

Transcript: SEE International interview with Col. John Blashford-Snell

Q: So how exactly did you get in touch with Harry Brown in the first place?

A: Well, I was in California, promoting Operation Raleigh and Operation Drake, which the Prince of Wales was the patron of. The Prince of Wales had a reception at the Annenberg Ranch at Rancho Mirage in California. But while I was in California, friends of mine introduced me to Harry and his then-wife, and we got talking about SEE International and what they did. And I met up with one or two of their people and so I invited them to come along on the expeditions and start doing the operations for cataract and pterygia.

Q: Is that why you were in the Congo, or was that a separate thing?

A: No, no, this was when we were going around the world with Operation Raleigh and Operation Drake, Prince Charles headed up these organizations to take young people of all nations on an assignment. The youngsters had to be 17-25, fit, compatible, able to speak English, swim, and have qualities of leadership. The idea was for them to come with us for three months and then come back home, wherever they lived, and do some good for the people there. And thankfully, many of them did. In the end, I think something like 40,000 have been through the program now.

We chose the name "Drake" because the first one ran on the anniversary of Drake's circumnavigation of the Earth. He sailed around- he was the first sea captain to circumnavigate the world, because Magellan, who had gone before, had died on the way. His ship got back, he didn't. Drake made it all the way around, from 1577 to 1580. So our operation was on the 400th anniversary. And then, when that was a success, the Prince wanted to do it again, so Operation Raleigh was born. That sailed in 1984, and commemorated the founding of the first English speaking colony in North America on Roanoke island, in what is now North Carolina.

Q: But your expedition had a much better fate, I think, than the Roanoke expedition did!

A: Yes, it did, we largely survived. Anyway, that was how it came about. And the first time Harry and his team came with us, was to Panama. There I met up with one of his nurses, called Paul Hershel, who still lives in California. She was a tremendous enthusiast who came on many, many expeditions with us. It was only through her, recently, the other day that I met Randal [Avolio][link]. She met Randal at a SEE International meeting, and said, "If you're going to London, please would you take this book to John?" She sent me a book about Prince Charles, which I got.

Q: When you were in Panama, where exactly was this? It wasn't in the Darien Gap, was it?

A: We were working in the Darien Gap, yes. We set up clinics, and the young people [from Operation Raleigh] were sent into the jungle, with doctors, to find possible patients for Harry. And then of course because they couldn't see, they had to be convinced that if they followed these young people - or were led by these young people, because they were blind - then they would eventually get to a clinic where their eyes wouldn't be taken out. And of course, these people didn't speak English, so you had to convince them, in a foreign language, to trust them. We had to lead these blind people through the forest, to the clinic that Harry and his team set up, and sure enough, cataracts were removed, and they got their sight back. So this was a tremendous step forward, and when they got their sight back, of course, they didn't know where they had come from! So the young people then had to lead them back through the jungle, to their homes.

Q: Because there are no highways there or anything, right?

A: No, not at the time, there was nothing. And they were coming from remote villages in the Darien Gap.

Q: That's fascinating. Was the clinic in La Palma [the only major town in the Darien Gap], or outside the Gap itself?

A: No, I think it - I can't remember - the first one, I think, was in a place called Yaviza. That's where the clinic was, I think. And the villages were scattered throughout the gap.

Q: And you could only get to them by foot?

A: Yes, usually. I mean, one or two may have been gotten by helicopter, if we could get a helicopter in. But most came by foot.

Q: Well, that sounds like it was quite a trip, then!

A: It was. And then we went on from there. And then the next one, I think, was in Chile in South America. And the people there were extremely grateful. I remember, a lady came in to be checked, and she was wearing glasses. So she had some sight. And Harry said, "May I have a look at your glasses?" And he took them off, and noticed that the glasses had no glass in them! And he asked, "How do these glasses help you? They've got no glass in them!" And she said, "I know, I just wear the frames, it's all the fashion here!"

Q: (laughter) Everybody's fashion-conscious in one way or another.

A: The next one, as I remember, was Papua New Guinea, and Harry and his team came in, and we set up a clinic down on the south side of the island, near the Fly River. One morning, I was there when the surgeon was looking at the patients who had been operated on the day before. There was a young lad who had been operated on, who had been blind since birth. He had never seen. In the morning, the surgeon took off the bandages, and stood in front of the boy and put his hand out, and said, "Can you see my hand?" The boy nodded. And then he looked for an object a little farther away, and there was one of our girls, a fairly large girl, standing at the end of the bed. She was wearing a green sort of nurse's uniform - she wasn't a nurse - and the doctor asked the patient, "Can you see that girl?" And the girl waved to him. And there was a silence, and then the boy said, "Oh, so YOU are a girl?" She was standing beside him with a look on her face that said, "You could've fooled me, copper!"

Q: (laughter) "And you're going to be chasing these for all your life, my son!"

A: The greatest event, though, was in Mongolia. We had one of our climbers, who was a world-renowned climber, had an accident on a mountain on the border with China. A rock fell on his leg and squashed it and broke it in six places. There he was, right up at about 30,000 feet, up in the snow, and he had to be rescued. And the only way to go in was helicopter. Well, there were no helicopters to speak of in Mongolia. So I called the British Embassy in Ulan Baatar, and the ambassador said he would do what he could. He managed to find a Mil-8 which was a Soviet helicopter.

The only thing is, it hasn't got a lot of fuel. So the Mil-8 flew over and when it landed in Hovd, which is where we were based, the engine cut out and the pilot said, "I have no more fuel." Very luckily, Harry and his team had operated the previous week on some people in the town and one of these people was the mother of the governor. He restored her sight, so the governor was so grateful that he gave us the entire reserve of helicopter fuel that he had in the town. So with that, the helicopter managed to get up into the mountains. But when it got there,

the poor unfortunate climber was in a tent. The doctors jumped out, and to their horror, the helicopter flew away!

Q: Oh no!

A: And went down into China! So they were left up in the mountain, with their clothes and tent but nothing much else. Anyway, they got the patient out, gave him some morphine, prepared him, and then very luckily, the helicopter came back. (inaudible) and he didn't turn off its rotors. They put the patient in the back and would like to have asked the pilot, "What the hell are you doing," but he didn't speak English. And then to their horror, the chap flew back into China! And when he landed, he kept his engines running. The pilot and the crew got out, and under a rock, they'd hidden their batteries. They loaded the batteries back onto the helicopter, while the engine was still running. To reduce the weight of the helicopter, they'd flown down to China, taken their batteries off, and then taken (inaudible) back up the mountain and picking up the patient and the team. And with that, they eventually got back into Mongolia. As they landed on a nearby strip, once again the engine cut out, and they had no fuel. So our team found a wheelbarrow and put the patient on it, wheeled him into the local hospital, and mended his very severely broken leg - it was broken in six places. They mended it with a wooden part of a filing cabinet in the hospital director's office, that they had to cut up with an axe. There were no pain-killers or anything like that. Then they wheeled the poor, unfortunate chap back to the helicopter, we thought, "What are we going to do now? This guy's got no fuel." But the pilot was quite an ingenious chap. When we got back to the helicopter, we found it alongside a Russian airliner that had come on out. And the pilot happened to have two or three bottles of fine quality vodka with him. He swapped the vodka to the Russian pilot for some fuel. The helicopter was connected to the Asimov airliner by a length of hose, and they were just siphoning off enough fuel into the helicopter to get it airborne. And with that, it flew back down to Hovd, where we were, and once again, the engine stopped. And that was the end of the fuel. But it was all thanks to Harry and the team that we got the fuel in the first place, to get the helicopter up the mountain.

Q: My goodness, what a story!

A: That patient is a man called Lindsey Griffin. He is now the President of the Alpine Club.

Q: So that wasn't his last climb, then, wow! Talk about perseverance. That is incredible.

A: So those are just some of the many, many stories we had with Harry and his team. Bailey, his wife then, was really supportive, and we were told, whatever we did, that we must let Harry get some sleep at night. Well, of course, some of the guys, after a long, hard day, would like to have a party. But she would drag poor Harry off. He wasn't allowed to have any party at all. He had to go to bed and sleep, no alcohol, nothing, to keep his hands steady. He had a very delicate operation with very delicate form the next day.

Q: Well, thank God she was there to corral him, then.

A: But Harry was a wonderful man. I made a film once of him operating, and it was in the early days of video cameras. I shot this movie looking at the eye, and of course, looking through the lens, it looks horrific. I showed it to my colleagues, and they couldn't bear to watch the eye operation actually happening. It was a close-up of Harry's instruments and Harry working, with perfectly steady hands, removing the cataract from a patient's eye.

Q: He really was a remarkable person. It takes a really special person to travel around the world as he did, and the first thing that he wants to do after he settles down is get back up again and go around the world, and help people who need access to vision care. It's a remarkable story.

A: He was a remarkable man, very selfless person who did everything he could to help people who couldn't see. They're an awful lot of people who I knew of, who were extremely grateful to Harry and his team. And Harry was a good leader too. He got his team together; they were driven (inaudible), rather they were calling for Americans. And they were backed, as you probably know, by Rotary International. Rotary really appreciated the work that Harry was doing. I remember, there were other doctors from countries like Australia, Britain, and so on. Harry managed to weld them all into a team.

Q: And that's something you know quite a bit about yourself, about how difficult that is, from what I understand. You played major roles in organizing a lot of these exploratory expeditions of your own.

A: Still doing it! All of today, I've been interviewing people for an expedition to Africa, that's going off in January. After that, we shall be back in Mongolia.

Q: Whereabouts in Africa?

A: We're going to Kenya. We're going first to Mount Kenya, and then north of Nanyuki, on a mixture of wildlife tour, and we're also giving aid to the local people, with doctors and dentists. We're using horses and on foot for much of it, and then in Mongolia, we'll be using horses again. In an area not very far from where Harry used to come with us, all those years ago.

Q: Did you ever think you would be spending your life after retirement from the military doing this?

A: Well, I'd hoped so, because the military was very good to me. They gave me my last eight years of my army service. I was (inaudible) full pay to run Operation Raleigh. I was very grateful to the military, and indeed the Prince of Wales; they were very helpful. I can't think of a better way of spending eight years as a soldier doing the sort of thing that we were doing.

Q: Well, it's terrific PR for them, I'm sure. Have you gotten to meet the Prince of Wales?

A: Yes, frequently. I haven't seen him lately, but when he was patron of Drake and Raleigh, we saw each other pretty often. He was another dynamo, full of energy and good things, and I must say, he did wonderful work. He put himself behind the whole project.

Q: My understanding is that he's put himself behind a lot of humanitarian work throughout the years.

A: Oh, he has. Of course, he has less time to do it now, because one of these days, he's going to be king! So much of his work is assisting his mother, who's getting older. She's 90 now. She's a remarkable person too!

Q: It's not really related to SEE International, but I'm so very, very curious about your earlier explorations that you did. Navigating the Blue Nile, for example. The source of that's in Ethiopia, isn't it?

A: Yes, two hours through Ethiopia, and it joins the White Nile at Khartoum.

Q: And becomes the Nile. Fascinating. Of course, that was during your military days. Was there a particular purpose behind that, or was it just to chart the Blue Nile?

A: Our task was to explore the Blue Nile, which was then the last unexplored piece of Africa. Several people had tried to do it, and many of them perished. We were commissioned to do it by His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie. The British Army supported it. He had scientists, and experts in the field, together with soldiers for it. It was a very tough one, an exacting expedition. We were lucky to get out alive. The result of it was there was a lot of publicity around it, and the Scientific Exploration Society was founded, to carry on the full work we started on the Blue Nile.

Q: Did you get to meet the Emperor himself?

A: Yes, both times. He was another remarkable person. Tiny little man, but he was the nearest thing I think I ever met to a god.

Q: Well, some people believe he was a god - is a god, I guess.

A: Yes, the Rastafarians swear he's a god. I don't think Haile Selassie ever encouraged them, but he was a very remarkable person. He had the most amazing eyes, that when he looked at you, they seemed to bore right into you.

Q: What was the most dangerous part about charting the Blue Nile? How did most people who had tried it before die?

A: Some of them would drown, some of them got shot. I think it was mainly just drowning and getting shot. There are a lot of ways of meeting your end there though.

Q: Getting shot just by locals?

A: Bandits and so on. We had to fight two battles to get out at the end. There are pretty warlike people there.

Q: That doesn't surprise me. My goodness, though. No casualties on your side, though, I hope?

A: No, we had some injured, but thankfully, we all got out alive. But, "it was a close-run thing."

Q: As Wellington put it?

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: This has been a really enlightening conversation, John. Thank you so much for talking with me about...

A: Not at all! Please give Randal my best wishes. I wish every success to SEE International.