get on that trip. He wished he had some specialist skill like a doctor’s that he could offer Hempleman-Adams.

The long hours at sea gave him time to think. Wrapped up against the cold, with his camera batteries stored inside his jacket so that they did not freeze up in case he wanted to take a photograph, he thought of Julia and how much he missed her, and horse riding with the dogs and sheep on the farm. He made himself a mental note in his diary: ‘For a couple of years now I’m really going to turn up the pressure – take some risks in business as I do elsewhere.’

Valentine’s Day, 14 February, was supposed to be arrival day in Antarctica, but instead it was survival day. Bland wrote: ‘I woke up and there was hell on deck. A sheet had been dropped over the side in the night with the engine going and had led to the propeller being fouled. So we had no motor. Then the wind, which was forecast to be less than fifteen knots from the east-south-east, came in at 40 knots from the south-south-east. We rotated helmpersons all day for half an hour. There was ice frozen all over the deck and rigging. Had to chip ice off the global positioning system dome, all the rigging and masts and break it off with ice axes. Spray from the sea built up on the belly of the sails and froze. We had to put our back against it and chip the ice out of the folds in the reef of the mainsail so that its weight didn’t rip the sail. In the end the weight got too much for us and it did rip the mainsail.’

The boat was now effectively stranded six kilometres from their destination of Boat Harbour in Commonwealth Bay, where Mawson had landed almost 80 years before. The engine wouldn’t work because the propeller was fouled, and the mainsail was ripped. They worked through the day trying to free the propeller from inside the boat, but it remained
jammed. They bobbed helplessly in the waves as giant icebergs floated closer and closer. To make the situation more grave, the local catabatic winds, formed by cooling air descending from a high altitude, were rushing down onto Commonwealth Bay from the Antarctic ice plateau. The elements were assaulting the boat from every direction, and Bland was just about to experience the most dangerous piece of sailing in his short career.

Setting the smallest headsail with three reefs to reduce the sail plan to the absolute minimum, Corrigan attempted to head towards the shore of Commonwealth Bay by tacking into the eye of the wind. The boat moved perilously forward at about six knots, with Bland on the bow waiting for water shallow enough to allow him to drop the anchor. But before he had the chance to do so, the boat fell off the wind, turned, and suddenly found itself flying downwind straight towards an iceberg 80 metres away. The only way past the iceberg was through a narrow channel between it and a rocky reef sticking out from the shore. The channel appeared to be about twenty metres wide, but there was no way of telling how deep it was, and whether the keel would clear the bottom. With everyone bracing themselves for an impact, Bland took up a position in the bow and, secured by a safety harness, leant forward over the hull to check the depth of the water beneath the boat. By holding out his arms, and using them as indicators to turn to port or starboard, he guided Corrigan to the deeper water. The boat squeezed through the gap, and headed for the comparative safety of the water further off shore. The narrow escape brought home their predicament, and how difficult it was without the engine. Having unsuccessfully tried more conventional methods of freeing the propeller and getting the
boat in to shore for the previous three days, more desperate measures were now needed.

Corrigan, the skipper, called everyone together. There were two alternatives: either they chanced their luck by sailing back to Hobart with no engine or propeller, or someone would have to dive overboard, in sea temperatures of minus one degree Celsius, to try to cut the rope wound round the propeller. Bland saw this as his chance to get himself on Hempleman-Adams’ North Magnetic Pole trip the following year.

Some describe Bland’s decision to dive overboard as a moment of madness, but he describes it as a moment of supreme opportunism. He told Hempleman-Adams he would do it on two conditions: the dive would be filmed and Hempleman-Adams would give him a place in his party to the North Magnetic Pole. ‘If you can free the propeller, you can have anything you like,’ said Hempleman-Adams, throwing in the offer of a beer when they returned to Hobart. Bland had another reason for making the dive. He was just six kilometres away from Boat Harbour and the hut built by his hero, Mawson, and he wasn’t going to turn around and abandon his dream of seeing that. He made his preparations. He went down below deck and sharpened one of the galley knives. The boat had come without wet suits, because they had been wrongly labelled and left behind in Hobart, so he decided to dive in his waterproof sailing suit, with a mask and flippers. He asked Houseman, the doctor, how long he could stay in the water before the effects of hypothermia hit him. Five minutes was the limit, Houseman said. The outside air temperature was minus 60 degrees Celsius. He put on a safety harness and attached it to a rope that would be held by the people on board; if anything
happened, or he was a long time resurfacing, they would haul in the rope. Corrigan sailed the boat into the lee of an iceberg, to lessen the movement of the water, and Bland prepared to make his dive. ‘I was so focused. All I could think of was, “Cut the rope, five minutes; cut the rope, five minutes.” ’

According to Hempleman-Adams’ autobiography, Toughing It Out: ‘We all gathered on deck and watched as Pete slipped over the side. As he hit the water you could see quite clearly how the numbing cold took his breath away. His eyes suddenly stuck out of his head, he looked up so that the whole of his face stared towards the sky, and he just let out an “aaaaarrrrgh” noise before flipping over and diving down into the sea. The whole trip, and quite possibly our lives, depended on the next three minutes and the bravery of this remarkable young man.’

Lowering himself over the starboard side of the boat, Bland was winded by the shock of the cold. Bits of ice were floating all round him. ‘My legs and feet were hurting from the cold, and I knew I had to take a breath and let go of the side of the boat, but it was so cold my chest was constricted and I felt I couldn’t breathe. I took the biggest breath I could manage, and down I went. I remember pristine, clear water. The whole time I was thinking about what was under me, and whether there were any killer whales around.’

The 2.5-centimetre diameter rope was wound several times around the propeller and didn’t yield easily to the knife. Bland decided it was better to try to unravel the rope and, bursting for air, he went up to the surface. Frozen by the cold, he struggled to get some words out to the people on the boat. ‘Four feet, four feet, more slack,’ he gasped. More rope was fed out to him and he dived down for a second time. ‘I got 80 per cent of the rope off the propeller, then I ran out of air again.

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I knew my five minutes was nearly up, so I went to the surface, sucked in some air, and went straight down again. I was absolutely spent, and as I went up for the third time I flicked the last bit of rope off the propeller.' He could hear cheers and applause from the boat as he surfaced giving the thumbs up. He was hauled in over the back, taken down into the cabin, and his wet clothes were pulled off him. People rubbed his skin to try to restore his circulation, and volunteered their spare pieces of clothing. Hempleman-Adams says: ‘I made him a hot drink and as he sat in the cabin lapping up the adulation he was as proud as punch.’

Julia couldn’t believe it when Bland rang her soon after to explain what he had done. ‘I was horrified. I thought, typical Pete, and I’m glad I didn’t know about him going over the side until now.’

Bland had joined exalted company by diving overboard in Commonwealth Bay. Both Mawson and the Australian photographer, Frank Hurley, had braved the icy Antarctic waters on their trips down. Mawson went into the very same piece of water off Commonwealth Bay when he thought a key piece of equipment had been dropped in the sea while stores were being landed in 1912. He believed the wick from the stove was in the chest which fell in the sea, and he retrieved the chest only to find the wick was not in it. Hurley is remembered for trying to save his glass-plate negatives from the wreck of Shackleton's boat Endurance as it was being crushed by the ice in 1915. He fought his way through the rising water inside the ship to retrieve as many negatives as he could, and they now form the pictorial record of Shackleton's extraordinary journey.

Bland saw his dive to free the propeller as less of an act of
valour than grabbing an opportunity when it arose – a philosophy that was to become increasingly important to him. ‘Opportunities are slippery little suckers. They’re often very difficult to recognise, and you’ve got to have your eyes open and know what you’re looking for. The trouble is they can be in front of you all your life, and you don’t notice them. It might be a childhood scar, like I had, or a piece of bad fortune, but if you can see them as opportunities, with belief and determination they can become just that. It’s like diving overboard in Antarctica. Other people saw it as bad luck having a fouled propeller, but I saw it as an opportunity to achieve my goals.’

Hempleman-Adams was an example of someone who had managed to attract sponsors to fund his hobby. He successfully combined mountaineering and polar adventure with a family life in England, and Bland saw an opportunity opening up before him. By joining Hempleman-Adams’ North Magnetic Pole journey in twelve months’ time he could become the first Australian to the pole, thus establishing his credentials as an Australian adventurer, and easing the task of securing sponsorship.

After the dive, his attention was taken up with trying to help Corrigan get Spirit of Sydney in to shore in the face of 80-kilometre winds blowing off Antarctica. They anchored in the lee of an iceberg, and Bland took the Zodiac in to shore, where he fastened two lines from the boat. He finally stood in front of Mawson’s Hut. ‘I was in awe of actually setting foot in Antarctica, and seeing Mawson’s Hut for the first time. It was bleached and windswept, with solid ice clinging to the timber boards inside. Strips of hemp insulation flapped in the wind, and there were old boots, tins and collars from the huskies still attached to the chain. A colony of penguins was
feeding just outside.’

The pilgrimage over, Bland returned to the boat, and joined in the repair of the mainsail torn by the ice. They faced a passage of about 350 nautical miles to reach the South Magnetic Pole, and they estimated it would take them about four days’ sailing. If they had witnessed some of the terrors of the Antarctic in the past four days, they were now to witness its beauties: reflecting the changes in the sun, the ice changed from grey to white, blue, pink and orange.

In recognition of the fact that Bland had saved the trip by diving in to free the propeller, Hempleman-Adams asked him to be the one to steer the boat to the pole, the point the earth’s magnetic field rotates around. Champagne was poured, which helped numb Bland’s sore and swollen feet – a legacy of his dive into the freezing Antarctic waters. He was unable to move his toes without pain and he had them examined by the ship’s doctor, who diagnosed that the nerve endings of the toes were damaged and the skin was likely to die because the cold had prevented the blood from circulating properly.

On 28 February, 23 days after departure, Spirit of Sydney returned to Hobart and the waiting journalists from the ABC, the BBC, Channel Six, and the Hobart Mercury. Hempleman-Adams attracted most of the publicity because of his previous feats, but the Australian media was keen to hear about Bland’s heroism in diving into the freezing Antarctic waters to free the propeller. Stoically, Bland described it as ‘just another day in adventureland’. Hempleman-Adams had to admit he would rather go climbing than sailing any day. ‘How anyone could stay in the Antarctic for a year is beyond my imagination – you’d have to be nuts, or an Australian’ (a reference to Don and Margie McIntyre, who had spent twelve months in a hut
in Commonwealth Bay the year before). Bland was impressed not just by Hempleman-Adams’ composure with the media, but by the fact that he could command their attention with his feats. ‘If you can get the media, you can get the sponsorship money. That’s the way the adventure business works.’ He watched carefully for whatever tips he might pick up.

After a celebratory dinner that night with the rest of the crew and Don and Margie McIntyre, Bland flew back next day to Tullamarine, where he was met by Julia. She immediately noticed the extent to which Peter had fallen under the spell of Hempleman-Adams. ‘Meeting David was the pivotal moment for Pete,’ she says. ‘He was swept away by this guy who could make money doing something he loved. He’d climbed the seven peaks and now he was doing the four poles. He represented the consummate adventurer/businessman, and Pete raved about him.’ Bland raved even more about the Englishman when he heard that, apart from all his other achievements, he had completed twelve marathons and two British 80-mile races.

Bland had invited Hempleman-Adams, Stephens and Houseman back to the farm, the intention being that they would drive from there to Mount Kosciusko. As Hempleman-Adams had climbed the highest peaks on seven other continents, he now wanted to climb Australia’s highest mountain. He did so to the background accompaniment of Bland reciting ‘The Man from Snowy River’, just as he had done when he was first wooing Julia.

Bland found the optimism of Banjo Paterson irresistible, as well as the message of underdogs from the bush triumphing over adversity. Take the man from Snowy River, who hailed from Kosciusko way: when the colt from old Regret got away, it wasn’t the ‘tried and noted riders from the stations
near and far’ that finally recaptured the horse, it was the man from Snowy River, ‘a stripling on a small and weedy beast’. Bland knew it by heart, especially the bit where the experienced riders all stopped at the top of the mountain:

*But the man from Snowy River let the pony have his head,*
*And he swung his stockwhip round and gave a cheer,*
*And he raced him down the mountain like a torrent down its bed,*
*While the others stood and watched in very fear.*

Bland’s other favourite Paterson poem was ‘The Geebung Polo Club’, about a bush polo team. They were crack riders:

*But their style of playing polo was irregular and rash –*
*They had mighty little science, but a mighty lot of dash.*

They decided to take on an exclusive city club called the Cuff and Collar Team, who came up to the bush for the match complete with their valets. It was a fearsome affair, so ferocious that even a spectator broke a leg in the pandemonium, and it was called a tie when the Cuff and Collar captain, the last surviving player, tumbled off his horse and died. Still conscious, and refusing to say die, the Geebung Polo Club captain raised himself slowly from the ground.

*So he scrambled on his pony for his last expiring chance,*
*For he meant to make an effort to get victory to his side;*
*So he struck at goal – and missed it – then he tumbled off and died.*

That, for Bland, symbolised the determination of men bred
in the Australian bush.

From the peaks of Kosciusko, Bland descended to the reality of farm life, and the continuing challenge of selling Settlers Shortbread. In six days’ time he had a flight to Tokyo to sell Settlers at Food Ex. On the eve of the exhibition he went to the JETRO stand, and there was Settlers. ‘I remember walking in and seeing that and feeling pretty proud. We’d come a long way in a short time.’ The trip, with its mixture of direct sales, networking with Australian and Japanese trade officials, and visits to Tokyo retailers, gave Bland a taste of serious international business, and he liked it. A new goal entered his life, and he wrote in his diary: ‘I will go back after this trip and set up a trading company. Only one of the products traded will be Settlers cookies. I will get a real office and do business to the full extent of my abilities. I will also sail, but as a holiday only.’

Full of resolve, he flew down to Hong Kong to check whether the boats really were as cheap as he had been told. If they were, he’d hatched a plan that he would buy one and sail it back to Australia, braving the pirates in the South China Seas. He thought it was worth the risk, if he could find a boat at a price he liked, but it never came to a race against the pirates. The prices of the boats were little different from Australia, and he dropped the idea. He flew home, fired up by the prospect of starting his own international trading company, and the dream of the following year’s trip to the North Magnetic Pole.

Things were starting to happen in his life. On 3 April, while talking to the local primary school about his adventures in Antarctica, he was asked for an autograph for the first time in his life. Somebody thought he was famous. Ever the oppor-
tunist, he also used the school talk to market Settlers, giving each pupil a piece of shortbread and promising them a 10 per cent discount if they bought a packet with a special voucher in the local deli.

Settlers was taking off. It had outgrown the oven at home and the cooking was now sub-contracted to a local bakery. He was visited by an executive from a chain of Japanese department stores, and worked with Julia on the development of special packaging to sell shortbread to the Japanese honeymoon market. There was a market for couples buying gifts typical of the country they were going to for their honeymoon, and Bland wanted to tap into it. He also received his first small order from the Philippines.

His name as a yacht delivery skipper was starting to spread down the east coast. One day Simon Kellett, owner of Fast Forward, which Bland and Watson had delivered from Osaka to Melbourne the year before, rang to ask him if he was interested in delivering Kookaburra I, one of the boats from Australia’s unsuccessful 1987 America’s Cup defence, from Darling Harbour in Sydney to Melbourne. Elated, he flew to Sydney with Jay Watson and two other friends, Gary McCarthy and Doug Pickford, and picked up the famous 12-metre yacht from its berth alongside the Australian Maritime Museum. Feeling like a million dollars, they sailed past the Opera House and out through Sydney Heads.

‘It was a beautiful yacht to sail and pointed at about 20 degrees off the wind. It could do nine knots to windward without any trouble, and it would turn on a dime. It was a very powerful yacht, with a huge mast and roached mainsail. But it felt very much like taking a Formula One racing car off the racetrack and putting it on a four-wheel drive course.
America’s Cup yachts are not designed to go into the open ocean. I must say, I don’t think I’ve ever been in a vessel that I thought had a greater chance of sinking than on that trip down. The trimmer’s pit where the primary winches [which hoist and trim the sails] were positioned was completely open, and the waves broke over the top and leaked in. In America’s Cup racing there is a crewman whose sole job is to man the bilge pump to get rid of the all the water that comes on board. As we came round Gabo Island we hit a strong south-westerly along the Victorian coast and waves were pouring into the yacht. There was an enormous forward hatch designed for the bowman to push huge spinnakers through, and we couldn’t stop the water crashing in there. All the charts I was carrying were ruined from the water spewing down below. We took cover in Refuge Bay in Wilson’s Promontory, off Victoria’s south-eastern coast, until the storm went through, and then pushed on to Westernport Marina. We left the boat there because it was too rough to get into Port Phillip Bay.’

As if sailing, selling shortbread and farming was not enough to satisfy him, Bland now took on two further activities. In June, to earn some extra money, he started his own fencing company, P&J Fencing, with his friend Jaap Viergever, and in July he took up paragliding on the coast west of Melbourne to get a new shot of adrenaline in his life. Soon after taking up the new sport he wrote: ‘It was a beautiful day down at Torquay. I flew all day, paragliding off the dunes between Point Impossible and Point Danger. Unreal. Absolutely buggered by the end of the day.’ It seemed to sum up his life.

If he needed any further motivation to achieve in life, beyond his Douglas Mawson and Sidney Kidman books, it came when Kieren Perkins won the 1500 metres at the
Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996, after Perkins had been given virtually no chance of retaining the title he first won at Barcelona in 1992. If ever there was a demonstration of determination and willpower with which Bland could identify, this was it. Ploughing on inexorably through the pool, metre after painful metre, Perkins never gave up. The diary entry for Saturday July 27 said it all: ‘Inspired listening on the radio as Kieren Perkins won the 1500 metres, with Daniel Kowalski coming second. What a champion he is.’

Bland could relate to Perkins in other ways, like the preparation and hard work that went into building up for the final performance. If Bland was to become the first Australian to the Magnetic North Pole in 1997, he had to put in the hours of preparation, which included raising sponsorship money. He kept up a steady flow of emails to Hempleman-Adams, seeking advice on techniques of raising sponsorship. The Englishman sent him some brochures from his past trips, and ended up inviting Peter and Julia to the UK to discuss what could be done.

Before they could do that, they had organised a two-week holiday in Queensland and, for once, adventure was not uppermost in Bland’s mind. But he was still driven by a goal – to ask Julia to marry him. His preparation was less than perfect, as he had not bought an engagement ring, nor had he asked Julia’s father if he would let Julia marry him. Getting her on her own proved difficult the first week in Noosa, where they were staying in a flat with friends. They then moved up to Fraser Island to camp with Justin Harty. The days ticked by, and still no opportunity presented itself for the proposal. With time running out, Bland took the initiative. The three of them were riding the four-wheel drive to Lake McKenzie.
when Bland suddenly told Harty to stop; he and Julia were going to run the rest of the way. Less than impressed, and wondering why on earth they needed to run the rest of the way, Julia nevertheless agreed to get out of the vehicle and follow Peter down the track. After they had been running for some minutes, Peter saw a fallen log across the path. Running ahead, he stood on top of it and offered his hand to Julia to help her over. ‘She was very sweaty and unromantic, and I said, as though I was offering her a lolly, “Will you marry me?” She stared at me and said, “Are you serious?” Getting down on my knees, I said, “I’m very serious.” And she said, “Yes, yes, yes.” We ran straight back to Justin to tell him we were getting married.’

They tried to celebrate the occasion by booking in for the night at Kingfisher Resort, but the accommodation was full and, after dinner at the resort, they retreated to their humble tent on the beach.

They bought the engagement ring in Oxford, while staying with Hempleman-Adams at his home in Wiltshire. During long conversations with the English adventurer and his wife, Claire, they took heart from the fact that Hempleman-Adams had received knockback after knockback from sponsors before his name was established (to the extent that Prince Charles wrote the foreword to his 1997 autobiography), and they learned how he had used his ingenuity to gain sponsorship from pubs in England called The Red Lion. He gave an expedition flag to each pub owner who supported him.

It didn’t worry him unduly at the time, but Bland’s diary entry for 5 October contained an ominous portent of critical health problems soon to come. ‘It seems that my health is starting to get a bit weak. I was sick most of the day in bed.’
The illness proved no deterrent to Bland and Julia climbing Britain’s highest peak with Hempleman-Adams. They travelled to Snowdonia, in Wales, and climbed the peak there, stopping in the historic hotel where Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tensing had stayed when they were preparing for their ascent on Mount Everest in 1953. Hillary’s signature was scrawled on the ceiling of a room in the hotel, along with that of other climbers who had scaled Everest.

Hempleman-Adams’ attitude to Bland was warm and supportive. ‘Everywhere we went he’d say: this is a very famous Australian yachtsman, you should get his autograph. Tongue in cheek, I’d sign “Peter Bland, famous Australian yachtsman”.’ Bland gave the Englishman a kangaroo stock whip as a fortieth birthday present, and he left England with the understanding that he would be part of Hempleman-Adams’ trip to the North Magnetic Pole in early 1997.

He flew home to Melbourne in a mood of euphoric anticipation of engagement to Julia and a trip to the North Magnetic Pole. On top of that, he wanted to do the Murray Marathon at Christmas with his brother Stuart, and he was registering the company Polar Challenge to handle all his adventure activities and fund-raising.

The euphoria was to last barely a month. One November afternoon things came to a shuddering halt. The illness he had suffered a few weeks earlier in England struck once again. He was out on Albert Park lake teaching his brother Stuart how to windsurf when he suddenly felt terrible. He drove home to see his doctor, who diagnosed pneumonia and a collapsed lung, and told him to get a chest x-ray at the local hospital. The x-ray showed an abnormality of the aorta, and the doctor arranged a CT scan of his heart in two weeks’ time.
That showed he had an aneurysm, or blow-out, of his thoracic aorta – the main artery in his chest. A critical aneurysm is considered to be one that has blown out to twice the normal diameter of the artery. Bland’s had blown out to three times the normal size; it was as though he was carrying a football inside his chest cavity. The aorta was pressing against his left lung, causing partial collapse, which helped explain his frequent bouts of pneumonia. The risk was that the artery would burst, filling his chest with blood, or even causing paralysis.

An appointment was arranged with a heart specialist at Cabrini Hospital, but two days before that Bland had a meeting with the company producing his North Pole brochure. The same day he received a Japanese order worth $5500 for Settlers Shortbread. The up-beat mood lasted 48 hours, until the meeting with the heart specialist.

‘What’s a young man doing with a thing like this?’ said the specialist, who told him he faced serious surgery to repair the damaged aorta with a piece of Dacron tube, and that there was a 5 per cent risk of paralysis. Recuperation would take three months. Bland implored him. ‘Can’t you put it off for six months?’ ‘No, but why?’ replied the specialist. ‘Because I am going to be the first Australian to the North Magnetic Pole and I leave in March for the Arctic. Here is my brochure.’ The specialist was unimpressed and alarmed at Bland’s apparent nonchalance about his illness. ‘I don’t think you understand what you’ve got,’ he said. ‘You’re not going anywhere.’

Bland was shattered, and furious that the specialist should destroy his dream of going to the pole. His first action was to ring the brochure printer and cancel it. In the car going home, both he and his mother were in tears. ‘You crying won’t get
us anywhere,’ he told his mother. ‘Your job is to drive.’ ‘I remember her saying, “I wish to God I could have this, not you.”’ Julia did her best to console him. ‘I know it’s not because you’re afraid of the surgery,’ she said. ‘It’s because you’re hurt that your dream is shattered.’

He shared his anger about the specialist with his friend Justin Harty, who had quite recently had serious surgery on his leg. ‘It’s like buying a car,’ Harty said. ‘You’ve got to shop around.’ Heeding the advice, Bland began to make inquiries, and he heard about a vascular surgeon at the Royal Melbourne Hospital called Peter Field. Field advised him to have the surgery, and made it clear that recovery would take several weeks, but he raised the possibility that if Bland had the operation before Christmas he might at least be well enough to occupy the role of radio operator at base camp on the trip, even if he wouldn’t be able to make it to the pole.

One medical theory suggests that if an average person has an aortic aneurysm and spends most of his or her time in a sedentary office job, and doesn’t place any excessive physical strain on the body, he or she could quite likely continue to an advanced age before the aorta expands enough for it to become a health problem. In contrast, the excessive strain Bland had placed on his body in the Antarctic trip could well have sped up the natural process of the progressive widening of his defective aorta.

Field discounted the possibility that Bland’s dive into the freezing Antarctic waters had precipitated the aneurysm in his thoracic aorta. ‘The aneurysm had developed in recent years, unrelated to his heart, and was the result of an uncommon disease, a particular weakening of the wall of the aorta called cystic medial degeneration. Diving in those Antarctic waters
would not have contributed to weakening of his aorta any more than the other activities of his vigorous lifestyle.’

When Bland returned to the farm, tears welled up in his father’s eyes when he learned of the surgery. His father drove on quickly to avoid breaking down. He later told Peter he was the toughest person he’d ever met, which was high praise for his youngest son. But almost in the same breath he vented his anger that Peter had disregarded risk and not taken out private medical insurance. He made it clear he would not contribute to whatever medical expenses Peter faced. ‘Dad felt I was too “she’ll be right”, and life’s not like that. It’s a tough place, and you have to work hard. It was because he was so fond of me that he tried to make me more conscious of things like insurance, for my own good. He wanted me to grow up and be a real man. That was his way of doing it.’

The family prepared to face a bill for tens of thousands of dollars for the operation, but eventually, because Bland’s condition was so critical, he was treated in the public system.

As Bland went from one hospital test to another, Julia made her own psychological diagnosis. He was flattened not just because of his aneurysm, but because his dream had been destroyed. ‘Pete, accept it,’ she said. ‘You aren’t going to get to the pole this year. But you will go next year and it’s going to be bigger and better than it ever would have been. We are going to have a website, and make a documentary, and you will end up talking to school kids around the country about what you’ve done.’

Julia had one other brainwave. Conscious that her father had suffered two heart attacks, and Peter’s father had also suffered from a heart condition, she suggested that the trip should be linked to a fund-raising drive for the Heart
Foundation. The pair of them made an appointment to speak to the charity in Melbourne, who ventured the opinion that it was fairly extreme to travel to the pole after undergoing major heart surgery. ‘I’m not an extremist,’ said Bland. ‘I’m somebody who, through research, training and preparation, never exceeds his parameters of competence and experience.’ As he was just about to have surgery, no firm decision was made. But he made a commitment to himself by ringing up the brochure printer and reversing his earlier phone call cancelling the order. He wanted it to go ahead exactly as they had discussed, but with one change. The date should be altered from 1997 to 1998. The goal was clearly set now.

He was due to have the operation on 23 December, but driving down to the hospital the day before he was shivering and feverish from the pneumonia, and feared that he would not be well enough for surgery. Overnight his temperature rose to 40 degrees. All night long he counted down the hours, staring at the alarm clock and willing the temperature down so that he could have the operation as scheduled. A fan was brought in to keep him cool but in the morning, when Field came in to see him and read all the charts, he postponed the surgery. A distraught Bland was told to go away for six weeks, get rid of the pneumonia and temperature, and come back fully fit for the operation.

He did as he was told. Apart from his activities at the farm, he worked for Athol Guy, member of The Seekers, who had a property nearby. He recovered, but defied some medical advice in the process. ‘I had been told not to lift anything and people were annoyed with me because I wasn’t listening and was going off and doing fencing. I remember so many times saying to Dad after his heart problems were diagnosed,
don’t lift this, or don’t lift that, and he still would. Dad was the definition of stubborn. I can say that now because I realise I’m exactly the same.’

He examined his feelings about the impending surgery in his diary entry on the eve of the operation, on 9 February 1997. ‘People ask me if I’m nervous and I can honestly answer, no, not at all, though I’m totally aware how serious the operation is. Whilst I believe that the quality of your life rests totally in the individual’s hands, and that you must make the most of the opportunities presented to you, I also believe that once you have done everything within your powers, the rest is fate. Don’t try and control the uncontrollable. What is the point of worrying about what you cannot control? I have the best team of surgeons. I have got through the last six weeks in good health and a strong mental attitude. We’ve done our research. We know the consequences. That’s all you can do.’

He awoke from the five-hour operation in intensive care. He was acutely conscious of the risk of paralysis, and didn’t dare to try to wriggle his toes in case he found he couldn’t move them. He put it off, and put it off, and finally summoned up the courage to try. Miraculously, he could wriggle the toes on both feet. He wasn’t paralysed. But there were other problems. The pain was so intense as the nursing staff tried to wean him off morphine and onto strong painkilling tablets that he found himself arching his back to withstand it. By the first day after the operation he had regained some of his resilience. When the anaesthetist came in to check how he was, he replied: ‘Top of the world, because that’s where I’m going.’ The North Magnetic Pole had replaced vascular surgery as top of his agenda. He emailed Hempleman-Adams, who sent the supportive message: ‘When the going gets tough,
the tough get going.

Field outlined the gravity of the operation he had just performed on Bland. ‘The repair operation was done on the left side of his chest, by removing parts of several ribs, collapsing his left lung, and with the anaesthetist keeping him alive, using the right lung. By working alongside the heart and gullet, I replaced the diseased part of Peter’s aorta with a DeBakey Dacron graft, which is a very strong plastic artery, stitched securely to the normal sized aorta at each end. This operation was developed in the 1960s by Dr Michael DeBakey, pioneer cardiovascular surgeon of Houston, Texas, who taught me and many surgeons around the world the effective way to repair such major arteries as the aorta. The operation carries its own very serious technical risks, including bleeding, infection, heart attack, pneumonia, stroke or paralysis, damage to lungs and kidneys, sometimes resulting in kidney dialysis or the need for crutches or a permanent wheelchair. Peter survived and recovered brilliantly and quickly.

‘The operation involved two specialist vascular surgeons, two trainee surgeons, and an experienced vascular anaesthetist. The operating theatre staff included two specialist vascular scrub nurses, their helpers and a perfusionist who helped to recover any shed blood and retransfuse it back into the patient. In preparation for his operation, Bland had donated some of his own blood for use during surgery, to supplement the Red Cross banked blood. He also required specialist evaluation of his heart by cardiologist Dr David Hunt, and special CT scans and arteriogram x-rays of the aorta by specialist radiologists. After the operation he had vital monitoring, skilful nursing and physiotherapy by our teams in the intensive care unit and
Vascular Surgery Unit at Royal Melbourne Hospital.’

When Bland returned to the ward he set himself a goal, to beat the other three patients out of the hospital. ‘I know I’m a competitive prick, but I looked round the other patients and I said I’m going to beat you, and I’m going to beat you, and I’m going to beat you. My aim was to have one tube removed from me each day, and that way I thought I should be able to get out in a week. I was discharged in six days.’

Field placed no restrictions on Bland’s future adventures. ‘Modern vascular surgery and heart surgery both aim to restore people to their usual activities, whether working or playing. Older patients may have uncorrectable heart disease or other health problems which do require some modification of their goals. Younger patients can expect to be more active, so no restriction on Peter’s customary lifestyle was contemplated. Factors other than operations like Peter’s, such as family responsibilities, have more effect on the general risks one may undertake.’

Bland launched himself into the lengthy process of recovery and rehabilitation. Against all his family’s advice, he began with a walk down to the local bakery the day after he returned home, to see how production of Settlers Shortbread was going. A couple of days earlier the staff in the bakery had seen an article on Bland’s operation in the Herald-Sun, entitled ‘Peter’s Plans On Ice’, and they were shocked to see him in the flesh so soon. Only later did they reveal their true thoughts – that he had looked green when he came in. There was, however, no stopping him. He walked with a spaghetti can in each hand to build up the muscles in his arms and chest; he worked out in the gym; he roller-bladed; he pulled a tyre along Albert Park beach to simulate hauling a load over snow on the way
to the North Magnetic Pole. This served a double purpose: at the same time he was hauling the tyre up and down the beach he wore a tee-shirt bearing the message ‘The North Magnetic Pole 1998. An Australian First. Sponsor Wanted!’ The people from the Heart Foundation had initially considered him an extremist; passersby on Albert Park beach found him more of an eccentric.

Field monitored his patient’s progress carefully: ‘Peter behaved as a surgeon hopes a patient will: he carefully considered my advice on his vascular condition, and asked questions about the possible treatments, with his family present. Despite the major risks he faced, he declined the offer of further specialist opinion, and determined to proceed. His positive approach to surviving and recovering worked very much in his favour, and he worked extremely hard to regain his fitness and desired lifestyle. This story of his success doesn’t stop surgeons from being eternally cautious, prayerful and thankful: we have the extraordinary and very special privilege of being allowed into someone’s confidence and into their body in a most intimate way.’
By February 1998 Bland was national news, and he featured in a *Who Weekly* article on adventurers that also included American millionaire balloonist Steve Fossett. The trip to the North Magnetic Pole had been planned for April that year. Packaged, sponsored and named as the Polar Challenge, it was now being publicised. Together with three English adventurers and a cameraman, Bland intended making the 650-kilometre trek across the Arctic Sea to become the first Australian to reach the North Magnetic Pole. ‘I’m driven by the fear of not reaching my potential,’ he told his interviewer. ‘I’m doing everything I can to make sure I do. You jump in the deep end and come out knowing a bit more about yourself.’

The magazine showed a photograph of Bland in shorts and
runners training on South Melbourne beach with ski poles in each hand, and dragging behind him a large rubber tyre, meant to simulate the experience of dragging a sled over the frozen Arctic wastes. The tyre was attached by a rope that went around Bland’s middle, and it seemed to symbolise some mental weight that Bland was forever hauling along behind him. Was he destined always to walk in the shadow of the challenge of adventure?

The interview ended with him saying: ‘I hope I die happy, as opposed to dying wealthy and after a long time just existing.’ Comments like that sent shudders through Bland’s mother, as did her son’s subsequent remark to the reporter that ‘Fear is not an issue. It only arises through lack of preparation.’ One of the things Jane Bland feared most was Peter’s lack of fear.

Bland spoke to local papers, national papers, magazines, television – anyone who would help raise the profile of his trip and make it easier to raise the $30,000 he still needed. Bland was to be the one Australian in a team of five, the rest of whom all came from England. The leader was to be Steve Pinfield, and he would be accompanied by Ed Bacon and James Daly. The trip’s patron was David Hempleman-Adams, although he was not a member of the team. While Pinfield was leading the party to the North Magnetic Pole, Hempleman-Adams would be making his own trek to the North Geographic Pole, after two previous unsuccessful attempts in 1983 and 1997.

The adventure magazine *Expanse* reported: ‘Bland and the other members of the Polar Challenge expedition will each tow sleds weighing 70 kilos over daily distances that will vary greatly according to weather conditions. Some days they may only cover one kilometre as they struggle over near-vertical
ice mountains pushed up by colliding ice drifts. Other days they’ll contend with salivating polar bears, emerging empty-bellied after five months hibernation, having lost 50 per cent of their body weight. Polar bears’ finely tuned senses can smell food up to a kilometre away.’

Editors with finely tuned news senses could also spot from a kilometre away the story of the driven adventurer risking life and limb against the wishes of loved ones, particularly when Bland was so candid about his motivation. He told Expanse: ‘I’ve always been a hyperactive pain-in-the-arse to go away with on the weekend, and the thought of sitting down to read the Sunday papers all day just bores the shit out of me. I’m doing this because I’ve travelled, I’ve taken the photos like everybody else, and that wasn’t hard enough for me so I’m going to keep pushing until I find my boundary.

‘This is going to be a very challenging expedition, but I’m stronger than I’ve ever been in my life. I want to tell people, “Hey, I’ve been there, I’ve taken all those steps from the hospital bed and through sickness and depression to end up standing at the North Magnetic Pole, without ever losing sight of the goal – no matter the journey.”’

If Bland conveyed a surface impression of calm and confidence on the publicity circuit, underneath he was battling desperately to raise the $30,000 needed for the trip. It had become an exercise in brinkmanship, with brochures distributed, publicity generated, sponsors lined up. But, if he couldn’t raise all the money he needed, there was still a risk that he might not be able to go. Boldly, he and Julia decided to hold an $85-a-ticket black tie fund-raising event at the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre. Premier Jeff Kennett, who had accepted an invitation to be patron of the expedition, friends,
family and sponsors were asked to come. Bland’s father opposed the function, and the idea that his friends would be called upon to support his son’s adventuring ambitions. Bland thought again, and decided to enlist the support of the Heart Foundation in making the function a fund-raiser for both his trip and the cardiovascular unit at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, where he had had his surgery. He contacted his friend John Grigg, who was also Victorian Heart Foundation president, to ask him to speak at the event. He knocked on the doors of restaurants all over Melbourne asking for donated meals for two to auction in the raffle. An old-time swing band, the Denis Farrington Jazz Band, agreed to play for nothing. Invitations went out to attend ‘POLAR CHALLENGE: An Australian First. In association with the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre, the Heart Foundation, the Royal Melbourne Hospital. A Gala Fund-raising Evening with proceeds going towards supporting Peter Bland’s attempt to become the first Australian to the North Magnetic Pole and the cardiovascular ward at Royal Melbourne Hospital.’

The gala proved a great success, and the mood of adventure even extended to one inebriated guest removing his clothes and threatening to jump off the high diving board. As the guests cheered, Bland raced up the stairs to the board, only to find that a security guard had already moved to stop the man from making the evening an even bigger splash than it was already.

Bland, as usual, was living at least three lives simultaneously – fund-raiser, would-be adventurer and commodities trader. The previous September, realising the need for a real job and salary, he had joined Elders in their export division. It signalled the temporary end of operations for Settlers
Shortbread, which was put on hold while he went to work full-time for Elders. At his interview with Elders’ general manager of operations, Greg Hunt, he pointed out that he already had two pending commitments – marriage to Julia Knight the following month, and an expedition to the North Magnetic Pole in April 1998. Unfazed, Hunt gave him a job as manager of feed trade in Elders International. The position involved him marketing produce to Japan, Korea and India. ‘I loved it. One day I was running the cotton seed through my hands in Moree; the next I was buying US dollars on the foreign exchange market; and the day after that I was flying to Japan for the sale.’

Bland halted his travels for his wedding on 19 October 1997 at St Peter’s, Eastern Hill, and afterwards at Melbourne’s Royal Botanical Gardens, renowned for its colony of fruit bats. A few of Julia’s friends occasionally wondered if she was bats to put up with Bland’s serial adventuring, and even questioned her husband’s relationship with reality. She listened to all their concerns, and chose to disregard them. ‘I didn’t think he was mad. I thought that after the heart surgery he deserved to do whatever he wanted. We didn’t have children, and he desperately wanted to do it.’

The man who Julia believed had changed the direction of her husband’s life, David Hempleman-Adams, flew in from England especially for the wedding. He flew out the next day to have dinner with Prince Charles to discuss the Prince’s Trust, the organisation for young people. It didn’t matter that he left so soon, according to Julia; he had already made his mark on their lives. ‘I had a premonition when we first became friends with David that this guy was going to have a big impact on Pete’s life. I felt Pete had put him on a pedestal and
he wanted to do what David did. Initially, I thought, “That’s great, but what about our life?” Our life course just changed when he met David. The fates dictated that he should meet David, and do all these things, and you can’t have regrets.’

Supporting her husband did not mean she had no concerns for his physical safety on the trip. ‘I think a lot of people didn’t understand why I supported him going to the pole. I had my own reasons. It’s different when you’re on the outside and you don’t see the person lying there in hospital having just had major heart surgery. Before he had the surgery he said the reason he was having it was to go on the trip. How do you ever say no to someone like that? I would have had a very hard time doing that because I really believe that you should be able to do what you really, really passionately want to do. I pride myself, probably to my detriment, on being able to support Pete in what he wants to do, because I think he’s a unique, talented person. I think he was always going to do that particular trip whether I supported him or not. Internally, for sure, I was scared for him, and for us, but there was no way I was going to show that to anyone, including myself, most likely. What was the point lying awake fretting when I could be out there doing something positive? I chose not to say what I thought internally because once you say something like that it’s out there and you’ve got to deal with it. I felt more comfortable supporting him and turning the trip into something great.’

Julia put aside the danger, and the fact that her husband had been through major heart surgery only months before, and turned her attention to raising money for the trip and the Heart Foundation. Through Bland’s friend Johnnie Knights, she met Melbourne businessman Andrew Cannon,
who shared their passion to raise funds for and awareness about the Heart Foundation, and who was prepared to invest his own money to set up the project. With Julia he developed a detailed business plan and went to see the Heart Foundation to convince them to run with the campaign. When the Heart Foundation successfully adopted it, Bland gave the credit to Cannon and Julia.

Bland, meanwhile, was out pounding the pavements and pushing open corporate doors in the search for sponsorship. Just as he had found when he was trying to sell Settlers Shortbread to the retail trade, he had a lot of knockbacks for each yes. One of Bland’s targeted sponsors was commercial real estate company Jones Lang Wootton. Bland had first been in contact with them about competing in the company’s sponsored triathlon, together with John Maclean, a wheelchair triathlete backed by the firm. Maclean had been hit by a truck at 120 kilometres per hour whilst training for a triathlon, but that did not stop him competing. Bland was struck by his mental strength and the two became good friends.

Kevin Manning, the film editor who had worked with Bland on his adventure documentary, suggested that he should seek sponsorship from a camera company. Panasonic eventually signed up to provide him with a digital camera, which he picked up on the eve of the trip. Kodak, meanwhile, agreed to give him both print and slide film.

Elders’ office was situated at the corner of Queen and Bourke streets in Melbourne, close to Little Bourke Street which is the mecca for all would-be adventurers. There are shops with tents, boots, skis, climbing gear and every conceivable piece of adventuring equipment. In his lunch breaks
Bland would go into the stores and pester the manager for sponsorship. ‘Mountain Design eventually gave into my persistence and provided me with clothing, boots and a sleeping bag. I think they figured that if I was so persistent in chasing them for gear I would be equally persistent on the ice.’

One day Andy Watson, Jay’s brother, introduced Bland to his best friend, Mitch McAuley, who had a company making boxer shorts. McAuley agreed to give $2000 because he admired Bland’s ambition and enterprise. McAuley’s advertising slogan for his boxer shorts, ‘Nothing Should Hold You Back’, fitted perfectly with Bland’s mindset. Bland was now renting a house in Albert Park and each morning, after completing his daily training session at the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre, he would roller-blade past McAuley’s house on his way to work.

He had sponsors; he had a full-colour brochure. The brochure appealed to Australian nationalism and portrayed Bland as following in the steps of his hero, Sir Douglas Mawson, who, together with Sir Edgeworth David, became the first people to reach the South Magnetic Pole on 16 January 1909. It also explained what the Magnetic Pole was: ‘The earth’s magnetic field is a fundamental force of nature influencing every facet of life on earth. Explorers since the twelfth century have relied on the earth’s magnetic field to guide them on their voyages of discovery. The Magnetic Poles are defined as those two points where the direction of the earth’s magnetic field is directly downwards. The North and South Magnetic Poles are constantly moving around the earth’s surface due to the phenomenon of polar wandering. On average the poles move at a rate of ten miles per year.’

What Bland still needed was money. Even with his sponsors
on board, he found himself still $28,000 short of what he needed to pay for a cameraman to accompany him on the trek. He hadn’t been able to organise a film production company to do the film for him, so he had to do it himself. To be a proper professional adventurer, he needed a proper professional cameraman to record the trip, even if it meant going into debt. He borrowed $15,000 from the bank, and promised Hempleman-Adams that he would pay the balance by the end of the year.

Bland now produced another coup. Julia’s uncle, Ross McOmish, was friendly with the grandson of Sir Douglas Mawson, Andrew McEwin, who lived in Adelaide. One day when Bland was in Adelaide on business he went to meet McEwin and together they visited the Mawson collection at the Waite Institute. After hearing of Bland’s plans to go to the North Magnetic Pole, McEwin and other Institute officials offered Bland one of Mawson’s handmade flags to take with him. His chest swelling with pride, Bland took the fragile flag, which was wrapped in tissue paper, and guarded it with his life for the next six weeks.

There were still last-minute details to be arranged, like trying to raise money by selling exclusive television rights to one of the commercial stations. Channel Seven’s *Today Tonight* current affairs show had done a preview story on his trip, and Bland was seeking a deal to cover him reaching the pole and other stories. When Bland raised the issue with a Seven producer, he was told: ‘We don’t do chequebook journalism.’ ‘Well, I do,’ said Bland. He then went to Channel Nine, who gave the same response. Bland upped the ante by telling Nine that Seven were interested. ‘How much?’ said Nine. ‘$2000,’ said Bland. ‘Nuh, not interested,’ said Nine.
Negotiations remained temporarily suspended while Bland set about finding the cheapest flight to London, and from there on to Canada. He eventually did a deal with Lauda Air, flying economy to London via Dubai and Vienna. By the time Bland’s flight reached Dubai a message came through that Channel Nine were offering $3000. The offer had risen to $4000 by the time he left London, but it was only when he reached Canada that the two sides agreed on $5000. Channel Nine were sending reporter Nick McCallum and a crew from Los Angeles to the expedition departure point at Resolute Bay, in Canada, and they were to receive first access to Bland’s film of conquering the North Magnetic Pole; access for a story on his departure from Resolute Bay, and his later return; and phone interviews along the way, technology permitting. Bland signed, with two provisos: that he wasn’t granting Channel Nine worldwide copyright of any footage he shot (he was mindful of preserving his own documentary), and it didn’t bar him from doing other radio interviews as well. Like the savvy modern adventurer he was, he promised to mention Channel Nine whenever he could in interviews.

In London he stayed with his cousin, Andrew Robinson, who leant him £1000 sterling to buy additional camera equipment and lithium batteries that were resistant to the cold. At Heathrow he met up with the rest of the party, including Phil Coates, the cameraman, who had been recommended by one of Hempleman-Adams’ co-adventurers. Bland’s greatest concern at Heathrow was trying to persuade customs to clear the pump action shotgun Hempleman-Adams had obtained for the party to ward off Arctic polar bears. Hempleman-Adams had himself been threatened with attack by a polar bear in the Arctic, and had been forced to shoot it dead. While
Bland had a licence for a rifle in Australia, he had no permit to carry a shotgun in England, and airport security questioned him at length before finally allowing him and the gun onto the flight to Canada.

They stayed overnight at Calgary, eating at a restaurant famous for its enormous pork ribs. Afterwards, in an icy, wind-swept hotel car park, he tested the satellite phone and laptop computer, discovering to his great delight that both worked. The plane had three more stops, at Edmonton, Yellowknife and Cambridge Bay, before they landed on an ice strip at Resolute Bay, in Canada's Northwest Territories. Bland had arrived in the great white outback. ‘Resolute Bay is not the end of the earth,’ he wrote in his diary, ‘but they do say you can see it from there.’ His first impressions were of husky dogs chained up and howling, Inuit children toboganning, and blood-red scars left on the snow from polar bear and seal carcasses. This was polar bear territory, where each Inuit family is given a quota for culling the bears. Some choose to use their quota themselves, and some choose to sell it off to rich tourists who come up to the Arctic to go polar bear hunting.

For a week they prepared for the trip, living in the fibro shacks where the heaters blasted out in self-defence against the cold. Equipment was made ready. Reality set in. During the course of the week they saw two parties returning to the base after failing to reach the North Magnetic Pole. ‘Seeing those two failed parties was good and bad. It was bad, because it indicated how tough it would be. It was good, because it wasn’t that hard to judge the character of the people who failed. Each of them had a different excuse as to why they failed – the environment, or the weather. It became pretty obvious to me that, at least for some people, they thought,
“Shit, this is too tough for me,” and they gave in.’

If everything went well, they planned it would take 28 days to reach the pole. From Resolute Bay they would trek along the west coast of Cornwallis Island before crossing to Bathurst Island. From there they would make the long crossing to King Christian Island in the Maclean Strait and finally go round the Noice Peninsula on Ellef Ringnes Island, where the pole is located.

Bland’s job was to plot a course across the frozen surface of the Arctic Ocean, where the ice begins to break up at the onset of the northern summer. ‘The ice was about one and a half metres in thickness and my job as navigator was to get the team from south to north, while avoiding wet spots, where the ice had melted. We wanted to avoid regions where the polar bears were migrating. They were coming out of hibernation so they’d lost a lot of their bodyweight and were pretty hungry. We always walked in a pack, so that any bear would hear the noise and see the group and think it was a big creature.’

From the first night they camped on the ice at Resolute Bay it became clear their main enemy would be the intense cold. That first night in the tents, the temperature dropped to minus 30 degrees Celsius, and the cold even permeated the sleeping bags which were supposed to have been tested in Antarctic conditions. Everyone agreed that in future they would sleep with all their clothes on to try to counter the cold.

Everything froze, including the shot for the shotgun. When they tested the shotgun on a snowman built next morning, they discovered the gun wouldn’t fire. It was decided that from then on one man would be responsible for the shotgun each day and his job included keeping the shot warm in a breast pocket.
Keeping the batteries in the cameras unfrozen was an equal challenge. The lithium batteries were supposed to be proven against the cold, but even they succumbed to the Arctic temperatures. Eventually, after some trial and error, someone devised the idea of putting the batteries in an overnight express plastic bag containing a silica gel pack, which absorbed the moisture. The plastic bags were then placed in the sleeping bags overnight, to stay warm. ‘There was a fair bit in your sleeping bag each night. I had a plastic bag with digital camera and batteries in it; a battery charger; my suitcase; moisturiser, toothpaste and urine bottle. I used the bottle a lot during the night because the Arctic is one of the driest places on earth – drier even than the Sahara desert – and you drink so much. If you left anything out of your sleeping bag it would be frozen solid in the morning. Even in your sleeping bag it was half frozen.’

Bland had his fancy sponsor’s sleeping bag, the Mountain Design, but he decided it would not help team morale if he slept soundly in his own special sleeping bag while everyone else was shivering in theirs. ‘I figured this was a team effort, and to have one individual with a better bit of equipment really wouldn’t have been fair and it might have broken up some of the team dynamics. I didn’t want to be the one waking up in the morning saying, “Wow, I had a great sleep because my sleeping bag’s so good,” and everyone else’s wasn’t. I knew that first night we camped out on the ice that they were crap sleeping bags, but they were the bags we had as a team. So I chose to leave my Mountain Design at Resolute Bay.’

The party left Resolute Bay on 31 March, after Channel Nine’s Nick McCallum had filmed them going. Bland’s diary entry that night referred to the pervasive cold: ‘Poor Nick’s
feet are suffering from the cold, he’s already formed blisters. Walked eight miles today from Cape Martyr to Sheringham Point. Light snow cover on the rocks. Set up camp by 6.30 pm and played backgammon. It is colder tonight than I expected. On previous trips I have always been able to get warm in my sleeping bag, but tonight I’m freezing.’

By the end of day two, Bland knew he was in for prolonged struggle: ‘Felt pretty tired by the end of the day. I haven’t pushed myself like that for a long time. I know I’ll get there but at least I am acknowledging that this trip is more of a challenge than I have been admitting. We walked further out to sea than expected and our position now is just east of Browne Island. We walked all day expecting it to be Claxton Point, but it wasn’t. We saw a plane on the coastline looking for us and we couldn’t work out why it was so far in. Spoke to base camp on the radio, giving them our position and update.’

Day three brought the first sign of polar bears: ‘We saw our first polar bear tracks past the northern end of Browne Island. Camped last night in Pioneer Bay, decoy food sled away from the camp in case of polar bear attack. I feel good walking, strong, especially in the last hour. I bent my ski pole, and had to walk with only one pole for most of the day. Ended up heating it over the stove in the evening to straighten it. My body is a bit sore, left hip feels aggravated and right leg over-compensating. Some blisters, though nothing too bad at this stage. Very, very sore throat. I can hardly swallow. I must find a way of getting rid of this cold.’

Frostbite was the great fear. As the nerves and blood supply were cut to the tips of the fingers they lost all feeling, and would turn black in cases of severe frostbite. Bland’s diary entry on 6 April reflected the concern: ‘I am a bit worried about my
fingers as they are showing signs of frostnip. Because I was cook yesterday, I got wet gloves whilst handling the water. I was determined to show that I could be cook and help pack up camp also (if you’re cook, you usually aren’t able to help with the packing up because you are too busy cleaning up the dishes and dismantling the stove). I stupidly helped Steve with the fly of one of the tents and, before I knew it, all of my fingers were numb. At least they are all pink, but they’re bloody sore. I will have to be so careful from now on.’ Bland was to return from the trip with some of his fingertips split from frostbite.

Nor was it only his hands he had to worry about. Early on, he learned to tape the rim of his drinking cup, so that its frozen edge did not pull away the skin on his lips when he drank.

Seeing the two failed parties return despondently to Resolute Bay had also impressed upon Bland the need to implement mental strategies to get through the physical labour of each day, and the boredom of walking on and on over the same landscape. Where Antarctica had mountains and sheer cliffs, the Arctic was flat, white, covered with ice rubble, and un-ending. ‘From the moment I saw those people coming back after failing I decided I would take it each day at a time, each session at a time. And I broke each session down to fifteen minute intervals. We had 300 grams in our lunch pack for the day and that included prunes and chocolates and nuts. I would take out six prunes for each 90-minute session, put them in my breast pocket, and say to myself, “Peter, so long as you’re not the last in the group, you can have a prune every fifteen minutes.” That worked for me. If you put enough fifteen minute sessions together you get a day. If you put enough days together you get a month, and that’s how I did it and that’s why I think the other teams failed.’
One day Bland was surprised to see Pinfield walking back towards him, in a southerly direction. Everything they did was geared towards heading north, and the pole. Bland was even more surprised to see Pinfield bending down to pick up what looked like polar bear droppings. When Pinfield then put the dark objects in his mouth, Bland was still more surprised. When he caught up with Pinfield, all was revealed. He, too, rewarded himself with prunes when he had walked a certain distance. This time his whole day’s supply of prunes had fallen off the sled, and once Pinfield realised he had to retrace his steps to recover them.

Some days Bland would pass time by playing fantasy games with Ed Bacon, but there were other days when he barely spoke a word to anyone, and he stared at his feet, saying to himself, ‘One step at a time.’ ‘I used to recite “The Man from Snowy River”, or sing “Waltzing Matilda”. Sometimes I would get myself some distance from the others and sing right out loud. I would do anything to keep my mind occupied.’

Each day the white ice stretched out ahead of them into infinity. For the flat sections skis were used, but in places the flatness was broken by mounds of snow and patches of high ice, called sastrugi, where two ice plates met one another and the edges of the plates were pushed vertically upwards. Skis were awkward to use in these sections, because the sled had to be hauled up and over the rise, and it would come flying down the other side. Whether to wear boots or skis remained a daily decision. One day Pinfield and Bacon fell through the ice in boots, while Bland was saved because he was skiing.

Food provided one welcome diversion from the monotony. The diet was a mixture of carbohydrates and protein to provide 7500 calories a day to replace the energy burned
pulling the sleds. A Twin Otter flew in twice to bring them fresh supplies of food.

Because of his link with the Heart Foundation, Bland had agreed to wear a Polar heart-rate monitor during the trip, and periodically he would email print-outs of his heart rate back to the Foundation. Bland’s hero, Sir Douglas Mawson, the scientist, would have been stunned and gratified by the pace of technological advance since he first reached the South Magnetic Pole in 1909.

But the technology was not perfect. About two weeks out, there were no radio communications to base camp for five days. Thinking the radio was faulty, they took it apart and checked it. Discovering the fault was a matter of urgency because they had an agreement with base camp that if no radio communication was received for 72 hours, they would send out a rescue plane. The budget only allowed for one rescue plane, and the last thing they wanted was to use up their one chance of rescue when it wasn’t needed. What if they really did need a rescue further into the trip? Only the year before, a young Englishman had to be medivaced out after falling through the ice. He was lucky enough to stumble upon Hempleman-Adams, who was trekking towards the North Geographic Pole with Norwegian Rune Gjeldnes.

Unbeknown to Bland and the rest of his party, everyone in the area was experiencing communications problems. ‘We subsequently learned that all the pilots in Canada’s north-west were unable to radio their airstrips. It was caused by the proximity to the magnetic pole. It was like a great blanket covering the pole and preventing communication by high-frequency radio. They realised that at base camp, which was why they didn’t send out the rescue plane.’
Members of the team experienced psychological lows at different stages of the trek. For Bland it came on day fifteen, when he was cook. He had no sugar rations left, and was down on energy. He got his fingers wet while cooking, which made him paranoid about frostbite. ‘I was very concerned about it, so I kept taking my gloves off to check my fingers. But the more I took the gloves off the more likely I was to get it. But there was no way I was going to just leave it. If you leave frostbite and you start losing feeling, then, all of a sudden, you’ve lost a finger.’

James Daly, the young Englishman, was to suffer the most. ‘He was lagging behind coming into one of the breaks and said that he couldn’t feel his fingers. We huddled round and Steve pulled his gloves off. His fingers had gone black. We instantly made camp and went into crisis management mode. We put a brew on and then heated up ice to a tepid temperature to bathe James’s fingers in. We did this for two hours. Then I massaged his fingers for the rest of the afternoon, trying to get the blood back into them. You could see in James’s face that he was shit-scared that he was going to lose one of his fingers. We knew we were making some progress when he started screaming out in pain, because it was a good sign that he was starting to get the feeling back in his fingers, and he wouldn’t lose them.’

Things weren’t made easier by the fact that Bland was experiencing conflict with Coates, the cameraman he had hired to film his documentary. Coates was highly regarded as a mountain cameraman, but seemed to struggle in the cold Arctic conditions. Bland felt responsible, having hired him to come on the trip. ‘He’d say it’s too cold to film and I’d say, “My arse it’s too cold to film. I wouldn’t have paid you to come
here if I’d realised you wanted to film in the Caribbean.” I mean, it’s cold. It’s the Arctic. That’s what it’s all about. He thought that I was an utter prick and I didn’t care because I wanted the job done.’

Spirits rose as they approached the pole. The day before arrival they decided to have a party. ‘We had four days’ rations with us, and we knew we were going to get there, so we put the gas heaters in one tent and put them on full bore.’ Knowing he had a heated tent to retreat to, Bland decided to do the right thing by Mitch McAuley, one of his sponsors, and stripped down to his boxer shorts. He then sprinted out into the snow towards Coates, who had the camera rolling on him. Face to camera, and shivering in his boxer shorts, Bland said: ‘2000 kilometres sailing to the South Magnetic Pole, 650 kilometres walking to the North Magnetic Pole. Mitch Dowd Boxer Shorts. Nothing Should Hold You Back.’

Coates asked for a second take, just to make sure, and Bland declined, dashing back to the warmth of the tent. When he got inside, he didn’t know whether it was safer inside or outside the tent. Because the heaters were going, people’s clothes, which had been frozen solid and unchanged for 27 days, were starting to melt, releasing the overpowering stench of stale sweat and unwashed socks.

Twenty-eight days after leaving Resolute Bay they walked up a rise and looked down into Deer Bay to see the North Magnetic Pole. It actually stretched over a six-kilometre radius, but in the middle of the bay they saw a large, pyramid-shaped iceberg, and decided to nominate that as the precise point of the pole. Unwrapping Mawson’s flag from its tissue paper, Bland posed by the iceberg, making sure that the sponsor’s name of Jones Lang Wootton was prominently displayed on
the side of the sled. Nick McCallum soon flew in with the Channel Nine crew and a bottle of champagne, and for a couple of hours everyone savoured the triumph. Back in Melbourne, the Heart Foundation prepared to declare that Bland was its first ‘Aussie Heart Hero’.

But the immediate feelings of exhilaration were quickly followed by a creeping sense of let-down and sadness, now that the challenge had been completed and the team was going to be split apart. For Bland, that meant the vacuum had to be filled by a new goal: ‘I’ve always found that with these trips it’s very important to have the next challenge set. When I come off the high, I go into a bit of a low until I’ve found the next goal.’

He didn’t have long to wait. No sooner was he back in Resolute Bay than a member of Hempleman-Adams’s base support team told him there was a seat free on the two planes that were flying out in a couple of days to meet the Englishman when he reached the North Geographic Pole. Bland, the adventure junkie, couldn’t resist. While the rest of the party flew back to England he found cheap accommodation with an Inuit family in the village.

Then he was off to meet Hempleman-Adams and his fellow trekker Rune Gjeldnes, who were about to succeed in reaching the pole where they had failed the year before. ‘We flew in a two-plane convoy to Siberia, stopping three or four times to refuel. Most of them were manned bases, but one stop turned out to be just a guy camped on the ice for weeks and weeks. He was there to man the fuel depot, and all he had was a tent, a gun and a huskie. He used to send radio signals back to a base camp with the coordinates of where he was because, being on an ice floe, he was moving all the time.’

By reaching the North Geographic Pole at his third attempt
Hempleman-Adams had become the first man to complete the adventurer’s ‘Grand Slam’: he had scaled the highest summits of seven different continents, and walked to all four poles. With a target like that to aim for, Bland had no intention of retiring from the adventure game.
Chapter Ten

BREAKING FREE

Bland arrived home to a hero’s welcome in May 1998. It happened to be National Heart Week, and the Heart Foundation formally bestowed on him the title of ‘Aussie Heart Hero’. The organisation praised his achievement, and held him up as a model of what modern medical treatment could achieve: after major heart surgery as a child, and again at 28, he was now presented as the embodiment of heart health, and someone able to lead a life of exceptional physical activity. It was a hectic week of talks and interviews, with the ABC sounding the one sceptical note. ‘Adventurers are all the same,’ said the interviewer, ‘they associate themselves with a charity just so they look good. But in actual fact they have no real association with the charity at all.’ Bland had been warned by the Heart Foundation’s public affairs manager, Anne
Hayward, to be wary of the ABC questioning, which he rebuffed. ‘Nothing could mean more to me than the Heart Foundation,’ he said. ‘My father had multiple heart operations and I’ve personally had two. Apart from that, my father-in-law has twice had cardio-pulmonary resuscitation after suffering heart attacks. So nothing could be closer to my heart than helping to lift the profile of heart disease, and raising money for the Foundation.’ Bland was given an easier ride on Channel Nine’s *Hey Hey It’s Saturday*, with Daryl Somers. The show’s cartoonist pictured him on the ice, with a polar bear behind, waiting to give him a hug.

His appearance on the show marked his new-found celebrity status – a career high point that Jane Bland firmly believed would signal the end of her son’s adventuring. Both she and her husband were proud of their son’s achievements, but at the same time Peter’s adventures were taking a heavy emotional toll. She recalls: ‘There was a week during the North Pole trip when he was out of communication because conditions were so bad. For a week we didn’t know if he was dead or alive, and I couldn’t leave the place because I had to be by the email the whole time in case any news came through. John felt a great sense of pride, but he also knew he was getting older and he wanted to see his children secure for life before he died. I felt unbelievable pride when Pete became the first Australian to the North Magnetic Pole but, subconsciously, I thought that was it: he had achieved his goal and he would come home for good. However, I didn’t say anything because I love him, and there’s a point where I would lose him if I stopped supporting him.’

Jane Bland’s heart would have sunk if she had read her son’s diary entry for 21 April on the North Magnetic Pole journey.
It started in typically positive fashion, describing the day’s progress: ‘15 miles. Best day so far for distance. In the afternoon total white-out. That was when I found the trip was a mental test as much as anything.’ But then it made clear that Bland had no intention of hanging up his walking boots: ‘Spoke to Jools last night on satellite phone and told her I will walk to the South Pole in eighteen months. I think realistically we could set a target of $1 million to raise for the Heart Foundation, given enough lead time and momentum. I would like to go down to Antarctica this summer; take Jools to South America; do the Melbourne–Osaka yacht race with Simon Kellett.’

The plan had been that after the first week back from the pole, when he was doing all the media work and appearances for the Heart Foundation, he would go and relax with Julia at the Portsea home of Wendy Watson, Jay’s mother. But Julia found that, far from spending the desired quality time together, she was minding a caged lion whose every waking thought was about the past trip, or the next trip. He was working on the outline of a book on the polar expedition, and trying to arrange a film production company to handle the documentary footage Phil Coates had taken on the trek. He was contacting public speaking agencies to manage him. ‘Julia wanted us to spend some time together, and my mind was wanting to get onto the next stage. Physically, I was there with her in Portsea, but mentally I wasn’t.’

The first priority was to find a film production company for the documentary. Six months before the North Magnetic Pole trip he had gone to see film editor Kevin Manning, armed with a pile of home movies from his earlier sailing trips and hours of video footage from the South Pole voyage. Manning
recalls: ‘Peter was going to make a film and become famous – that’s how I saw it. The tapes were not well shot and his story had no structure on first viewing. But I became more interested when I saw the scenes where the rope became entangled around the propeller and Peter dived overboard to cut it free.’

Manning then introduced Bland to Brian Finch, managing director of FMTV, who helped develop the project with taped interviews of Bland, and promotional clips to attract further investment interest in what was to be called the ‘Polar Challenge’. Three months before Bland was due to leave for the pole, FMTV pulled out, considering the project too risky and expensive, and Bland too pushy.

Manning says: ‘Peter being Peter, he went to the North Magnetic Pole anyway, without pre-selling his film and without any financial assistance. Several months passed and Peter returned with another pile of tapes. This time they were a bit sharper, and we set about rough editing the material to try and attract some financial interest. Again we had no success.’

Never afraid to put himself forward, Bland rang Steven Warne, manager of documentaries for Film Victoria. Explaining who he was, he asked Warne out to lunch, and they met in a smart Bourke Street restaurant. Bland went straight into his sales pitch, including heart surgery at eight, diving into the Antarctic seas to free a rope wrapped round the boat propeller, and becoming the first Australian to reach the North Magnetic Pole fourteen months after major vascular surgery. Warne, who had requested water when he first sat down, switched to chardonnay as he became enthralled by the nerve of the man sitting opposite him.
Warne suggested two names: media player Steve Vizard, from Artist Services, or film producer Alan Lindsay. After lunch Warne emailed Lindsay’s details to Bland, and a meeting was arranged. ‘I understand you’ve got a great story to tell,’ said Lindsay, having been briefed enthusiastically by Warne. He had some reservations about the appeal of an endless series of shots of men tramping across a white wasteland, but after viewing the raw footage, Lindsay could see the potential: ‘You’ve got a great story, but you’re telling it arse about. Don’t start at the pole. I want to know who this man Bland is, what drives him, and what his struggles are. Start with that, then flesh out the man, and build up the suspense.’ Lindsay agreed to make a four-minute promotional film to show to people on his forthcoming trip to London and New York. The original working title of Most Determined was changed to the more catchy Ice Break Heart. Bland and Lindsay were in business. The film was eventually sold to Channel Four in England and the ABC in Australia, and Bland ended up making only $47,000 from it – far less than the cost of production.

Lindsay was left to ponder the Peter Bland phenomenon. ‘I’m still not sure what drives Pete. It’s easy to do an amateur Freud and talk of his strict father and a need to prove himself. I think it’s more likely the guy is just manic! There are times when Pete is like a caged animal, pacing and talking ten to the dozen ideas that go all over the place. He needs things he can absolutely focus on and I guess when you put your life at risk you have little choice but to focus.’

Bland’s friend Justin Harty shared Lindsay’s view of Bland’s energy. ‘Pete is like a life-size battery that many use to recharge their own diminished reserves. The energy he generates and

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his positive “can do” attitude is infectious to his friends – although some can only take it in small doses.’

Bland by now was channelling his energy into his day job at Elders International, working under its director, Tai Phung. ‘Even at the first interview, I knew that Peter was slightly left of centre,’ says Phung. ‘I recall that no sooner had we offered him a job than he countered with a request to take two weeks off to get married, plus three months’ leave to trek to the North Magnetic Pole. Most people would have been glad to be given a job, and it isn’t our company policy to allow employees time off so early in a job, but I knew by the tone of Peter’s request that it was his way or no way.’

Soon after Bland was taken on, he asked Phung what his title was to be, so that he could have business cards printed. ‘I thought for a minute and told Peter that it would be best if we gave him the title of assistant trader, due to his lack of experience. I don’t know why Peter bothered to ask me that question because within two years, off his own back, he had given himself three different titles – trader, manager, and general manager. Thank God for the workings of the Australian Securities and Investment Commission, otherwise I’m sure Peter would have called himself chairman of the board, had he stayed with Elders any longer!’

Bland’s principal sponsor on the North Magnetic Pole trip, Jones Lang Wootton, had agreed to put him through a public speaking course, and he stepped up his engagements for them and for the Heart Foundation, speaking at breakfasts and corporate lunches. The career that his father had so long wanted for him was beginning to take root.

Elders asked him to speak one day at a state managers’ meeting in Dubbo. The next morning he flew back to Sydney
on the 6 am flight with Elders managing director David Hills. Hills was a member of the elite Chairman’s Club at Qantas and he invited Bland for breakfast. ‘He introduced me to Brian Jamieson, who was then chairman of accounting firm KPMG, and we had breakfast together. I remember sitting there thinking: “This is what I wanna be; I don’t wanna be waiting in airport lobbies. I want to be having breakfast with the captains of business in the Chairman’s Lounge.”

‘David introduced me as his Elders employee who had just become the first Australian to the North Magnetic Pole, and I could see already that the trip to the pole had not only accomplished the goals that I had set, but was also opening doors for me in business.’

At Elders, while Tai Phung concentrated on the export of meat and livestock, Bland was given responsibility for building a new feedstuff and grain business. He thrived in the agricultural business which combined his love of farming with the theoretical commerce he had learned at university. ‘I felt that the feed trade business had to diversify beyond the lucerne needed by the stock in Asia into other proteins including cotton seeds. We started to do that, and to diversify beyond Japan into other markets like Korea and India. Within six months we were turning over $3 million in produce to Korea alone.’

Phung was impressed: ‘To my surprise, within twelve months we were trading in oaten hay, lucerne and cotton seed. In fact, the groundwork laid by Peter has developed into a multi-million dollar stand-alone division for Elders Limited. There were two things in particular I respected about him – his tenacity in creating new business opportunities, and his motto that “no is not a knockback, just feedback”.’
Whatever Bland did in life, he wanted to be in control, and Phung recalls the difficulty that his ever-competitive junior executive had in accepting Phung as his boss. Bland says: ‘Deep down I want to be the CEO, the captain. From the time I stepped on a boat I wanted to be the skipper.’

The battle between Bland and his father over the management of the farm was growing increasingly fierce. ‘From fourteen years old I was always in charge of the shearing, but once Dad retired in 1994 he wanted to take over. We had huge arguments in front of the shearers over how to count the sheep for payment. We even argued over how to mend a particular piece of machinery. The farm was supposed to be what brought us together, but it ended up forcing us apart. I knew whatever I did at home would be judged, and there would be a disagreement. I put up with it because I love the farm so much. It always ended up with Dad saying, “Let’s just drop it and go and work in the woolshed,” and for whatever reasons, I’d always say yes.’ Julia says: ‘Pete very much wanted his father’s approval. The judge would speak glowingly about Pete to me, but he couldn’t say it to Pete.’

Bland had always felt his father’s intellectual inferior, and one of the reasons he had purposely not followed his father into the law was so that his father would not be constantly judging him. Commodity trading and adventuring were areas where he could be proficient without being criticised by his father. But while the judge might not understand adventuring, he could still oppose it on the grounds that it stopped Peter from starting a proper career. Typical had been his reaction to his youngest son’s crossing of the Atlantic with Jay Watson in 1994. ‘He saw it as totally self-indulgent and threatening my job prospects. He was very suspicious of the
idea of delivering a boat from the West Indies to the UK, and he thought there must have been drugs involved. He was dead against it. The difference with the farm was that he owned it, and so his word went. But I owned my life, and so I chose to go on that trip and others.’

Where others might have chosen the path of least resistance, Peter Bland was determined to stand up to his father, and had the strength of mind to do so. The judge had always advocated the idea of empowering others, and he used to say that the way to help a starving person was to give them a fishing rod, not a fish. Now Peter was constantly struck by the irony that his father had been so successful in his goal of empowering his children, and bringing them up as independent, resourceful individuals, that they didn’t necessarily choose to do what he wanted: ‘I’m passionate about standing up for myself. I believe firmly that you don’t get what you deserve in life; you get what you negotiate.’

But Bland was still not financially independent. By the end of 1998 he was under pressure to repay to David Hempleman-Adams what he owed the Englishman for that year’s trip to the North Magnetic Pole. He found himself in the difficult position of having to ask his father to lend him the money. His father agreed. ‘Dad had softened during the year because he had seen the response to what I’d done. He’d seen I’d raised money for the Heart Foundation, and children coming up to me asking for autographs. I didn’t want to ask him, but I was under the hammer to pay back the debt.’

Although he found it hard to express it face-to-face, the judge felt great pride in Peter’s achievements – reflected in the note he wrote after his son redesigned the shearing shed at the farm. In a tone of awed admiration, it said: ‘Pete, there’s
nothing you cannot do.’ Despite the bond between them, Bland found that standing up to his father led to more and more confrontations. The more he argued with his father, the more the rest of the family told him: ‘Don’t get your father irate, because you know his heart is weak.’ His mother, the conciliator, drummed into him: ‘Don’t leave without making peace with your father.’

Change was afoot in Bland’s life. The phone rang one day in early 1999, and it was a call from a headhunter. The position of marketing manager at the MS Society had been vacant for ten months, and was he interested? Bland had never thought of leaving the corporate world and working for a charity, even though he had been so closely linked with the Heart Foundation, and was used by the organisation on its mail-outs through 1998. MS Society chief executive Lindsay McMillan told him about his desire to lift the organisation’s profile, and restructure the marketing department. After talking to Elders, Bland took the plunge in April. ‘I was seen as a bit of a bastard coming in from the corporate world to get rid of people. I had lots to learn in terms of communicating the restructure and putting it into effect. In hindsight, the way I did it left a lot to be desired. I called the staff into a meeting and basically said, “Right, until the morale round this place improves, the sackings will continue.” People know now that I was given a brief, but at the time they thought I was a bit of a prick, and they were probably right.’

He learned how to be a more effective manager through Jil Toovey at the Institute of Knowledge Development, an executive development organisation in Melbourne. ‘Peter is one of those people driven by their passions,’ says Toovey. ‘His passion and drive are hallmarks of his personality, but clearly
discovery and risk-taking are a key focus for him. My work with him has been concerned with personal learning and development, both of himself and his team and, unlike many other managers and leaders, he is willing to try out daring and different approaches to learning. He is not very interested in comfort zones, either for himself or others. My sense is that there are elements of Peter’s personality that he has been born with and elements that have developed as a result of life changing experiences, like his father’s death and his illness as a child. Attributes that are uncharacteristic to his nature, such as patience, insight and self-reflection, provide balance to his exuberance, curiosity, and courage.

Bland and Julia were now living in the Melbourne suburb of Albert Park, and going to the farm at the weekend. The judge’s health was failing fast from prostate cancer. He was also angry about his failing mind and memory, and not remembering people’s names.

In May 1999 he was admitted to the Peter McCallum Institute, Melbourne’s specialist cancer hospital, and then to Royal Melbourne Private. He longed to get home, to see the farm and his dogs and the view of the Macedon Ranges, and the hospital agreed to discharge him, even though he was still seriously ill. The family had grown used to the judge returning from every trip away and saying: ‘Why do we even go away? You’ve never seen anything as good as this! How about those views? How about that paddock? How about that mountain?’

The judge had come home to say goodbye to the place he loved. ‘I think he knew he was very, very sick when he left the Royal Melbourne,’ says Bland. ‘But that wasn’t what he was telling everyone else. He was telling everyone else that
he was feeling fantastic and that he could go home. And he
did go home. And that very afternoon he collapsed. He was
taken in an ambulance back to the Royal Melbourne Hospital.
They found the cancer had spread to his lungs.’

The judge had a strong faith for most of his life, but in mid-
life his formal church-going had lapsed, although he always
travelled with a copy of the New Testament. As he approached
death he did not turn back to the church for support because,
according to his wife, he thought it would be a sign of
weakness, or even hypocritical, to seek the comfort of religion
after all those years when he hadn’t gone to church. Tough to
the very end, he faced death surrounded by his family.

On 19 August doctors told Bland his father probably had
less than twelve hours to live. He went to his father’s bedside
and held his hand. ‘Even on his deathbed we didn’t share our
ture feelings. I still didn’t say what he’d meant to me and what
a hero he was in my mind. I didn’t tell him. I don’t know why.
We exchanged small talk about the farm, and there was no
mention of death. He said, “When I get out of hospital we have
to get smaller sheep; those sheep are far too big for me now.”
I had to laugh. The whole bloody farm was too big for him. He
had to acknowledge that. But he wouldn’t let go. I said, “Let’s
just reduce the work on the farm and enjoy it a bit more,” and
he acknowledged right there and then, “Yes, well, perhaps you
and Stuart should get together and look at operating the farms.”
It was the first time he had ever laid down the invitation to
Stuart and I to help him with the farm management.’ Having
finally ceded control to his children, John Bland died the
next day.

‘And then, like typical Blands, we avoided emotion,’ says
Peter. The family put its energies into preparing the funeral,
and a service sheet entitled ‘The Rustic Judge’. The front cover had a portrait of the County Court judge in his wig, and the back cover had a picture of John Bland droving his beloved merino rams at the farm. John Bland’s friend from the County Court, Judge Eugene Cullitty, gave the eulogy, and his three children, Joanna, Stuart and Peter, spoke and did readings. An era ended.

Peter Bland grieved for the man with whom he had so often locked horns. ‘Dad was an incredible, charming, powerful person. I felt saddened at the loss of a man I loved so deeply, and still miss every single day. But I also felt liberated. It made it a lot easier for me to make decisions about my life, including going to Antarctica, and turning the farm around. I don’t know why it had to be so much of the old bull and the young bull with us. I would love to have shared some time with Dad, rather than being told what to do. I would have given anything to have those years together at the farm as buddies, where everything was ticking along and Dad was content just to mind the garden, the lawns, the chooks and the dogs. But, sadly, it was not to be. It is one of the ironies of life that he had to die for his son to become what he always wanted him to be – a father and a farmer with a family and a career.’

A couple of days after the judge died, Bland and his brother engaged in a symbolic act that spoke of the liberation that had come with their father’s death. They built a fence at the farm which had long been a source of argument, and which their father had point-blank refused to erect. It ushered in a new era at the farm.

The family sat down and discussed what should be done with the property. Peter’s plan was to get rid of the merinos, build up the pastures, and fatten up the lambs and the cattle.
which would be brought across from King Island. The family agreed, and Bland began by spraying the thistles with chemicals that had long been resisted by his father. The merinos were sold, cattle brought over from King Island, and a business plan was introduced projecting the farm moving into the black in 2001.

Bland still felt his father’s influence: ‘Everything I did on the farm I was trying to please my father. I’m sure he disapproved, but I wanted to say to him, “Dad, look at the scoreboard, we’re getting $85 for the fat lambs, that’s twice what we used to get and our pastures are being exported to Asia.” Maybe I wanted to show off to him that I was right. I never thought I was his equal, and intellectually I always felt a dunce compared to him.’

Seven months after his father’s death, Bland’s daughter Olivia Rose was born, on 10 March 2000. At the end of that year Bland, Julia and Olivia went for a holiday to Byron Bay, and the ties and responsibilities of parenthood became even more apparent to a man who had been used to the unfettered pursuit of his individual goals. Bland and Julia set up a rotation system where one would look after Olivia while the other went to the beach. ‘It was a realisation for us that we couldn’t holiday as we had done before. I couldn’t just say, I want to go for a nice ten-kilometre run, and just go for it.’

That didn’t mean he intended ending his adventuring. He saw no clash between his new-found responsibility as a father and going to Antarctica. He listened to the concerns of those around him, but chose to follow his own instincts. ‘If everyone took the safe advice they were given, no-one would ever do anything,’ he said. ‘Everyone dreams, but very few people achieve. I put a date on my dreams.’
When Watson had returned from Antarctica in mid-1999, he and Bland began planning their crossing of the Antarctic peninsula in January 2001 and continued planning through 1999 and 2000, amidst Watson’s own plans to leave on an expedition crossing South Georgia in early 2000. The year closed with a flurry of activity: launching programs for the MS Society; fund-raising and preparing for the trip; continuing the changes at the farm; and renovating the old servants’ quarters next to his mother’s house so that he, Julia and Olivia could move in there before Christmas.

In the days immediately after the death of Bland’s father in August 1999, Alan Lindsay had gone to the farm to film interviews with the family for inclusion in the documentary Ice Break Heart. While Bland was filmed mustering the sheep on horseback, his wife and mother were interviewed about where they thought Pete’s adventurings would end. The last shot in the film had Jane Bland saying how much she hoped Pete never went on another trip, and Julia saying she was sure he would.

Julia knew her husband. But even she could not have foreseen that eighteen months later he would be lying at the bottom of a 40-metre deep Antarctic crevasse, close to death.
When Bland stepped out into the blizzard to secure the tent with extra ropes from the kayaks, Watson sat inside listening to the wind hurling itself furiously at the tent. As the flapping of the tent grew louder and louder he hoped it would not simply lift off, taking him with it. He tried to secure it by jamming two backpacks against the sides, then he sat tight. He started to realise that Bland had now been out of the tent for three or four minutes. He should have been back by now. He called out ‘Pete, Pete’ as loudly as he could to make himself heard above the roar of the wind, but there was no reply.

Unzipping the tent, he immediately saw a 15-metre wide scar in the soft snow where an avalanche had swept down the mountains. The avalanche had taken away one of the kayaks, and Watson assumed his friend had also been swept away by
it. The previous night, after pitching the tent, he had done a reconnaissance around the area where they were camped. Just below them lay an ice ledge with a 40-metre drop into a crevasse. He suspected this was where the avalanche had taken Peter. Roping himself to a stake he drove into the ice above the ledge, he walked carefully to the edge. 'I looked down into the hole and saw him lying there. He was on his back, his arms were flailing slightly, and his whole lower body was stationary. I could see his body had impacted into the ice, and I feared he had broken his back. His eyes were open, and I thought he was conscious. I yelled down to him, but I didn't know if he could hear over the wind. I took a couple of deep breaths to assess the situation. First I had to get enough supplies for him, so I threw down food, water, his sleeping bag, the stove, and fuel.'

Watson packed his own bag, went to the kayak, which he then slid over the ledge, and began the perilous, three-hour descent to Bland. He found him bleeding from the nose and ears, and incapable of speaking. 'I knew he was in a bad way. He'd obviously taken a huge knock on his head. I wanted to get him as comfortable and warm as possible, so I set up the tent over him by cutting a slit in the bottom and putting it over him.' He tried to get Bland to take some sips of water, but it was another twenty-four hours before he ate anything.

Ten hours after Bland was swept over the ledge, Watson could at last attempt a radio call to Tooluka to alert Roger Wallis and the rest of the crew about what had happened. Since Bland and Watson had left them at Esperanza, they had been sailing peacefully along the coast, taking in the sights, which McAuley and Andy Watson sketched. They marvelled at the ice and rock falls dropping vertically into the sea, at the penguin colonies
and at the whales which came up to breathe right next to the boat. They visited the extinct volcano and old whaling station on Deception Island, went ashore onto the peninsula to climb or cross country ski, and wound down each evening in the galley with plenty of gin, red wine, food and conversation. Everywhere they went, Wallis, the old hand, stressed the lesson that Antarctica can bite back any moment. McAuley recalls: ‘He pushed across all the time, don’t take anything for granted. Wherever we went we had ropes and equipment in the presumption that something might go wrong.’

Wallis inspired a sense of confidence in everyone, and it was as well, because Jay’s radio call was about to send them into shock. They had all felt some concern two nights before when Bland and Watson failed to radio in for their 8 pm check call to register their position, and to say that all was well. Andy, in particular, had a feeling in his gut that all was not right for his brother and Pete. The night before, when the rest of the party went ashore to one of the islands, Andy had stayed on board, subdued by a sixth sense that something was wrong.

The afternoon of the call they had been visiting Trinity Island and, seeing they were late, had run back across the beach to the dinghy to make sure they were back on board for the call. McAuley led the laughing and joking in the dinghy, and they stepped back onto Tooluka in high spirits. Then came the call. Very calmly, Jay told Wallis: ‘Pete’s had a bad fall. I think he’s broken his back. He’s unconscious, but still breathing. I can’t move him on my own. I need assistance.’

Andy, who was videoing the action on the boat at the time at Peter’s request, put the camera straight down and started to take in the full horror of what he had just heard. ‘My first reaction was, “Pete’s not going to make it.” Being the closest
to Julia of all the people on the boat, I thought I’d have to tell her, and that was pretty upsetting.’

McAuley, at a loss for words like the others, picked up the video and kept shooting, thinking that was what Pete and Jay would want for the documentary – some real life-and-death drama. He wished he had been quick enough to capture the looks on people’s faces when Jay’s call arrived. At the same time it went through his mind that Andy probably thought he was a callous bastard for filming on when a man’s life was hanging by a thread. He assumed that even if Pete survived, he had broken his back and would be a paraplegic for life. ‘I didn’t say it, but I thought to myself, “He’s dead.” I was surprised at Jay’s calmness. He repeated everything twice, to make sure we understood what he was saying.’

Collins also was amazed how composed Jay sounded. ‘To be honest, from the description of the injuries, I didn’t think Pete would last the night. It seemed horrendous.’ Kelsall and Devine sensed the mood change like a sudden Melbourne wind shift. ‘I felt this sinking feeling, and a dark cloud of anxiety and doubt descended on us,’ Kelsall said.

Jay was also weighing up the consequences of having an international rescue mounted to get Bland out of the crevasse, and he was especially conscious of Martin Betts’s warnings of the potential dangers when he had contacted the Australian Antarctic Division in Hobart before the trip. He could hear the doomsayers telling him, ‘I told you so,’ and he could envisage the public indignation if taxpayers’ money had to be spent to get Pete home. There had been a backlash in Australia against individuals going off on these trips and expecting the government to get them out of any mess they’d fallen into. At first people had applauded the Navy saving
French yachtswoman Isabelle Autissier, stranded in the Southern Ocean in 1995, and marvelled at the search-and-rescue mission that saved British yachtsman Tony Bullimore, upside down in the seas off Western Australia in 1999. But admiration for the endurance of the adventurers and the skill of the rescuers was gradually beginning to sour, and was replaced by irritation at the self-indulgence of some of the ventures. Jay Watson knew this as he crouched over his friend 40 metres down the crevasse, and he spoke about it to Wallis.

They had discussed the issue of outside assistance before the trip started. The Antarctic ethic was that if you went on a private expedition you should expect to be self-reliant, and if things went wrong, you should get yourself out of the hole with your own resources. ‘The expectation is you look after yourself and your mates, but you don’t ask for help,’ said Wallis. ‘It was very much against my thinking to ask for help. But a man’s life was at risk.’ Jay shared the dilemma. ‘The last thing I wanted was to call in a lot of other people. I knew there would be consequences in bringing other people in.’

There was another reason why Wallis and Watson didn’t want to call in outside help. They were humble, self-effacing men who undertook their adventures without fuss or glory, and they didn’t want the hullabaloo and heroism that accompanied every large-scale international rescue. Autissier and Bullimore did not win their races, but after being capsized and rescued in such spectacular fashion they were portrayed as heroic survivors, and splashed across newspapers and television the world over. ‘There’s more satisfaction if you achieve things quietly,’ said Wallis.

He and Watson were professional adventurers and regular travellers to Antarctica, so their reputation was on the line.
But if Watson had to choose between saving his own pride or the life of his stricken friend, who was delirious and unable to move from the waist down, there was only one decision: call for help. The two of them decided on a compromise. It was night-time, anyway, so no rescue could be mounted immediately. Instead Wallis would send out a radio call straightaway to see what help might be available and, after checking with Jay at 6 am next morning on Pete's condition, the pair of them would make the final decision about outside help.

Devine could see Wallis's reluctance to call in help, as could Kelsall. ‘You’re expected to be self-reliant in Antarctica, and we thought we were,’ he says. ‘Not much worries Roger, but that was an incredibly tough situation to be placed in after that call from Jay. He went up to the radio five times before he finally made the call to local shipping. He felt uncomfortable asking for other people’s help.’

Wallis’s first call was to gauge what help might be available from ships in the area. ‘He was really careful,’ said Collins. ‘He didn’t make it out to be an emergency; he just wanted to know what assistance there might be.’ The airwaves then began to light up, but, because of the language difficulties, there was some confusion about what had actually happened. Contact was made with the cruise ship Clipper Adventurer, but it was too far away to help. The Chilean military base at King George Island came on the radio, believing Tooluka was in need of help. Then over the airwaves came a perfectly enunciated English voice saying, ‘Hello, Tooluka, this is the Argentine Marine Assistance Centre in Ushuaia.’ Wallis asked whether they wanted to take over coordination of any rescue, and they said he should remain in charge on Tooluka. Where they could help was translating English into Spanish, and
coordinating with the Chilean authorities on King George Island. One vessel passed on the message that the cruise ship *Marco Polo* had a helicopter on board, and might be able to help with a rescue. The *Marco Polo* could not be contacted immediately because it operated on a different radio frequency from the other ships, and would not be on the air until the morning. Everything was put on hold until 7 am next morning when Roger would speak to Jay to find out if Pete had survived the night. Then the final decision would be made about whether to call in outside assistance.

‘They didn’t want to call for help unless they really had to,’ said Collins. *Tooluka*, meanwhile, was a scene of feverish activity. It was decided the boat would sail from Trinity Island to Charcot Bay, the nearest access point to Bland and Watson, and Kelsall would lead a shore party that would climb up to where the pair were positioned, and then transport Bland to a spot further down the mountain where a helicopter could land safely. As Wallis kept talking on the radio, weighing up the options, Kelsall began preparations for the climb.

Wallis had left the hardest call till last: ringing Bland’s wife, Julia, at home at the farm outside Melbourne. The call came at 7 am on Friday 2 February, when she was in the shower after breast-feeding Olivia. ‘Very calmly, very nicely, Roger delivered the news. He just said, “Pete’s had an accident. He’s been involved in an ice fall.” That was all the detail they gave me. He was conscious, but still in the crevasse, and they were trying to organise a helicopter. He said he would call me with any further news. I didn’t know how I was going to tell his mum.’

Their house was the renovated servants’ quarters attached to the old homestead where Jane Bland lived, and, with shampoo
still in her hair, she walked across to the main house to tell her mother-in-law what had happened. When she got to the front door she heard the shower running, and decided to go back and finish her own shower while she decided how best to break the news. She then called Peter’s elder sister Joanna, who drove up straightaway from Melbourne.

Again, she went across and knocked on the front door. There was no reply and she eventually found Jane out in the garden. She gave her the news: ‘Mrs B, they’ve just rung to say Pete’s had a bit of an accident.’ If Jane Bland had feared the worst from the time she had first tried to dissuade her son from going on the trip, now it had arrived. Julia braced herself for the first wave of media inquiries, feeling there was little choice but to answer the increasing number of calls. It was soon decided that Julia, with her public relations experience, and with assistance from her publicist friend Nerida Crake, would handle all the calls and interviews.

About this time the family received an email from Wallis, on board Tooluka. It set out the facts without embellishment: ‘Pete and Jay were within twelve kilometres of completing their 26-day traverse when Pete was injured in an avalanche four days ago. Three of our crew went ashore 40 hours ago to try to assist Jay to get him out of a crevasse. They got to Jay and Pete about 11.45 am, but it took until 3.45 pm to get Pete on the stretcher and out. The Marco Polo was the only ship in the area with a helicopter. All arrangements were in place so we could then ask Jay if they would accept air evacuation. He said yes at 6 am yesterday so Marco Polo changed course and offered all facilities to us. They stayed with us until about 10 am today.

‘Then the Chilean military base on King George Island
offered help. Many ships have offered assistance but nothing could be done until the shore party got him out and to a place where a chopper can land. The Chileans made two attempts but now he is being carried to a lower level in an open area. So tomorrow they will try again. This is a very condensed story of the last four days. This is turning into a big issue and is far from over yet.

Stuart Bland set to work to coordinate the Australian end of an international rescue that was to last sixteen days. It involved the Australian consular department in Canberra, the Australian embassy in Santiago, Qantas, the Chilean military and medical staff, Melbourne’s Alfred Hospital, the P&O cruise line, and countless friends and well-wishers.

One of Julia’s first calls was to Crake, who had been handling media inquiries on Pete and Jay’s trip. For the first couple of weeks of the trip Crake had been busy arranging satellite phone calls to Australian media outlets, and preparing for the pair’s homecoming. There was to be a special reception for the sponsors, MAB, and other celebratory functions. Events had not gone according to the script, and the trip was now about to get a very different type of publicity – although there was plenty of it.

At 5 am on Saturday Julia was rung by Andy from the hospital at King George Island with the news that it would cost US$22,000 to charter a plane to fly Peter from the island to Ushuaia. She desperately started ringing around to see how she might raise the money. According to Martin Betts, from the Australian Antarctic Division in Hobart, she made a frantic call to him at 7.30 am and during the course of the conversation asked if the government would pay to fly Peter out of King George Island. Betts asked if Peter was insured and was
disappointed to hear that Peter was relying for insurance on the support crew on board Tooluka. He began ringing Canberra and emailing his opposite number in Santiago to seek help, and gradually over the ensuing hours it became probable that the Chileans would fly Peter out.

The mood at the farm was one of high anxiety. Jane Bland was having to face the prospect of, at worst, losing a second child and, at best, having her youngest child come home disabled. ‘I felt I couldn’t care less if we sold the farm if we could just get Pete home. I was worried out of my mind that he would come back with brain damage.’ Besides all her concerns about his safety, she was also worried that he had left without writing a will. Julia had spoken to family friend John Allen, who knew Tony Charlton, businessman, fundraiser and media personality. Charlton had experience of flying his ill daughter back from the United States, and Allen contacted him for advice in case a medical airlift was needed for Peter.

Family and friends, including Annie and Jaap Viergever, gathered at the farm to help. Annie’s step-brother Athol Guy, for whom Peter had worked, offered assistance. The priority became getting a passport for Olivia in less than 48 hours, in time for her to catch the flight to Buenos Aires with Julia. Calls were made to state and federal MPs to try to speed up the process, and Julia’s uncle, Ross McOmish, rang a friend, Pam Mayer, who worked with Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in Canberra. The wheels began to turn, and special arrangements were made for the Melbourne passport office to open on Saturday morning. Julia, meanwhile, discovered she did not have Olivia’s birth certificate, so her sister Megan brought an application form up from Melbourne, had it
signed, and took it back to obtain the certificate. When Julia tried to take a Polaroid photo of Olivia for the passport, the camera would not work so she had to tear into town to arrange pictures. It felt like bedlam.

‘I was desperately trying to coordinate going to South America with Olivia, finances, media pressure, and keeping the family informed, calm, and assured that I would be OK and that taking Olivia was the best decision. Pete was my number one priority and I had to be totally focused on getting to him in case, at the very worst, he died. I wanted the three of us to be together again. I also had concerns that his back might be broken, though I kept those to myself. I just tried to get organised and keep up with the relentless phone calls.’

The full extent of the rescue operation was brought home to her when Roger Wallis’s wife, Annie, rang from Gippsland to let her know Collins, Kelsall and Andy Watson were about to risk their lives by climbing up the mountain to bring him back.

By now the media had started ringing and Julia, who had worked in public relations at the Melbourne firm of Turnbull, Porter, Novelli (where she met Crake), began to cringe at how press and television would present the story, and what tears they would seek to extract from her for their television news footage. While the family’s first reaction was to ask the media to go away and respect their privacy, Julia, with her knowledge of public relations, felt differently. She believed that if you courted publicity from the media, as Peter had done previously on behalf of his sponsors, you could not then turn around and tell the media to go away when things were going badly. The way of the world was that Peter relied on his
sponsors, and sponsors wanted media publicity. ‘If you ask for media support when seeking publicity for a trip, and you get it, you must return the favour when the media seek information when things go wrong. I also wanted the sponsors to be informed and aware that I was taking on the responsibility of speaking publicly about the trip in my husband’s place.’

She did the right thing, and was photographed with the sponsor’s logo, but drew the line at posing looking sad, as one photographer requested. ‘I told them to just take the shot exactly as it was before I changed my mind. It was actually one of the worst moments of the whole scenario that weekend, and I had to grit my teeth.’

She was determined not to be portrayed as the weepy, upset wife and rang Michael Venus, the Channel Nine chief-of-staff, whom she knew, to ask him to remove any tears and emotion from whatever story they might do. She would talk to the media at 3 pm, and they weren’t to go beyond the front paddock gates. She would give a statement, and they would then have time to return to Melbourne in time for the 6 pm news. He agreed, and not long after the media started flying in. The first warning the Blands had of the arrival of the news helicopters from the commercial networks was when Paddy, the family kelpie, started barking at the noisy intruders in his territory. As soon as the first helicopter landed he registered his disapproval by urinating against it. One of the children at the farm asked why it was that Channel Ten had come in a car, when everyone else had helicopters. Even the ABC had a sparkling silver chopper to film the emotional drama at the farm.

Julia established the media ground rules: only she would talk, and she then expected everyone to leave the property.
The Rescue

She managed to hold herself together, and when she watched that night’s six o’clock news she was gratified to see that Venus had kept his word on Channel Nine’s report. There was no emotion, no tears; just the facts.

That was not the end of the media interest. At 10 am next morning Julia discovered two female reporters and a photographer from the Herald-Sun out on the property waiting to talk to her. ‘I was irate and stressed out of my brain. I told them they could not step beyond the paddock out the front. I felt I was drowning in all the demands and comments and requests.’

Julia had granted special media access to Channel Nine, and their crew was at Tullamarine on the Sunday morning when she and Olivia booked in for the Qantas flight to Buenos Aires via Auckland. Nine were to accompany her on the journey down to Punta Arenas, and they asked her not to let on to the rival Channel Seven crew filming her departure at Tullamarine that she was travelling with a Nine film crew. She was in no condition to argue, after no sleep the previous night, and all she could think of was walking through the doors of the international departure terminal at Melbourne without breaking down in floods of tears, which would have worried her family even more.

The Channel Nine news crew was a secondary consideration. ‘At first I was horrified at the continuing invasion of privacy, but my parents were relieved that I would have some escorts, even if the price was having a camera trained on me all the time. As it turned out the crew were very respectful of my privacy and very supportive. They also made sure I ended up in the right country because, in my highly distressed state, I had bought a ticket to Ushuaia, in Argentina, rather than
Punta Arenas, in Chile. Without them, I would have ended up on the wrong side of the Andes.’

Down in Antarctica, Kelsall was leading the rescue. Trained in first aid, he had been a member of the Falls Creek ski patrol and the Monash University search-and-rescue team. He had once been part of a group of paddlers that saved a girl trapped underwater for ten minutes after her kayak capsized in an East Gippsland river. He had performed cardio-pulmonary resuscitation on the girl, and had never forgotten the relief and exhilaration he felt when she took her first breath. Reluctantly, he agreed to take the lead in the shore rescue party. Over the radio he told Jay to keep Pete warm, placing as many sleeping bags over him as possible.

From the point where they took Jay’s distress call, the boat faced an eight-hour sail to Charcot Bay. Wallis and Kelsall thought they could be at Charcot Bay by the early hours of the morning. Once ashore, the rescue party faced an all-day climb to reach Bland and Watson. The question was, who would go? Collins recalls: ‘John initially wanted to take everyone, on the basis that if you’re doing a mountain rescue, it’s a huge effort, taking someone down a mountain on a stretcher. He had mountain and rope-climbing experience, and I was probably the next most experienced. Then we decided people had to stay on the boat to stop it from drifting into icebergs, and to take radio calls.’

With Kelsall and Collins going, that left one more spot to be filled. Kelsall was troubled by Andy Watson’s health, believing he had had pneumonia on the boat down from Ushuaia. His first choice was to take Devine, whom he had trekked with on previous trips, and knew to be strong, but Andy Watson would have none of it, according to Kelsall. ‘He
wouldn’t accept it. He said, “Look, I’m going. My brother’s up there.” Andy said: ‘I could sense John felt I wasn’t up to it. But when he looked into my eyes he could see I meant it. Even if they’d left me on the boat I would have found some way of going. He was my brother, and I had to save him.’

McAuley recalled: ‘It wouldn’t matter if Andy only had one leg, he would have gone. He just wanted to go to let Jay know he was there. John had learned enough about Andy by then to know that if Andy said he was gonna go, he was gonna go. Knowing it was dangerous, and the fact that he had just got engaged, I told Andy that Jay would be OK. But it made no difference. He was determined to go.’

So it was agreed that Devine and McAuley would stay on Tooluka with Wallis, who would liaise with cruise ships in the area and the Chilean authorities on King George Island. Collins, Kelsall and Watson spent till 2 am packing equipment and enough food for five days, plus another five days of food to be cached ashore in case the ice closed and Tooluka couldn’t get back. They tried to sleep, but couldn’t, lying there imagining what was happening to Pete and Jay up there in the crevasse. Wallis, meanwhile, was steering the boat towards Charcot Bay, their drop-off point, in hair-raising conditions. ‘It had begun snowing when we left Trinity Island, and the weather wasn’t good. We had headwinds and a lot of pack ice, and there was no moon, so we did it with zero visibility. We steered all the way by radar. When we got to the bay we were lucky to find a peninsula of rock and ice where we could land them because everywhere else there were 60-metre high cliffs dropping down to the sea.’

The hours ticked by at the bottom of the crevasse, as Jay kept his vigil, hoping that Peter would make it through the
night. ‘I felt strong knowing Pete was such a strong character. To survive falling so far onto concrete ice was incredible. I don’t think many other people would have lasted. I thought if he could survive that first night he would get better and better.’

On the boat everyone waited anxiously for the 6 am call to Jay to check on Pete’s condition. Andy recalls: ‘It was an amazing relief when Jay told us Pete was still alive, and moving. He hadn’t broken his back. It was like a green light coming on saying, “We’ve got to go and get him.”’

Wallis and Jay made the immediate decision to call in outside assistance, hoping that Pete could be flown out either by the helicopter at the Chilean military base on King George Island, or by the helicopter from the *Marco Polo*. Wallis turned on the radio frequency used by the *Marco Polo* and made a call. Just before Collins, Kelsall and Watson left the boat to begin their climb, he got through to the ship, which promised to send out its helicopter. There was a potential problem that it had no winch, and could not haul Bland up from the bottom of the crevasse. He would have to be lifted out by the rescue party and taken to a suitable landing spot below 800 metres, where he would be out of the clouds and visible to the pilot. There was also a risk that the helicopter’s rotor blades could set off an avalanche similar to the one that had taken Bland.

Collins, Kelsall and Watson set off at 6.30 in low cloud and light snow, with visibility limited to 30 metres. ‘We were hopeful of getting there late afternoon and getting Pete out of the crevasse by the end of the day,’ says Collins. But neither he, nor Watson, nor the experienced Kelsall had any conception of the difficulties they were to encounter. The packs, loaded down with five days’ provisions, were so heavy that
Watson nearly collapsed backwards into the sea when he put his on. Collins says: ‘I’d done fourteen-day treks in Tasmania and I’d never carried anything as heavy as that.’ Collins was also pulling a heavy stretcher which kept getting bogged down in the snow. An hour out from the boat his heart sank. He suddenly realised he had forgotten his matches and lighter, normally stored with the stove, and they had no way of lighting the stove to melt ice for drinking water. To compound their bad luck, Kelsall had recently given up smoking, so he had no lighter with him either. They had taken some water with them, which they rationed carefully. They were all perspiring heavily from the effort of the climb and carrying the heavy packs, so thirst and dehydration threatened to be a major problem. Collins said: ‘I asked if we should go back, but we felt we would be up to Jay by the end of the day and he would have matches. So we kept going, and I ate snow to overcome the thirst.’ It also meant they could have no hot meal during the day, and their intake was restricted to biscuits, nuts and sultanas. They didn’t bother to radio their problem to Tooluka because they didn’t want the people on the boat to worry even more than they were already.

It took them about two hours to cover the first 200 metres, over steep ground with soft snow and awkward crevasses. They walked in single file, roped together at twenty-metre gaps, with Kelsall leading the way and probing the snow for crevasses, as though he was picking his way gingerly through a minefield. Even he found the going tough. ‘Getting up off the coast was very hard, because it was steep, and there was a breakable crust with sloppy snow. Each step you found yourself sinking up to your thighs in snow. There was mist all the way, so all you could see was white. I had to keep turning
round all the time to look at the others so that I could focus on something distinct.’

They fought physical fatigue and intense thirst. They missed one radio call from Wallis on Tooluka because they were struggling so hard to make headway in the mist and light snow. Blindly following their compass and global positioning system, they edged forward up the fifteen-degree incline. As Andy hauled one leg in front of the other, he kept himself going by repeating, in time with his steps: ‘Jay, Pete; Jay, Pete.’ He feared how Jay would feel if anything happened to Pete, and wanted to get up to the crevasse as quickly as possible.

‘I sweated and sweated, because it was such hard work,’ says Andy. ‘I’ve never been so thirsty in my life. It was about minus ten degrees Celsius, and you’d stop for a minute and your clothes would freeze. They’d be covered in this frost. I hadn’t imagined Jay and Pete’s situation was as bad as it was. At the start I thought, “Ten kilometres to reach them, that’s all right.” But unless you’ve been in that kind of terrain you have no idea what it’s like. Turning back was never an option. When it’s your brother, it never enters your mind. All you think about is that your brother needs you. I only began to think about the risks when the avalanches started coming down.’

The avalanches started rolling at 9 pm, which made them halt for the day, fearful of what lay ahead. Despite the fact that conditions meant they had little or no visibility, Andy trusted in Kelsall’s sense of direction. ‘John had an instinctive feel for the route. Without him I’d still be out there looking for Jay. He was fantastic. I think he knew I was desperate to get to Jay that night, but he said, “Sorry, mate, we’re not going to get there tonight.” We were exhausted after fourteen hours straight. And that’s when we started hearing the avalanches,
rolling out of the fog, just a few hundred metres away. I started to think, “My God, what have I got myself into here?”

Collins says: ‘We could hear the avalanches around us, but we couldn’t see where the hell we were because it was getting dark, and we were in the cloud. We were dehydrated and exhausted. At that stage I didn’t know how I would react if I got up there and discovered we were too late and Peter had died.’ Collins was inspired by the leadership of Kelsall, and impressed by the strength of Watson and his quiet determination to rescue his brother.

There were more threats to Andy’s wellbeing than the avalanches that rumbled continuously through the night; he was seriously sick. The pain in his chest was intense, and didn’t allow him to lie down. He put the pain down to a recurrence of the pneumonia he had on the boat coming down, and spent the night sitting up in the tent, waiting to go. Kelsall and Collins sensed he was not well but, exhausted from the day’s labours, they both collapsed into sleep. Collins slept with the snow-filled water bottles against his body inside his sleeping bag, in the hope that they would melt overnight, providing the three of them with water, but the temperature was so cold overnight that the snow had only partly melted by morning.

When they woke at 4 am, after five hours of sleep, the cloud still covered the plateau, but it had lifted beneath the summit, and they could see up the mountain towards Jay and Pete’s likely position. Kelsall emerged from the tent with his binoculars and started scanning the horizon. About 800 metres away as the crow flies, and 400 metres above them, he thought he could detect something foreign in the terrain. ‘I asked Nigel to have a look. He said, “There’s a figure up there.” It was Jay waving.’
Sketch of Antarctic rescue

1. Jay & Pete's campsite prior to avalanche
2. Avalanche site
3. Rescue party campsite & site of helicopter evacuation
4. Location of food drop
5. Crevasse field traversed during rescue
6. Crevasse Pete had been swept into by avalanche

N. Collins '02
The Rescue

Relief washed over Andy as he had feared what might have happened to his brother in the previous night’s avalanches. But relief turned to apprehension when he took a longer look at the 40-degree climb they faced to reach Jay and Pete. ‘I thought to myself, “God, I hope it’s not up there,”’ and John said, “Yes, that’s where they are.”’ To the eye, it looked as though the distance would only take them a couple of hours, but so difficult was the ground it took them almost eight. The first obstacle was the crevasse field stretching across in front of them which made a direct ascent impossible. As they were preparing to tackle it, they heard the clatter of helicopter blades, and looked up to see the chopper from Marco Polo flying over them towards Jay’s position. The pilot hovered overhead for some time, studying the scene below, and then, when it was clear he could not land, he tilted the helicopter on its side and headed down to the three climbers. He touched down and, screaming over the noise of the rotor blades, told them to get Bland down to a spot where he could land. It then headed back to the ship.

They had been going for an hour when the helicopter returned. It hung in the air above them and dropped two large black plastic garbage bags containing that day’s breakfast provisions from the cruise passengers on Marco Polo. Having lived off nuts and snow for a day, Collins, Kelsall and Watson were suddenly inundated with croissants, orange juice, chocolate, muffins, milk and water, all swilling around in the bottom of the plastic bags. Despite losing marks for presentation, Watson remembers that it tasted magnificent. McAuley was later to remark that the only thing the pilot forgot to drop in the black bag was a coffee percolator. It was one of the few minutes of light relief in a blind, morning-long toil up the mountain.
Having breakfasted like kings, the rescue party commenced the hazardous task of zig-zagging from one side of the glacier to the other, using ice bridges to pick their way across the crevasses. ‘I was bloody tired,’ says Collins. ‘I just focused on putting the next foot in front of the other, and getting up there safely. John was in front, followed by Andy and myself, roped together, twenty metres apart.’

For Andy, the reunion with Jay was frustratingly elusive. ‘The geographical positioning system was telling us Jay was only one hundred metres away but we couldn’t see anything because of the mist and the little rises of snow all over the place. We yelled out and our hearts sank because there was no reply. Then we came round this corner and, appearing out of the fog, there was Jay. John was first to him, then I gave him a hit with my stock on his boot. I’d visualised giving him a hug, but I was too exhausted.’

Kelsall and Collins had both been expecting more emotion from the two brothers. Kelsall recalls: ‘I thought they’d give each other a big hug, but Andy just gave Jay a tap on his boot. It was as though they’d just met on the street, but there was a lot of warmth. I think Jay didn’t want to let out too much emotion because he had to be in control of himself and the situation.’

Kelsall was in awe of the deep crevasse where Bland lay. Blue and cavernous, and filled with icicles and ice sculptures, it struck Kelsall as a massive ice cathedral. Forty metres down on a ledge was Bland and Watson’s tent, damaged from various ice falls which had hit it. Kelsall braced himself for the worst. ‘When I saw the busted tent and Jay lifted it off and I saw this crumpled figure I thought, “Oh, Jeez, this is pretty serious.” Going up, I half-expected him to be dead when we got up
there. He couldn’t speak rationally, but he knew it was me, which I took as encouraging.’

Andy was astonished Bland had stayed alive. ‘Those big blue eyes were looking up at me, and I sensed some recognition and relief that I was there. Pete’s the only guy who would have survived in those circumstances. There’s an incredible inner strength. When Jay first radioed in I thought, “If anyone can survive this, Pete can.”’

He was awed by how his brother had handled the freezing, 40-hour crisis since Bland had first been swept into the crevasse. ‘His skills in that situation were amazing. He looked quite at home in this desolate environment, which was the most inhumane place I’ve seen. I don’t think anyone on the planet would have handled it better than him.’

Collins was relieved to hear Bland speak. ‘He was in extreme shock and he mumbled, “Hi, guys, what are you doing here?” He didn’t know where he was. He could move his torso a little bit, but he couldn’t move his legs. We had to get him out as soon as possible.’ They put crampons onto their boots to grip the ice and climbed down into the crevasse with the stretcher. Bland had melted into the snow, lying on his side to ease the pain in his hip. The pain intensified if he lay on his back, which is how he had to be placed on the stretcher. While Collins and Andy strapped Bland to the stretcher, and tied his hands to stop him undoing the ropes and trying to roll back onto his side, Kelsall and Jay set up a pulley system to haul him out. All the time Bland was wincing with pain. When they started hauling him out, the stretcher spun round, scraping Bland’s face against the ice wall of the crevasse. ‘We treated poor Pete pretty harshly, but we had to keep moving,’ says Andy.
Collins recalls: ‘He had that glazed, cloudy look in his eyes. Every now and then he’d drift into reality and say, “Put me on my side, put me on my side.” Small avalanches continued all the time, and down in the crevasse bits were constantly breaking off, and you’d hear lumps of falling ice breaking. It was this beautiful blue, but scary. Jay spent two nights down there caring for Pete, keeping him warm with all this ice falling around him. Frankly, he deserves a medal. I don’t think too many people could stand mental conditions like those. It must have been a nightmare.’

From the time of arrival at around 1 pm it had taken them a couple of hours to get Bland up from the crevasse ledge. When they rang the boat to say they had him out of the crevasse, the news was greeted by loud cheers. The Chileans had now taken over responsibility for the rescue because, after a 30-hour delay on its cruise, Marco Polo had been forced to resume its voyage. Wallis told the rescue party that the Chilean helicopter would reach them in about half an hour, and they set to work feverishly trying to flatten an area of snow to enable the chopper to land. Around 4 pm they heard it coming, and looked overhead as it hovered, checking out the terrain. Almost as quickly as it arrived, it suddenly turned away, and headed back to King George Island. The pilot had decided it was too hazardous to land, and that there was a risk of setting off another avalanche.

The rescue party was struck by the awful reality that it was now up to them to get Bland back to the previous night’s camp, six hours’ difficult descent from where they were now. ‘I felt extremely disappointed when the helicopter didn’t pick him up,’ says Collins. ‘It was a case of God, what now? It went through our minds, we’ve all got to get him down. We were
feeling fairly desperate.’ The continuing peril of the situation was brought home by the constant rumble of avalanches. ‘I realised we were still in an incredibly dangerous position because mini-avalanches were coming down,’ says Andy. ‘It felt like we shouldn’t be there.’

They started by trying to drag the stretcher over the snow but, lacking any runners, it simply sank in the soft cover and after an hour they had only advanced 100 metres. Then they decided to try lifting him, but that proved equally fruitless. Kelsall says: ‘I lost it for five minutes and had a big swear and said I’m too fucking old for this. Nigel made a cup of tea and Jay and Andy decided to put Pete on his side in the cockpit of the kayak.’

Bland was drifting in and out of reality. Parched with thirst and wincing with pain, he stirred enough to ask Collins for some water. ‘C’mon guys,’ he said, on the edge of delirium, ‘I know where the water is; untie me and I’ll go and get it.’

They now made their way slowly down the mountain, with Kelsall and Jay stabilising the kayak with two ropes tied to the back and sides, and Collins and Andy guiding it with two more ropes from the front. In particularly steep sections, all four rescuers had to hold the kayak with ropes from behind, to stop it sliding away down the mountain. At one stage the strain of pulling the kayak through the snow seemed almost impossible, and progress was so hard that they were forced to ignore Bland’s delirious ramblings. Eventually they stopped and looked back to see why the kayak had become so hard to haul; it had flipped over and Bland was being dragged along face down in the snow. Collins rushed over, fearing the worst, only to discover Bland had drifted again into unconsciousness, oblivious to his rough handling. Kelsall says: ‘Getting him
down we didn’t have the luxury of time to treat him gently, as we were moving over an ugly area of crevasses covered by snow. He was babbling and in a lot of pain. When the sled flipped over and I saw his arm hanging out limply, I thought, “Poor bugger, it was too much him and he just died.”

‘Each of us found strength at different times,’ says Collins. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever felt so exhausted in my life as those last two hours from 11 pm to 1 am. Andy was really suffering at that stage, but we didn’t know until just before we reached the tent. Considering how ill he was, his effort was amazing. He made absolutely no complaints.’

At 1 am the team at last reached the tent. Collins helped Jay put up a tent over Bland, while Kelsall brewed endless cups of tea and meals from inside his sleeping bag. Andy still couldn’t lie down because of the pain when he breathed. Kelsall says: ‘I didn’t realise how bad Andy was until we got into the tent that night. He hadn’t complained. He was in an incredible amount of pain, his chest hurt, and he couldn’t breathe. We had to prop him up.’ They had heard by radio from Wallis that a Chilean helicopter would come and land near the tent at 9 am, and it now became a matter of urgency that Andy should take the second place on the Chilean helicopter to the hospital on King George Island. Jay, who might have taken the place, had in any case decided that he meant to walk down to Tooluka in Charcot Bay, thus completing his peninsula crossing.

They awoke around 7 am to a beautiful clear Antarctic morning. Using orange flagging tape, they marked out a large cross on the snow where the Chilean helicopter could land. At 9 am it clattered into sight and hovered for a while before landing on the cross. Two orange-suited Chilean paramedics
jumped out and lifted Bland aboard, helped by the rescuers. He was joined by Andy, who had been fighting intense chest pain for more than 36 hours, and was now too weak to object to being given preference over the other, equally shattered team members. Andy’s last words to Kelsall before he took off on the chopper were: ‘I love you.’ He openly expressed his gratitude to Kelsall, but his love for Jay, which had driven him for two days up treacherous terrain, in the face of intense chest pain, went unexpressed. ‘I felt John had been the key to getting us up there to save my brother and Pete. I’ve never said to Jay “I love you”, and I probably never will. Brothers don’t need to do it. It goes unsaid.’

As the helicopter lifted off for King George Island, Collins felt a huge weight lifted off him. But he barely had time to glow in the satisfaction of a job well done when, as he was packing up the tent, he heard a rumble high above him. Jay called out: ‘Quick, look.’ A huge avalanche was sweeping into the crevasse where Bland had lain for the previous three days, and where they had all been the afternoon before. Had they been in the crevasse twelve hours later, they would all have been swept away. Collins believed the fine weather and sunshine that morning might have melted the snow and set off the avalanche, and he also wondered what would have happened if the weather had been fine all the time. Would they have been dodging avalanches the whole time? ‘It was the biggest reality check you could possibly have. It was like nature saying, “I let you out this time, but next time you might not be so lucky.” We all knew if we’d been in the crevasse at the time none of us would have survived. It brought home how dangerous the whole thing was, and it had a profound effect on me.’

In brilliant sunshine, they set off on the twelve-hour return
trip to Tooluka. In places Kelsall, a fine skier, was carving turns through the snow on the glacier like the star of a cinema snow spectacular. It was too good to last. Antarctica, that landscape of swiftly changing moods, had one last challenge in store. When they reached the sea they had to abseil down the ice cliff, with the catabatic winds howling down behind them. Slowly they lowered themselves and the kayak down onto the shore, where Wallis and Devine were waiting with smiles and hugs. They had survived.

Collins knew how precarious their existence had been for the previous three days. ‘Being so close to death made me realise how precious life was. When I got back to the boat I had to spend time on my own at the front of the boat, almost sobbing. I was so shattered. I’m not a religious person, but I felt, you’re here by the grace of God, or nature.’

Within 90 minutes of the helicopter lifting off Bland was in the operating theatre on King George Island. Drips were inserted in his arms, his gear was cut open, and the doctors did their first diagnosis: dislocated hip, fractured foot and ribs, lacerations, a suspected fractured skull, and as yet unknown damage to the brain. He woke up struggling with the oxygen mask over his face, just as he had as an eight-year-old after undergoing open-heart surgery at the Alfred Hospital.

Andy, still in severe pain, had a chest x-ray which revealed no sign of pneumonia. He left the hospital to have lunch with the base commander, and went to rest afterwards at the visitor centre. He was in too much pain to lie down on the bed, and returned to the doctor. This time the doctor diagnosed pericarditis, an inflammation of the sac around the heart. He was put in the hospital bed next to Bland. ‘Although Pete was slurring his words and struggling to speak, he was already
talking about his next trip, and trying to remember details of what had happened on this one. From day one he was rushing to rehabilitate himself, getting into the wheelchair and trying to walk around. The doctors had to push him back into bed. It was another sign of his incredible drive and energy.’

The Chilean doctors manipulated Bland’s dislocated hip back into position, but they were still worried about his heart, and the fracture to his skull. The dilemma now was whether the Bland family needed to organise an emergency evacuation to get him to a larger medical centre in Chile, like Punta Arenas, or even fly him home to Melbourne. Pocock, at the consular section of Foreign Affairs in Canberra, obtained a quote for $56,000 from Omega, an Australian medical evacuation company, to fly Peter back to Melbourne from Punta Arenas with a doctor and nurse. If he needed ventilatory support, the quote would rise by a further $12,000.

Back in Melbourne, Charlton, who had previously invited Bland to charity fund-raising functions, contacted specialists at the Alfred Hospital about what information they needed to give an assessment. Reports would be needed from the doctors in Chile and translated from Spanish to English for the specialists at the Alfred Hospital. At the hospital on King George Island, Andy’s role was to field the phone calls coming in from Australia seeking details of Peter’s condition.

The options were to immediately hire a special medivac plane to fly Peter to Punta Arenas, or wait until he could go on the weekly Chilean military Hercules which supplied the King George Island base from Punta Arenas. Andy was the uneasy man in the middle. ‘I thought Pete would be all right to wait for the Chilean military’s Hercules flight, but I didn’t want to make the call on whether to spend $50,000 on an
emergency evacuation. I thought he was stabilised, but I didn’t want to be the one responsible for Pete ending up with brain damage.’

As Andy and Stuart weighed up whether to call in an air rescue flight, Julia and ten-month-old Olivia were arriving in Santiago. They were met at the airport by Australia’s Ambassador to Chile, John Campbell, and the Head Consul, Tanya Grubic. ‘I was exhausted emotionally and physically and did not know if Pete would live, or how devastating his injuries would be. John took me to his residence where I was looked after like a family member. He and Tanya then co-ordinated my journey down south to Punta Arenas. John had, to my knowledge, spent the better part of two days and nights before my arrival liaising between Roland Pocock, at the consular department in Canberra, and the Chilean military base. For the three weeks I was in Chile, John was my rock. Without his kindness, professionalism, ability and coordination of Pete’s rescue and hospitalisation, Pete may well not have received the medical attention he required as quickly or efficiently as he did.’ Julia was distressed to hear that later in 2001 Campbell was recalled to Canberra by the then Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer. He subsequently left Foreign Affairs, saying he had been forced out because Downer had been unhappy that he had not been met personally in an official car on a visit to Santiago, and instead had to take a taxi. Downer denied this was the reason for Campbell’s recall, but as far as Julia was concerned, no Australian ambassador could have done more for her husband than Campbell.

The news of Bland’s accident had broken in Chile, and the first Hercules that flew into King George Island from Punta Arenas carried an enterprising freelance Chilean journalist in
search of the exclusive story. The base commander drew up hasty plans to keep him out of the hospital, but he still found his way in. Andy agreed to speak to him so long as he took no photographs of Bland, who was having his hip put back in place in the operating theatre at the time.

Arrangements were put in place to charter a Medivac aircraft for $50,000 to fly down to King George Island, collect Peter and take him to the military hospital at Punta Arenas. But the weather deteriorated the next day, preventing both the Medivac aircraft and the military Hercules from landing on the island. When the weather improved sufficiently the following day for the Hercules to fly in, with room for Bland on the return journey to Punta Arenas, the private Medivac charter was cancelled.

At Punta Arenas, Julia stood inside the barbed wire perimeter fencing with Olivia in her backpack as the Hercules roared down the runway and came to a halt nearby. A local journalist pushed a microphone into her face and she brushed him away, bracing herself for the first sight of her husband who was being carried down the back ramp of the plane on a stretcher. ‘He had a month’s growth of beard and he looked pretty scrawny, with these hollow looking eyes, which were still as blue as I remembered.’

Andy, whose condition had stabilised sufficiently for him to travel, and who had been on the same Hercules flight, gave Julia an enthusiastic wave before being grabbed by the consul and rushed off to catch a connecting flight to Santiago. As Julia climbed into the ambulance beside her husband, Andy shouted out one last greeting to his friend: ‘You’re a legend, mate.’

Bland was in no state to know why.
Chapter Twelve

THE AFTERMATH

This is about ordinary people doing extraordinary things, and the backlash it creates. – JULIA BLAND

JULIA BLAND WILL NEVER forget the clinical smell of the Chilean military hospital in Punta Arenas where her husband spent two weeks returning from the brink in February 2001. It is seared for ever in her memory, like the original call from Roger Wallis telling her Pete was in trouble; the frantic 48 hours preparing to fly to South America to see him; and the months of anger and adjustment in Melbourne as he came to terms with his brain injury, and the restraints it placed on his activities. She gradually learned to give voice to the resentment she felt at the anguish his single-minded adventuring had caused those who loved him most.

Bland’s slow awakening from his fall found him like a
groggy bear in a cage. His first return to consciousness was at the military hospital at King George Island. He woke up to find Andy Watson in the next bed, but he had no idea why he or Andy were there. He remained in a mental white-out similar to the climatic one that had enveloped him for so many days on the peninsula, and it frustrated him like hell. Andy told him he’d had a fall, he’d been rescued, and he was now in a Chilean hospital, but as he was saying it, he had no idea whether Bland understood what he was talking about. In his regressed state he was just able to scribble down on a piece of paper what he wanted to eat: jelly. Andy understood, even though the ‘e’ was written upside down.

Certainly Bland had no idea of the telephone conversations that had been going on around him, or of the plans to evacuate him. The only thing he was to remember later was the deafening vibration on board the Chilean military Hercules which eventually flew him out to Punta Arenas.

Before the ramp at the back of the Hercules opened, Andy adjusted Bland’s beanie to make sure that the sponsor’s MAB logo was visible for the assembled Australian and Chilean news crews. When he was carried off the plane, there was a woman on the tarmac he recognised as his wife, but he had no idea what she was doing there. ‘I knew this bad thing had happened to me, but I didn’t know what. The last thing I remembered was Jay and I abseiling down an ice cliff above Charcot Bay, and then there was my wife in Chile.’

Seeing Julia and Olivia brought Bland back from the void. ‘I needed her to give me a lifeline then, as I had in 1997, after my heart surgery.’ Julia was also fighting in her husband’s corner in the talkback radio debate that was going on back in Melbourne over whether Bland had been irresponsible to go
on the trip. Julia was heard defending Peter on the radio by close friends Charlie and Bina Read, who sent a fax of support to Punta Arenas. When Julia read it out to her husband in bed, tears began to trickle down his face. At last he was allowing out some of the suppressed emotion of the past seven days.

Julia was almost constantly on the phone, to family, sponsors, Foreign Affairs, the Alfred Hospital, and Tony Charlton over Pete’s future hospitalisation in Melbourne. Twice a day she trekked the two kilometres to the hospital with Olivia in her backpack, trying to amuse her young daughter by going ‘woof woof’ to each flea-bitten stray they encountered in the streets. What time was left she spent at the supermarket, trying to supplement Pete’s military hospital diet with fattening milk, cheese and chocolate. He had lost around nine kilos, or one tenth of his normal body weight. Even though he was impaired physically and mentally, he had lost none of his wilful determination, and he kept up pressure on Julia to get him out of the hospital and back to Melbourne.

‘Pete is, at best, an unwilling patient and, at worse, a cantankerous one. He could not register why he was hospitalised, due to his lack of ability to make judgements because of the head injury. He wanted to come back to the hotel with me for coffee or lunch and I must have had at least 40 discussions with him on the point. He couldn’t believe that they wouldn’t let him out for a quick lunch. It was very trying, and I was only just able to suppress my frustration at him being unable to comprehend why I would not escort him back to my hotel for lunch.’

He was straining to leave the hospital and go back to Melbourne, and at times almost had to be physically restrained
from walking out the hospital door. The pressure was on Julia to decide whether he was fit enough to fly, after taking into consideration the best advice she received from the Chilean doctors. Then another medical complication arose. After a week he developed an arm infection from all the needle jabs for intravenous injections, and his arm swelled up like a red, throbbing balloon.

In Melbourne, Stuart obtained quotes from Qantas to strip out three side rows of a Jumbo in case his brother needed to be flown home accompanied by a doctor, nurse and oxygen. The results of the CAT scan on Peter’s skull were emailed to specialists at the Alfred Hospital, and their reaction was unanimous: he was a lucky man to survive.

Julia barely recognised him as the man she had married four years earlier. ‘His speech was poor, and he didn’t even know Olivia’s name when he first landed in the plane – though he did know she was his daughter. Apart from his fractured skull and ribs, his feet were in pain from frostbite, and he would totter down the hospital corridor with his open surgical gown and walking frame. “Physio, physio, physio” was all he talked about. He wanted to get home, and the pressure from him was enormous.’

After two weeks Bland was considered well enough to move, and Julia paid the hospital bill of almost $3500. With Olivia in her backpack and her husband either hobbling on crutches or propped up in a wheelchair, she made for the airport for the domestic Chilean flight to Santiago. Bland was due to pick up a new passport from the Australian embassy, and his scrambled mental processes showed up in his diary entry for that day – the first time he had written in the diary since the night before the fall almost three weeks earlier.
‘Thurs 15: flew top santiago from Puenta Arenas
Discharge flew
It was great to be able to look around
‘Fri 16: we have our own driver we to pack up everywhere
they took me out to me get but passport photo taken. Took
a look toge time to walk awalk the rode. Jools took me bak to
hotel where I where.
Jools and I and ORB [Olivia Rose Bland] flew to Buenos
Aires 5 pm.’

At the departure terminal in Santiago the Australian ambas-
dador, John Campbell, again came to Julia’s rescue. They had
been delayed at the check-in counter for two hours over
whether they had the proper medical clearance papers to
allow Bland to travel. Julia took the brunt of her husband’s
pain and her child’s tiredness and frustration: ‘I had Olivia
screaming in my backpack and Pete screaming in his wheel-
chair, “Just get me on the plane.” I in turn was almost scream-
ing at the check-in person who was too scared to clear us
through to the boarding lounge because Peter looked so bad;
sitting hunched up in his wheelchair he could have passed for
a 70-year-old frail and ill man. After two hours of waiting,
just to load our bags on, I was almost ready to collapse on the
floor and have a tantrum of my very own.’ Eventually they
received clearance and boarded the one-hour flight to Buenos
Aires, where they were due to catch a connecting Qantas flight
to Melbourne.

Julia recalls things were no easier in Buenos Aires. ‘I was so
completely exhausted that I left the bags with the ground staff
in the middle of the terminal, even though it was known to
be one of South America’s most notorious airports for theft.
I couldn’t have cared less if they were stolen because I just
needed to get my husband somewhere to lie down and to give my daughter a breast-feed.

‘Pete was slumped in the wheelchair in his own world of pain, saying, “Can you get me to Qantas Club so I can lie down?” Olivia wouldn’t keep still for more than ten seconds, and eventually I found someone with a walkie-talkie who organised our bags to be checked in and got us into Qantas Club, where Pete threw himself on a seat and collapsed.’

The pain and swelling from the infection in Bland’s arm was so bad that at the transit stop in Auckland he sought the help of the airport doctor. The doctor said he should go straight to hospital in Auckland, for intravenous antibiotics, but Bland refused point blank. He was now only four hours from Melbourne, and nothing was going to stop him. A nurse gave him two ice packs to help with the pain on the flight to Australia. Qantas and Tony Charlton had done their best to get Peter and Julia upgraded, but the plane was so heavily booked that they flew economy from Auckland to Melbourne. Peter was in pain from his arm, his hip, his head and his swollen feet, and he sat wincing each time anyone brushed him. Julia, meanwhile, was trying to breast-feed Olivia in the aisle seat without knocking Peter’s swollen arm as she did so.

The three of them arrived at Melbourne’s Tullamarine airport early on the morning of Sunday 18 February. They were greeted at the door of the plane by Tony Charlton, who was ready with a wheelchair, and wanting to know what more he could do. Waiting in the arrival lounge were Peter’s mother and sister, Julia’s parents and the media, wanting to know how he felt. From the airport Bland transferred to the emergency department at the Alfred Hospital and, once he had been checked out, to the hospital trauma centre.
Four days earlier in an article in *Australian National Antarctic News*, Martin Betts had questioned the future of privately sponsored trips like Bland and Watson’s. ‘While the incident appears to have ended well in that Bland seems likely to make a full recovery, Australian authorities are concerned about many aspects of the planning and execution of the trip, and particularly that despite the concerns that they expressed prior to the expedition’s departure, they had little formal ability to ensure that program plans had been made in an appropriate, thorough manner.

‘The Australian national program intends to conduct a full review of the venture in order to ensure that they understand what happened, how it happened, and what steps are required to try and ensure that its nationals who are planning activities in Antarctica are fully and suitably prepared for the activity they propose to conduct.’

Bland and Watson thought the criticism was unfounded because it ignored their polar experience, and the preparation they had done. It was also based on incomplete information of what had happened, without talking to most of the participants. Things became worse when similar criticism appeared in the *Age* the day before Bland arrived home. Under the headline ‘Antarctic Adventurers May Get Official Cold Shoulder’, it suggested that the Australian authorities might in future crack down on private expeditions to Antarctica.

Bland was depressed and in no state to argue. He still had no memory of the fall and subsequent rescue, and struggled to speak or write coherently. He wrote in his diary: ‘We mood is swinging up and down. I do know that I am very lucky to be alive after that accident but it just seems so unfortunate that the accident had to haven’t. The doctor told me take I will not
be able to drive for 3 months because of my brain draggage.’

Surgeons operated on his left arm to remove a section of infected tissue the size of a 20-cent piece, which left a lasting scar, but the greater scar was mental. The brain injury left him irritable, tired and lethargic, where previously he had been irresistibly energetic. ‘I was in total denial. I hadn’t accepted that the energetic, can-do Peter Bland had become this tired, pissed off person. I couldn’t identify what I’d done, but I knew I’d let a lot of people down, and there was an enormous amount of hurt flying around.’

It was only when Jay came to visit him at the Alfred Hospital that he learned exactly what happened. He attempted to put on a positive front by suggesting that Jay should take video footage of him in his hospital bed to spice up the documentary of their trip.

The day before he was due to leave the Alfred Hospital he had been booked in to see the neuropsychologist, Dr Lina Forlano. He was determined to be in the best possible condition for the appointment, to make sure he didn’t stay in the hospital any longer, and to prove to himself he wasn’t as disabled as it seemed. He remembered the story of how Douglas Mawson, crawling to safety in Antarctica and exhausted after hauling himself out of a crevasse, had stripped off his clothes to get the restorative rays of the sun on his body. Bland walked across to Fawkner Park, opposite the hospital, and although he didn’t do the full Monty, he removed his shirt and thought positive, healthy thoughts.

Dr Forlano explained he had post-traumatic amnesia, or PTA. It is described as a period of disorientation, impaired attention, memory failure for day-to-day events, illusions and misidentification of family, friends and staff. Although no
single physical cause can be established, it is widely accepted that it results from a brain injury. Initially patients are in a state of internal confusion because psychological messages are scrambled. They may find it hard to concentrate, become agitated in response to external stimulation, have repetitious thoughts, and find their sleep disrupted. The period of recovery can take days, weeks or months. With recovery comes a return of awareness of self and others, and ultimately insight, judgement, the ability to plan realistically and to solve problems.

The doctor tested his cognitive functioning by asking him to do a series of tests. The simple ones he had no problems with, but when it came to placing cubes in a certain pattern, he was lost. Wanting to help, Dr Forlano leaned forward and asked: ‘Do you want a hint?’ An affronted but polite Bland, determined to complete the task unassisted (as with his trip across the Antarctic peninsula), looked at the specialist and said: ‘Can I give you a tip? Never, ever give me a hint.’ After struggling for a couple of minutes, he completed the puzzle.

The specialist told him he had ‘some cognitive issues’, another way of saying that he had an acquired brain injury. He was told not to drive; and that he might not be able to return to work for three to six months. ‘The reality was that I couldn’t remember people’s names; I couldn’t drive; the MS Society had put in a consultant to do my job; if I rang up directory inquiries for a phone number I couldn’t remember the number long enough to write it down; and when I got home I had to sleep for two hours in the middle of the day.’ The rest may have been enforced, but for the man raised on the tenet ‘time wasted can never be regained’ this represented a fundamental shift of personality.
The Aftermath

He hobbled around on crutches, sought help from a speech therapist, and started using tapes with exercises that helped improve his memory. The first milestone in his recovery was passed in March at the Perth wedding of his friend Justin Harty, who had been best man at Bland’s wedding in 1997. Harty asked him to read a passage from ‘The Desiderata’ at the ceremony, and he practised and practised to make sure he read it without mistakes. He did so, and a small measure of his confidence returned. The agents for his speaking engagements, International Celebrity Management, wanted him to perform at a function while he was in Perth, but he decided against it, on Julia’s advice. ‘Pete very much wanted to do the talk, but I was adamant that he should not do any public speaking engagements until I was sure of his judgement and ability to speak as himself, rather than someone who was sick and brain damaged. He didn’t agree with me, probably because his judgement was still affected, but he trusted me enough to let me decide for him. For his future talks in the corporate world, I wanted to make sure that when he did go back, he was fully recovered and 100 per cent right.’

There were other signs of progress. He had been warned that the accident would seriously affect his judgement, so it gave him a boost when he negotiated with two stock agents to sell some lambs. On the first day he was offered $41 a head, and by the end of the second day he had negotiated $53 a head from a second buyer. Triumphanty, he said to himself, ‘Who said there’s anything wrong with my judgement!’

By the end of March he was well enough to meet MS Society chief executive Lindsay McMillan for lunch to discuss a part-time return, but reality was again brought home when he went for another check-up at the Alfred Hospital and was
told that his return to work would take longer and be slower than he hoped. To protect his damaged hip he would have to stay on crutches for another month. ‘Me very depressed,’ he wrote. ‘Really how long this whole recovery is happening and how much effect is having on our life.’

His state of mind worsened after an article appeared in the Age attacking his trip. Under the headline ‘Trying to save the white wilderness from adventurers’, the first paragraph read:

“Explorers?” snapped the old Antarctic hand. “You can call them explorers if you like. I’d call them egotistical adventurers. It’s pathetic. A total pretence. It’ll be the first idiot bicycling across Antarctica next.”

The article said the rescue had been ‘complicated and expensive – especially for Chile, with about $100,000 in aircraft bills – and has prompted heartburn and anger in official Antarctic circles.’ It went on to say Bland and Watson had ignored advice to obtain insurance.

The article angered Bland, who was spending the weekend with friends at Lindenderry Guest House on the Mornington Peninsula when it appeared. On the way down in the car Julia telephoned Michael Venus, her friend at Channel Nine in Melbourne, to discuss the possibility of Pete and Jay defending themselves against the criticism on Sixty Minutes. Venus thought it would be a good move, and they considered contacting someone from the program. Bland’s black mood was reflected in his diary entry: ‘Mood pretty bad because of bad press and feel like my life is gone out of my control.’ The article also hurt Nigel Collins, John Kelsall and Andy Watson, who had risked their lives on the two-day climb to rescue Bland from the crevasse and take him down to a place where the Chilean helicopter could land. While the media continu-
ally talked about the $100,000 cost to Chile of the airlift, they said nothing about the team from the boat, and the fact that without them there would have been no rescue. Collins speaks for the others when he says: ‘Journalists have got to write a story, and do it quickly, but you’d hope for a bit more investigation. It was all about the Chileans mounting the rescue, and how it cost $100,000.’

Andy Watson says: ‘The Chileans were terrific, and they provided the helicopter. But we got Pete and took him to a safe landing spot. The whole of that peninsula came together to save Pete, and all you read about here was that it cost the Chileans $100,000. It was very upsetting to read the article, knowing the preparation Pete and Jay had done for the trip. We thought it was a cheap shot at them. Everything had gone well up to that moment, then they were hit by a freak of nature.’

Julia says: ‘I don’t know where that figure of $100,000 comes from – out of thin air, it appears. We paid for everything apart from the chopper ride to the base hospital and stretcher room on a Hercules supply plane that was making the trip back to Punta Arenas, anyway. By comparison, how much did it cost Channels Two, Seven, and Nine to fly from Melbourne to our farm to interview me twice in two days once the news broke of Pete’s accident? In any case, what’s the comparative cost of a life these days? It’s a matter of priorities.’

Bland felt he had not been given the chance to tell his side of the story: that the insurance costs for a trip like his were prohibitive and, instead of paying for a formal insurance policy, the crew on Tooluka had been his ‘insurance’. He felt he and Jay had prepared carefully and responsibly for the trip; and that when he was struck down by the avalanche it was
not a foreseeable hazard, but a piece of rank bad luck. He rang Channel Nine reporter Nick McCallum, whom he knew from the trip to the North Magnetic Pole, to seek advice about how best to get his story across. He explained he and Jay were thinking of contacting *Sixty Minutes*, and McCallum gave him the name of someone on the program. When contacted, the program was keen, and Bland began rehearsing his answers for *Sixty Minutes* in practice question and answer sessions with Nerida Crake.

He then turned to public relations executive Noel Turnbull, who had worked with Julia, for a second opinion on whether he should do the interview with *Sixty Minutes*. Turnbull advised against it. There was no way of guaranteeing the outcome Bland wanted, and it was likely to end up generating even more publicity, with the strong possibility that some of it would be bad. Bland decided to hold off, in the hope that the criticism would abate, and he would be able to tell his story at some later date.

Julia responded to the criticism by contacting the British Honorary Consul in Punta Arenas, John Rees, who had provided so much help while Bland was in hospital. She asked him to contact the Chilean authorities to find out how much Pete’s helicopter rescue had cost, so that she could pay them back. ‘There’s no need,’ said Rees, after consulting with General Trevinjo at the military air base. ‘The Chileans were happy to do it and saw it as part of their job to be good Antarctic neighbours.’

The tension in the Bland home was rising. Bland was constantly fatigued and Julia knew she would not get a word out of him after seven o’clock at night, such was his tiredness. The house was unrenovated, and he faced financial difficulties
because his income replacement insurance with the MS Society had been limited to only $8000 in the first six months of the year because of his history of heart surgery. He had thought about trying to raise the amount the policy allowed him before he left on the trip, but he put it off, subconsciously believing that nothing could ever happen to him. Far from basking in the celebrity and lucrative spin-offs of a successful Antarctic trip, he was now impoverished, brain-damaged, and increasingly worried about whether he would ever be able to work again. On 20 April 2001, almost three months after the accident, he wrote: ‘I am concerned about my mental capacity at the moment and whether I can do my job.’ He ended the brief entry by saying, ‘Fed cattle.’

At the farm, at least, he felt sure of himself and his capacities. For the first time since his father had bought it almost a quarter century before, it was now making a small amount of money, and he felt vindicated that the changes he had made to the stock and property management, which had so long been resisted by his father, were now paying off. The merino lambs had been replaced by fat lambs, the thistles had been killed off, and a new, enriched feed of rye grass and clover had been sown for the animals. ‘The farm was crucial to my recovery,’ he says. ‘It was something I knew, and could do well.’

He was less certain about how to deal with the anger he had created in those close to him with his decision to go to Antarctica, and the strain that his rescue had placed on everyone. ‘Mum thought she was having an invalid with brain damage coming home, and she thought her lot in life would be to look after me, unemployable and frustrated.’

Julia, who had previously given all her emotional attention
to getting him home, and healthy, began to feel increasingly angry. Her patience for his adventuring was running out, and she decided to seek counselling. ‘When we started our relationship we had an understanding and respect for each other that we wouldn’t stop each other from doing things. When you get married, you don’t become one person. But I was tired of seeing him off and having 50 million people asking questions about how I felt and why did I let him go.’

She saw two possible explanations for his accident: ‘To me, it’s hubris. He feels if you’re prepared, you can deal with everything the elements throw at you. But it might be that on the morning of the avalanche, typical hyperactive Pete Bland had ants in his pants, and had to go out of the tent to protect it.’

The mess around her in the unrenovated house compounded her unhappiness. ‘I was nauseous from being pregnant; I could smell dead rats in the roof; there was no skirting board, and so cold air used to blow in; there was a stone slab floor; and I wasn’t happy. For me it was rock bottom. I had closed off emotionally to let Pete go on the trip and now I had to open up again to let him back.’

Bland recognised his wife was unhappy. ‘She bottled it up by going out and walking round the paddocks. I was lost, and still trying to use my usual tools, that belief and willpower can overcome anything. She would say, “Can’t you see you nearly lost everything because of these trips?” but I wouldn’t recognise that the trips almost separated me from my wife and child, and had caused all this anger in the family.’

Bland’s elder sister Jo could laugh off the exasperation the rest of the family felt about Peter’s adventuring. ‘If he hadn’t died in the crevasse, we’d have killed him, anyway! Pete’s driven to prove he’s big enough, strong enough, tough enough. Why
would you have major heart surgery and then walk to the North Magnetic Pole? The Blands live a bit close to the edge, and to the limits of what our loved ones can tolerate. Dad pushed Mum to the limits of what was humanly possible and Pete probably pushes Jools to the limit. There’s no doubt someone upstairs is looking after Pete. Things like that don’t keep happening to people. I think the rest of us have this blind faith that he’ll be all right.’

Stuart took the view that ‘Pete is Pete’, and he was beyond trying to convince his younger brother that one day his adventurer’s luck would run out: ‘Pete believes preparation eliminates luck, and that if you wrap yourself up in cotton wool you’ll never achieve anything.’ Nor would he try and persuade him to take a less risky path in life. ‘Risk is in the eye of the beholder. What appears like risk to other people is not risk to him.’

Bland’s mother Jane was less philosophical about the mental torment that Pete’s trips had caused her. ‘I felt a lot of anger and hostility. For the first trip to South America I was full of prayerfulness that he would come back safe. I didn’t want to stop him, but I was very apprehensive. Then on the first trip across the Atlantic with Jay I felt apprehension not just for him, but the other person on board. Once he’d had the open-heart surgery I felt quite differently. I felt it was unnecessary and even foolhardy to subject his body to such extremes. On the North Pole trip there was that week when he was out of communication because conditions were so bad, and we didn’t know if he was dead or alive. It’s a bit like war wives: you get on, do your normal things, but it’s as though you’re on auto pilot. I felt unbelievable pride when he became the first Australian to the North Magnetic Pole. But subconsciously I
thought that was it, he had achieved his goal, and he would come home for good.’

He hadn’t come home for good, but his injuries were forcing him to reflect on the pleasures of home life, like resting on the sofa in the afternoon with Olivia asleep in his arms. He fought tiredness, and a visit to the specialist confirmed he still had some damage on the front left side of his brain, although he was allowed to start driving again. Four months on from the accident, he wrote: ‘I really, really wonder when I will get back to my old self.’

There were signs it was returning. He was full of grand ideas, even if he didn’t have the energy to put them into effect. For a while, until others pointed to the paramount need to rest, he contemplated spending his months of recuperation training polo ponies on the farm. Putting his marketing hat back on, he had Jay film him in Cabrini Hospital when he went in for an MRI scan of his brain to add some more drama to the documentary he was now trying to sell to a production company. In May, reverting to his Action Man persona, he started kayaking on the Yarra River at 6.30 am three mornings a week with his friends Stewart Collingwood and Richard Campbell. Julia thought he was mad to get up at 5.30 am when he was already suffering fatigue and sleep deprivation because of the effects of his acquired brain injury. But he persevered, believing that his tiredness would diminish as his physical fitness improved. To make allowances for his lack of strength, they placed rubber straps round the bows of their kayaks to slow them down, so Bland could keep up with them. Bland appreciated the gesture, even though it riled the competitor in him that one year earlier, before the accident, he had been the one to slow down his boat with a strap to give the others a chance.
He was seriously worried about his memory loss, and used the travelling time on the train from home to Melbourne to listen to tapes on memory improvement that he had obtained a couple of years earlier when the World Masters of Business brought their motivational talks to town. Each day he put on his Walkman tape recorder as the train left the station and he applied himself to learning the techniques, including a phonetic alphabet that acted as a spur to memory. His perseverance with the technique paid off, because at his next three-month review with the doctor at the Alfred Hospital he got twelve out of twelve in his test. When he was asked by the doctor to say the twelve items she had read out to him, he cheekily replied: ‘Do you want me to repeat them backwards or forwards?’

The specialist advised him he could return to work part-time in June, but, as usual, he took no notice, and followed his own self-dictated timetable, starting again in late April. Nor would he accept the medical advice that in brain accidents such as he had suffered, it usually took eight years for the neurones to regrow. ‘I didn’t accept the quote,’ he says. ‘That wasn’t good enough for me.’ He took the view that, like a rider thrown from a horse, the sooner he remounted the better. He had to confront his fear, just as his father confronted his need to prove himself by taking up boxing.

Bland had two fears: that he no longer had the old drive and self-belief, and that people would think of him as a lesser man because of the accident. There were echoes of the fear he felt as an eight-year-old boy with a 15-centimetre scar down his chest, wondering what the other boys would think of him.

When he saw MS Society chief executive Lindsay McMillan to discuss his return to work program, it was agreed...
he would return in a new role as the capital appeal manager for the Nerve Centre, the organisation’s new headquarters at Blackburn in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs. In this role he would not have staff to manage and it would allow him to work the four-day week he wanted, to give him more time at home with Julia and Olivia. The goal, almost as ambitious as Bland’s two-man crossing of the Antarctic peninsula, was to raise $7.5 million between 1 July 2001 and 30 June 2002. It required Bland, bold as brass, to front up to captains of industry, financial sector titans and government ministers, asking for sizeable donations for multiple sclerosis.

‘I’ll never forget going back to work. I was so fearful, and this was supposedly the man with no fear. The thing that worried me was losing face to people I had employed. I couldn’t even remember some of their names, and that made me so angry.’ After two trips to Antarctica, one to the North Magnetic Pole, and various voyages around the world, he still felt impelled to prove himself to others, including his dead father.

‘What people think does matter. Everything I’ve done I’ve been constantly trying to prove myself. I was afraid that when I went back to work my reputation would be lessened; I would be looked on as a lesser person because of the brain damage, and it would give ammunition to those people who said, “We always said it would happen to you eventually.” My attitude was, yes, eventually you can be knocked down walking down the street in Melbourne. So live life to the full, because you never know what will happen tomorrow.’

Not only did he have to regenerate neurones; he had to regenerate his self-belief. Amidst all the criticism of him going to Antarctica, he had to rediscover the belief that he had been
right to back himself. And he had to prove to himself that he was still capable of following through on an undertaking, ‘and that what I say I’m going to do, I do’. He took heart from the words of Olympic sprint champion and MS sufferer Betty Cuthbert that: ‘You cannot move on without acceptance.’ ‘I had to accept I had brain damage, and that my judgement and memory were affected. I had to reinvent myself, and work on it, and work on it. That’s why I wanted to raise the $7.5 million for the MS Society, to prove I could still do it.’

In June he and Julia threw a thank-you party for the crew from Tooluka who had rescued him. The trauma of his accident had not had the effect of deterring any of the crew members from returning to Antarctica. Quite the opposite, the trip gave everyone a heightened desire to return. Wallis, who had played the key role in organising the outside assistance, was back in Antarctica within months, but with an enhanced consciousness of human vulnerability in the face of all-powerful nature. ‘Pete’s accident made me realise the elements control everything down there, including the shipping. No matter how young or fit you are, you are never fully in control. Pete was lucky he survived and the next person may not be so lucky. I continue to go because I feel I understand it, and it’s a calculated risk, rather than a foolhardy risk. You’ve got to know whether you’re taking acceptable or unacceptable risks.’

McAuley, the artist, was inspired by the landscape. He produced a collection of paintings from the trip that was exhibited in a Sydney gallery. As an abstract painter, he had been struck how close the Antarctic landscape, with its blocks of blues and whites and blacks, was to abstract art. The canvases reflected the alternating faces of Antarctica: pretty...
one moment, menacing the next. He called one of his Antarctic paintings ‘Between A Rock and A Hard Place’. Another, ‘Silver Lining’, was a piece of Gothic horror, with blue ice cliffs rising into mountains covered in swirling cloud.

‘It’s the most remarkable place on earth. The first time you go, you’re in awe, and the second and third times you start to take it in. Everyone I’ve spoken to who’s been to Antarctica wants to go back. I’m not religious, but this was God-like. I wish more artists and writers went down there, rather than scientists, because it would explain things better.’

Nor could McAuley bring himself to condemn Bland for going on the trip, against the advice and wishes of government and family. ‘Peter and Jay are doing things humans are meant to do – pushing boundaries. Today governments tell you what to do. In Antarctica common sense tells you what to do. They remind me of what it is to be a human, and what we’re about.’

For Devine, it was the challenge of survival in an alien but beautiful landscape: ‘The draw of the ice is more seductive than being at home in a safe environment, knowing exactly what you’re doing from day to day. You know what’s round the corner, and in Antarctica you don’t. It focuses your mind in a different way. When I went there I had a good job, nice family, not a lot of drama in my life. That’s why it was so attractive, because it was less predictable. When I came back I felt I could do anything I put my mind to. I could face risks or challenges that I might be scared about, and enjoy them.’

Andy Watson reflected on how the bond with his younger brother was strengthened by the experience of overcoming a heart condition, ice, snow, wind and potentially fatal avalanches and crevasses to reach him and Peter. ‘We’ve got this
extraordinary bond now. Nothing’s said, but we know we’ve been through something extraordinary together.’

Nigel Collins had tingling fingers for a month afterwards, and the skin eventually peeled off from frost nip, the precursor to frostbite. He was left in awe of Bland’s survival, and the Antarctic landscape. ‘If something needed doing requiring strength and determination, you couldn’t do better than Pete,’ he says. ‘It’s almost a blind strength.’

Kelsall, leader of the three-man team that rescued Bland from the bottom of the crevasse, believed that the risk undertaken by Bland and Watson was ‘very high, but I don’t think it was that outrageous’. Like Wallis, he came away with increased respect for Antarctica – not only because of what had happened to Bland, but because of an experience after he left the rest of the crew. After returning to Ushuaia he bumped into the skipper of a Norwegian 15-metre steel sloop who asked him if he would like to join the crew sailing to the Falkland Islands. When they reached the Falklands they heard about an Antarctic cruise ship that had been sailing from South Georgia to Rio de Janeiro. One hundred and fifty miles north-west of South Georgia the ship was caught in a storm and a wave lashed over the bridge, knocking out the ship’s electronics and stopping the engine. The ship was marooned in high seas until a British supply ship came to the rescue. For Kelsall, the moral of the story was: ‘You challenge Antarctica at your own peril.’

Jay Watson, the hero of the rescue, had a similar attitude: ‘I go feeling I have to be incredibly cautious, and respectful of the environment.’ But the continent’s attraction was undimmed for him. ‘It’s one of the few last untouched areas, with the potential to stay like that, and its wildness adds to
its attraction. I learned so much more about myself than I do here, and I found that I dealt with an extreme situation pretty well. I didn’t come back thinking, I’m never going again. It was just an incredibly unfortunate accident and it hasn’t lessened my enthusiasm.’

In the mind of Stuart Bland, that was an understatement: ‘If Jay Watson isn’t worthy of some bravery award for this, then no-one is. He went down into the crevasse and stayed with Pete for 40 hours and he could have been buried by ice at any time. He was extraordinary.’ The Bland brothers subsequently nominated Watson for an Australian bravery award.

The reunion celebration at the farm marked the halfway point in Bland’s long struggle back to normal functioning. He started back at work four days a week in July. The task was to raise $7.5 million for the new MS building in Blackburn, and his first job was to reconvene a committee of high-profile corporate executives who had agreed to help with the fundraising. The day before the first meeting of the committee, chaired by TABCORP chief executive Ross Wilson, he returned to the speech therapist at Bethesda Hospital for help with his speaking techniques and to make sure he did not forget his lines. He approached his goal of raising $7.5 million with the same unflinching determination he had shown in crossing the Antarctic peninsula. By midway through 2002 he had helped raise $7.9 million.

He was also back on the public speaking circuit. His first talk was to Australia Post management, and he was heartened by his performance. ‘Absolutely the best talk I have given. Why? Because it was honest and I told the not-so-good facts as well as the good.’ The brain injury had done nothing to restrict his vision or ambition, and he ended his diary entry:
'I want to be the best public speaker in Australia.'

Not so long after this, Bland’s desire to be the best at everything he tackled came up at a dinner with Robert Knight, Julia’s father. The conversation drifted to Bland’s physical and mental restlessness and Knight suggested he try meditating to slow himself down. ‘Right,’ replied Bland, ‘who’s the world meditation champion – and how did they do it?’

‘You can’t be the best at everything,’ said Knight. ‘Your mind is a raging bull. What you should do is find a way of taming the raging bull.’ Knight showed him a technique where he concentrated on the inward and outward breath, and associated a mantra with each. Bland took it up, visualising himself patting the bull’s chest on the inward breath, and stroking the back of the bull’s neck on the outward breath. Sometimes he ended the meditation session by visualising the bull going to sleep on his lap.

In September 2001, as his improvement continued, he was asked to speak at a centenary celebration for the creation of the Australian flag at the Australian Maritime Museum in Sydney. On his journey to the North Magnetic Pole in 1998 Bland had carried Sir Douglas Mawson’s original flag, and he explained to the audience, including John Vaughan, president of the Australian National Flag Association, that on that trip to the pole, weight had been critical. ‘Mawson’s flag weighed approximately 300 grams, which was the equivalent of two spoons of sugar that I chose not to carry each day. But I chose to carry the Australian flag because I felt no amount of sugar could give me the same energy and inspiration as carrying the Australian flag.’

He ended his talk by explaining that nine months earlier in Antarctica he had fallen 40 metres down into the crevasse
A STEP TOO FAR

— almost ten metres more than the height of the Australian flagpole rising next to him. The audience craned their necks to see the height of the flagpole — and gasped.

A month later, Bland went on holiday to Port Douglas without any accompanying sports equipment — for the first time in his life. All he did was relax and look after his daughter, Olivia. Partly he was compensating for the effects of chronic fatigue brought on by the accident, but Julia also saw signs that her husband was mellowing: ‘Pete is more aware of how satisfying it can be at home, and that there are other ways to get your adrenaline rushes. So there’s a lot to be said about good coming out of bad. Sometimes these things bring you closer together. If any good has come out of the accident it’s that we’ve had to regroup and have a really good look at each other and what we want. Those sorts of experiences are very testing to a relationship.

‘I’m very aware Pete’s an adrenaline-driven person and I will support him if he wants to do some other sport. I’m happy for him to play polo, or sail. It took me twelve months to get my husband back. I had this grumpy, annoyed person to deal with. He was like superman before and now he’s just a mere mortal. He’s got nothing to prove to his friends; he’s got nothing to prove to me; but he’s got this extraordinary energy.

‘He’ll always be an adventurer, and if he wants to do the odd thing on his own, I’m reconciled to that. But I’m not about to support him doing something as dangerous as he did last time. I would walk away if he said to me he was going to do that trip again. It’s not worth the risk to me. I’d never want to tame Peter Bland, because he’s been such an extraordinary person, but I think there are other things he can do that are
just as challenging. Our goal would be to have adventures together as a family.

‘But Peter Bland’s image of Peter Bland The Adventurer will be a hard one for Peter Bland The Realist to put to bed. It’s something that he loves – to be the adventurer. But I think if push came to shove, he would choose his family and adventuring with them in a more toned-down fashion than going off and doing something really dangerous.’

The accident had forced Bland to learn to sit still. Suddenly, like most other people, he started enjoying a lie-in at the weekend. ‘I love my mornings in bed,’ he wrote in his diary. ‘Ever since we moved this bed into the corner with the view of my mountain [Mount Macedon]. I could never get sick of looking at that view.’

Despite reflective mornings in bed, and his best efforts at meditation, his imagination continued to dream great dreams. He has made a habit of writing his long-term goals for the year at the beginning of each year’s diary. In January 2001, as he sat in the tent with Jay Watson during the early days of the trip across the Antarctic peninsula, he assembled his list of goals for the year: sports car; beach house; greater involvement with the Buxton family in property development; yacht; share portfolio; success at work. He repeated his mantra to himself: ‘If you’re going to be alive, you might as well live.’

Twelve months later he had achieved several of those goals: he had bought an apartment in Melbourne’s Docklands from the Buxton company. He had also set up his own company, Polar Group Australia Pty Limited, to handle all his business interests, his public speaking was taking off and he was promoting all this through his website www.polargroup.net.
He didn’t have a sports car or a yacht, but he had begun planning to enter the double-handed 2003 Melbourne to Osaka yacht race with Simon Kellett. And he had completed and exceeded his set task of raising $7.5 million for the MS Society. The fire of ambition burned as brightly as ever, even if he had slightly less energy with which to fuel it. He had overcome the worst effects of the brain injury, and the enforced lay-off had made him reassess the way he did things. ‘I have changed. I’ve become even more aware that time wasted can never be regained, because the time it takes me to do a task is so much greater. But it has made me so much more resourceful, and more willing to let go and recognise I can’t do everything. I’ve recognised how I tire not only myself, but how I tire my family.’

He recognised something else: that there might, after all, be such a thing as luck. For years he had debated with his brother Stuart about the concept of luck, and denied the existence of any such thing. His sister Jo had sometimes ventured the opinion that Pete had been lucky in life, but Pete rejected the notion absolutely. Bland’s view was that there is no such thing as good luck: you made your own good luck through careful preparation and determined execution. He used to say that luck is where opportunity meets preparation. He did not believe, as some others did, that he had been chancing his luck for years with all these expeditions, and finally his luck had run out. Nor did he believe in the concept of destiny, as a place you are drawn to by some mysterious force. ‘Destiny isn’t somewhere you get by chance; you get there by choice.’ So, for his fortieth birthday in 2008, he was already planning to sail round the world with Julia and his children.

But life experiences had now forced him to concede that
there was such a thing as bad luck, though, stubborn to the end, he preferred not to describe it in those words. ‘I’ve learned two things,’ he said. ‘The first is that “shit happens”. No amount of kidding yourself about preparation and research will protect you completely. The second is that “timing sucks”. If you accept both of those, you might be more conscious of the need for safety nets, like insurance.’

He also recognised he was exceptionally fortunate to have a friend like Jay Watson. He lived daily with the debt he owed his friend for saving his life, and wondered how he would ever repay it. It caused him to contemplate the difference between the two of them – Jay, the quintessential quiet achiever, and himself, who believed you had to make a loud noise to make yourself heard. The loudness was a means to the end of achieving his goals.

‘A lot of me wants to be like Jay, not the grandstanding, commercial creature I am. But I’ve never been very happy to be the quiet achiever. I’m an opportunist, and if you don’t go up there and sing it out, cock-a-doodle, you limit your potential. I will not be an impoverished adventurer sticking to the purist principles of just being there. It’s like I always say, “the squeaky wheel gets the oil”. I totally recognise I’m not the most talented guy around. My number-one skill set, which I hope to pass on to my children, is determination and belief.’

On 14 January 2002 Julia gave birth to their second child, Angus Jay Robert Bland. Peter turned his attention fully to fatherhood, as he weighed up the lessons of the accident. ‘It’s been a bad experience, so the important thing is to derive some good from it. I’ve learned the most important thing is my wife and family, and before the trip perhaps that wasn’t the case. I shouldn’t be measured by the time I spend with them, but the
kind of person I am when I’m with them. I’m so easily bored, and I am most satisfied when I have a challenge.

‘I’m still going back to Antarctica. I love the cold that pierces so far into your lungs that it hurts when you breathe; I love your glasses fogging up in the cold; I love spilling a sip of liquid so that the freeze goes off the metal cup, and you don’t crack your lips. People will say it’s a scary place and you shouldn’t go there because you could kill yourself, but I don’t accept that because you can get killed anywhere. I feel very comfortable in Antarctica. At least you know who the enemy is out there – the elements – and you don’t always know who or what the enemy is here. The only change is that I’m a bit more aware of what can happen down there.

‘I’m aware of the hurt I’ve caused a lot of people, and it’s something I’ve carried every day since the accident. If I don’t return to Antarctica that would be tantamount to saying Antarctica caused the hurt and that those who know so much less than me about Antarctica are correct in assuming that one increases the risk of premature death by visiting the region. If you go inexperienced and unprepared, it is dangerous. It’s not so much that I’m fearless, but I refuse to be restrained by self-limitations. I think I value life more than the average person and that’s why I want to live every moment.’

Bland didn’t fear for his own life, but he did fear for that of his newly born son. Three days after Angus was born the family’s paediatrician, Dr Robert Sloane, picked up a heart murmur during a routine examination. Family medical history was repeating itself; just as the young Peter Bland had been diagnosed with a heart condition, so was his son, thirty years later. Further tests at the Royal Children’s Hospital confirmed that Angus had not just one but two holes in his heart. He
had a serious ventricular septal defect, located next to the aortic valve, which would need careful monitoring over the ensuing weeks. The possibility of an operation loomed. Despite the fact that the director of cardiology, Dr Dan Penny, said the condition was not congenital, Bland was not convinced. He had had heart operations, and his father had had heart operations. It was no mystery to him where the gene had come from.

But he struggled to accept what was happening to his son. A taxi driver did his best to console him and Julia on their way to a hospital appointment: ‘Mate, it’s a bit like Saint Francis of Assisi. You know, God grant me the courage to change what I can, the grace to accept what I can’t, and the wisdom to recognise the difference.’ Bland was doing all right on the first two parts of the prayer, but was still battling with the last part.

When Angus reached six months of age the operation could be put off no longer. Both the cardiologist, Dr Penny, and the surgeon, Christian Brizzard, agreed Angus needed surgery. Once that was established, Bland’s first inquiry was whether the operation could be performed without scarring his son’s chest in the way he felt he himself had been disfigured when he had heart surgery as a child. Scarring could not be avoided, he was told.

Walking out of the hospital, Julia was devastated. ‘We stood in the car park and I could not stop crying. I couldn’t keep getting bad news about the people I loved – my husband, then my child. It felt as though the hits just kept coming. I had no fight left in me, none of the strength of mind required to be brave. I was sick of being brave. I was just very tired. If there was an ultimate low point in my life, then that was it.’
Bland found himself thinking back to his mother's reaction when she heard he would need major heart surgery to repair his aneurysm: if only he could have the operation, instead of his baby son. Looking up to the Great Creator, he muttered: 'You want to pick a fight? Then pick it with me!' Bland’s anger made him even more determined to try and get the best out of a bad situation by planning ahead how they might use Angus’s story to help support the Australian Children’s Heart Research Centre.

Bland and Julia forced themselves to think forward to the next stage. Having listened to the intricacies of the operation, Bland had only one question to ask the doctors: ‘When can Angus fly?’ After months of dealing with neurologists, surgeons, speech therapists, cardiologists and physiotherapists, he wanted to take his family on a holiday. ‘It was time to move on and celebrate and start living life to the fullest again.’

As they approached the operation, the great consolation for Julia was that this time she wasn’t facing emotional anguish alone. For once, Julia and Peter were rocking in the same boat. ‘I was so relieved that I had someone to worry alongside me, someone to draw strength from. And we did give strength to each other. Handing Angus, in his little blue gown, over to the anaesthetist before the operation was the hardest thing we have ever had to do, but we did it together.’

Angus Bland, already showing signs of his father’s mighty physical constitution, emerged from the operation in fine health, even though he had the same vertical scar down his chest that had so embarrassed his father twenty-five years before. Bland senior was quick to have a photograph taken of him and his son, showing their identical scars, for a fund-raising mail-out by the Heart Foundation. Once again, Bland
had demonstrated his determination to convert negative energy into something positive.

He had lost none of his front. Early in 2002 he was asked to audition for the position of new host for the *Sale of the Century* television show. He jumped at the chance, because it might take him closer to that fortieth birthday goal of owning a yacht and sailing round the world. Although he did not get the job, he turned the situation to his advantage. He began subsequent public speaking engagements by commenting on his pride at being shortlisted to host a television quiz show just twelve months after he was seeing a speech therapist to overcome his brain injury. ‘It’s not just what you achieve in life,’ he tells his audience, ‘it’s also what you overcome.’

He had also taken up boxing. Just as his father used to visit his city gym in lunchtime breaks as a barrister, so Peter now visits the boxing gym just round the corner from his office each lunchtime. ‘I’m not trying to prove I’m a man, or anything like that. I’ve wanted to box for years. It’s very skilled, and the fitness required is phenomenal.’ Murray, the gym trainer, has taken to his new stable member. ‘I like you,’ he said to Bland, ‘you’re so positive.’

At the lunch for all the Antarctic trip members held at the farm midway through 2001, as Bland was still working to overcome his brain injury, he thanked everyone for their role in keeping him alive. But he was also heard to say that his greatest regret was not the accident, but the fact that he hadn’t been able to complete the trip. Still driven after all these years, he hadn’t yet grasped just how close he had come to the brink in that crevasse in Antarctica.
Postscript

A MOTHER’S PRIDE AND HEARTACHE

The letter below was sent by Andy and Jay Watson’s mother Wendy to Peter Bland in Melbourne near the end of his recovery from his accident in Antarctica:

Dear Peter,

Friends often ask me how I feel about Jay going on these expeditions and do I worry about him when he is away on one of his adventures. I have to say that I do think of Jay day and night whilst he is gone. He is never far from my heart or my mind. I try to imagine where he might be as I follow his maps – what conditions he may be encountering, whether the
weather is being kind to him. Maybe it is cold, bleak and the wind fierce, or perhaps it is one of those magical sunny days that Antarctica can produce during the summer months. I try hard not to worry but as a mother it is sometimes a little difficult! I do have enormous confidence in Jay and what he does, knowing the meticulous research, preparation and care he goes through before each trip. I admire very much his adventurous spirit, determination and his skills, his belief in himself and the courage he has to follow his heart and his dreams. He always goes with my full support and admiration for his love of adventure and his will to succeed. He is always keen to learn all that he possibly can and is determined to do all he can to protect the environment and the wildlife of Antarctica for which he has the greatest love and respect.

I know deep down that accidents such as happened to you can occur no matter how knowledgeable or careful one can be and when Annie Wallis phoned to tell me the awful news my heart just sank to the deepest depths. I felt so alone and helpless. I wandered around the house and garden in circles not knowing what to do.

I phoned Jane and Julia. Together we talked through our tears, trying hard to remain positive and full of hope, not really knowing at this time just how badly you were injured and what the eventual outcome would be.

Andy’s beloved dog [a blue heeler called Rosebud] and I walked along the beach where we live. We climbed the cliff and sat close together overlooking the sea, thinking desperately of Jay and the others thousands of miles away across the sea in the cold and ice trying so hard to rescue their dear friend. Bud always knew when I was sad or worried. She sat very close to me that day and put her paw on my lap knowing,
I’m sure, that something was dreadfully wrong. I sat thinking for a long time of you lying injured at the bottom of the crevasse, of Jay trying so hard to keep you alive, of Andy, John and Nigel as they trekked, climbed and crawled through the ice and blizzard conditions to reach the accident site. I thought of Roger, Mitch and Philippa waiting anxiously on the yacht, continually on the radio supporting the boys and helping to organise the rescue. I thought of Julia, Jane and your family and their anguish as they waited for news. My thoughts, too, were of Annie at home in Lakes Entrance faithfully waiting for messages and news from Roger, and then passing them on to all of us as soon as she possibly could.

I did not know at the time how ill Andy was and what an enormous struggle it must have been for him to reach Jay. I do know that Andy would do anything to help his brother and to rescue a friend, no matter what the cost to himself. As brothers Andy and Jay are extremely close and are very dear and special friends. They would give everything to rescue a friend and I know that you would not have hesitated to do exactly the same for them.

I personally could burst with the love and the pride I feel for my boys. I do wish so much that Andy and Jay’s father Clive could share this with me. He was always so proud of his sons and their achievements. He, like me, I know, would be so very grateful and thankful that Jay and Andy could do their special bit to help safely rescue you.

What Jay must have gone through at this time I can only imagine. The fear, anxiety and desperation must have been terrible as he saw his dear friend lying injured at the bottom of the crevasse and he struggled so hard to keep you warm, safe and alive until help came. I admire so much his courage,
strength and determination, his positive attitude and ability to stay calm and focused in the face of such enormous danger.

So many people at this time were such a wonderful support to us all at home. Their reassuring and comforting voices on the phone I shall always remember. Your brother Stuart was always there for me. Foreign Affairs in Canberra and the Australian Embassy in Chile would phone me often, day and night, with any news of the boys. Dear friends of mine and the boys kept constantly in touch. To all these people I owe my sincere thanks and gratitude.

I have this feeling that I desperately would like to go myself to Antarctica (not quite the same way that Jay travels but perhaps on a nice cruise ship!) to see for myself a little of the beautiful and forbidding land that is so much part of Jay’s life.

Jay’s love, respect and passion for Antarctica is such that I know he will continue to return as he has already done so. He will continue to study, and to help protect the environment of this fragile land and the surrounding seas. He will no doubt climb more mountains and continue to explore the unknown. He will capture on his camera, sketch in his little book and write in his diary of this incredible land and its wildlife which he loves so much.

I do feel such joy when I see you now looking so well and happy. My ultimate joy is to see you, Jay and Andy together knowing that all is well and that this story has a happy ending.

Melbourne, May 2002
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FOR A LIFE AND RESCUE

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I have very little memory of the rescue and my immediate recovery so I have had to rely heavily on my friend Andy Watson, who accompanied me to the hospital. I would like to thank: all those from Chile’s Eduardo Frei military base on King George Island, and particularly Commander Juan Carlos Basconan; doctors Miguel and Sara Gattica, who worked round the clock to stabilise my condition; nurses Marco Godoy and Darwin Fernando Reyes Astudillo; and Captain Carlos
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I’m eternally grateful to the former Australian ambassador to Chile, John Campbell, and the former head consul, Tanya Grubic, who both worked long, late and hard to coordinate not only my rescue but also my wife and daughter’s arduous journey to my side, and our eventual journey home together. Roland Pocock, in the Foreign Affairs Consular Office, Canberra, liaised with dedication, kindness and sensitivity. Martin Betts, then with the Australian Antarctic Division, spent a whole weekend on the phone and email trying to kick-start the rescue here and in Chile.

I remember little of the hospital in Punta Arenas, after I’d made it off King George Island, but Julia and I thank the staff of the Grujano Guzman hospital, and in particular Dr Mauricio, neurosurgeon Dr Hernan Rebolledo Berrios and trauma specialist Dr Sandra del Rio Ferretti. General Patricio Trevinjo made space available on the Hercules that flew me to safety and was behind all the Chilean military assistance in Punta Arenas.

Once I got home to Melbourne, the Alfred Hospital took very good care of me. Thanks to Associate Professor Mark Fitzgerald, director of Emergency Services; Dr Michael Walsh, chief executive of Bayside Health; and everyone from the trauma ward.

The children of Solway Primary School sent faxes of support, and countless friends wrote, rang and emailed. It made and continues to make the difference.

Wendy Watson, your letter sums it all up.

Peter Bland, September 2002
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