

H W Tilman

Who was HW Tilman? Bill Tilman was possibly one of the last great explorers of the 20th Century. Born in 1898 after a distinguished lifetime of exploration and adventure Tilman disappeared at sea in his 80s. Character The true nature of HW Tilman is by turns enigmatic and elusive. Was he the austere, monomaniac conqueror of peak, ocean or Asian col? A crusty recluse, martinet, misogynist? Or was he an anachronistic yet profoundly civilised and intelligent man? It is said he possessed very good thinking equipment which he habitually used. His intelligence was allied to great humility, his courage identified as being of the best sort; quiet and seamed with humour. Uncomplaining, full of toughness and courage Tilman was a rare man in more ways than one. History A survivor of both the Battle of the Somme (aged 17) and later World War II He campaigned in the Western Desert and the Dolomites. With Military Medal and bar and a DSO (Distinguished Service Order) Tilman was a quiet introspective hero. Between the wars Tilman undertook exploratory reconnaissance expeditions to Everest Reaching 27400 feet just 1800 feet short of the summit. He was remembered by Sherpas as a "strong little sahib who ate the same food as us and carried heavier loads" Adventure The philosophy of Mischief Expeditions is informed by the character of both Tilman himself and the expeditions he undertook. The style in which Tilman undertook adventures was a hallmark of his character. The main principle being modest simplicity. For Tilman, adventures were not about bagging peaks or sailing oceans adventure was not an achievement itself but the journey. The adventure found in overcoming difficulty. Mountaineering and sailing were only ever means to an end. Avantgarde Tilman was described as many things; taciturn, erudite with a quiet humour. But most of all on expeditions he was described as a "retrograde hero of the avant-garde". Not for Tilman the expense, bureaucracy, politics (and footprint) of the large costly expedition. Tilman was ahead of his time pioneering ecologically sound principles of exploration and adventure.

Chronology

1929:

Tilman is introduced to rock climbing in the Lake District of England.

1930:

He ascends Mawenzi and almost ascends Kibo on Kilimanjaro, with Eric Shipton.

He makes first ascent of West Ridge of Batian, and traverses to Nelion, with Shipton.

1932:

Tilman ascends Mounts Speke, Baker, and Stanley in the Ruwenzori Range, with Shipton.

In April, he is involved in an accident in the Lake District which leads to the death of J. S. Brogden.

Later that year, he makes various climbs in the Alps.

1933:

Tilman ascends Kilimanjaro (to summit) alone.

1934:

Tilman and Shipton, with three others, make the first recorded entrance into the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. They also explore the nearby Badrinath Range.

1935:

Tilman participates in the Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition, and climbs various peaks near Everest.

1936:

Tilman attempts various peaks and passes, including the Zemu Gap, in Sikkim, near Kangchenjunga. Later, he leads the first ascent of Nanda Devi.

1937:

Shipton and Tilman make a major reconnaissance and surveying expedition in the Karakoram.

1938:

Tilman leads another Mount Everest Expedition; he and three others reach above 27,300 ft (8,320 m) but fail to reach the summit.

He traverses the Zemu Gap.

1939:

He leads an expedition in the remote Assam Himalaya, which ends in disaster. They attempt Gori Chen, but reach only

the lower slopes. The party was ravaged by Malaria, causing the death of one member.

1941:

Tilman climbs various peaks in Kurdistan.

1942:

He makes a night ascent of Zaghouan, in Tunisia.

1947:

Tilman leads an attempt on Rakaposhi which explores five different routes, none of which get near the summit. The expedition then explored the Kukuay Glacier on the southwest side of the Batura Muztagh.

He attempts Muztagh Ata, with Shipton and Gyalgen Sherpa.

1948:

Tilman attempts Bogda Feng, in northern Xinjiang, with Shipton and two others, but they only reach outlying summits.

He attempts Chakragil, in western Xinjiang.

He travels in the Chitral area of the Hindu Kush.

1949:

Tilman leads a four-month exploratory and scientific expedition to the Langtang, Ganesh, and Jugal Himal in Nepal, in the early stages of that country's re-opening to outsiders. He climbs Paldor in the Ganesh Himal.

1950:

He leads the British Annapurna Expedition, which gets close to the summit of Annapurna IV, and attempts other nearby peaks.

Tilman and Charles Houston view Mount Everest from the lower slopes of Pumori, on the recently opened Nepalese side of the peak.

1953:

Started sailing in Barmouth estuary and learned rudiments of sailing.

1954:

Bought his first Pilot Cutter "Mischief" at Palma, Mallorca. Awarded honorary Lld. by University of St. Andrews.

1955-56:

Sailed "Mischief" to Chilean Patagonia via South America. Crossed Patagonian ice cap. Returned to England via Panama thereby completing an entire circumnavigation of South America.

1957-58:

Circumnavigated Africa in "Mischief".

1959-60:

Sailed "Mischief" to Crozet Islands and Kerguelen Island in the Antarctic.

1961: Sailed "Mischief" to West Greenland.

1962: Sailed to West Greenland and east coast of Arctic in Canada in "Mischief".

1963: Went to Baffin Bay in "Mischief", crossed Bylot Island on foot.

1964: Sailed to East Greenland "Mischief".

1964-65: Navigated schooner Patanela to Heard island for Warwick Deacock. Later in 1965, again sailed "Mischief" to East Greenland.

1966-67: Sailed "Mischief" to South Shetlands, and South Georgia in the Antarctic.

1968: Foundered off Jan Mayen Island near Greenland, losing "Mischief". Went home and bought his second Pilot Cutter "Sea Breeze".

1969: Sailed "Sea Breeze" to Iceland, and the East Greenland coast.

1970: Sailed "Sea Breeze" to West Greenland.

1971: Sea Breeze to East Greenland.

1972: Sailed to East Greenland, but was shipwrecked and lost "Sea Breeze".

1973: Awarded CBE. Bought his third and last Pilot Cutter "Baroque" and sailed her to West Greenland.

1974: Circumnavigated Spitzbergen in "Baroque".

1975: Sailed to West Greenland in "Baroque".

1976: Sailed to East Greenland in "Baroque". Ran aground causing damage. Left "Baroque" to spend the winter in Iceland and flew home to England.

1977: Returned to Iceland and brought "Baroque" home. Sold her. Set sail at nearly 80 years old in steel-hulled tug "En Avant" with former crew member Simon Richardson and others to Smith Island. They reached Rio de Janeiro without incident. On Nov. 1, 1977, they left Rio for the Falkland Islands to pick up two new Zealand climbers. They disappeared and nothing has ever been heard of them since.

Source: The Seven Mountain-Travel Books.

Tillman's Books

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Â Mischief in Greenland by Brian HollowayÂ

From Mischief and me , Iceland and Greenland 1965. The year was 1965, and we were on the other side of the world from my home, going to Iceland and Greenland, up by the Arctic, where it is very cold and there is much ice and snow, even on the ocean. I was on a very old boat, painted bright yellow with black bulwarks, elderly wooden planks on elderly wooden ribs, fastened with copper roved nails, and built to last. In 1965 the boat was about 67 years old, and the skipper was 65years.

After he left Kenya, he really became best known for his old boat, a Bristol Pilot Cutter 'Mischief' which he annually sailed to very out of the way places, and then came home to write a book about it during winter. He had sailed to Spitzbergen, Greenland, Iceland, Patagonia, South Georgia, and other romantic sounding places that normally wooden yachts would never dare to go to, which added an element to the interest of armchair sailors world wide.

There was a crew of six - three of us being Brians! There was OLD Brad the cook (60) Bill Tilman (67) Noddy the engineer (21) and three Brians around 25 years old. After three weeks of painting, making baggy wrinkle (sail protectors on the shrouds, out of old rope) provisioning for three months at sea, and doing the myriad of chores required for a such a venture, there came the great day came when we finally cast off from the Lymington Shipyard.

We sailed down the English Channel from Lymington, and up outside Ireland. We shared the cold North Atlantic with pilot whales, and sea birds, and little else. There was very little shipping traffic and rather bleak conditions, considering I had just come from sailing in the South Pacific waters.

The ship was so hard to steer that a rope was lashed out to one side, and gradually eased off. As the boat rounded up into the wind, you had to put your back into the tiller, and manually heave it to windward. The four hour watch was a good bit of muscle work I can tell you.

But this wasn't Surtsey- no - this was Little Surtsey, a brand new island first seen only 3 weeks before us, and we were the very first yacht ever to see it. It was very exciting to see this and be there, for this is nature in the raw. An underwater volcano pushes up through the ocean floor, gradually pushing up more and more molten rock, that of course immediately congeals and solidifies. Eventually, the rock piles up enough to break through the waters surface, and a new island is born. If there is a prevailing wind, as up in the Atlantic, the rocks being blown into the sky fall back and create two sides, then a horseshoe shape. It finally closes the last side and the island begins to really take shape. We were there at the horse shoe stage, and the water boiled and hissed like the mouth of a dragon, and large boulders and clouds of smoke and ash were continually blowing into the sky.

Greenland is all rock and ice- the only colour you don't see is green, as there isn't a tree. Mosses are all the fauna that can live there, but surviving are polar bears, musk ox, seals, narwhales and a few humans. Greenland is run by Danes, and with a few Eskimos who live there, the capital of East Greenland, called Angmagssalik, still only numbered around 500 people.

Getting to it is a mission, for often the coastal waters are blocked in by ice, and though we were there in summer, we still had to negotiate about 5 miles of ice floes to reach the shore. Pack ice like this is measured in density, in other words 10/10 ice is all negotiate about 5 miles of ice floes to reach the shore. Pack ice like this is measured in density, in other words 10/10 ice is all ice, and 0/10 is open water. We had about 6/10, and the channels, or leads as they are called, change as the ice floes move with any swell or current. On an icebreaker this can be daunting enough - we were in a creaky old wooden yacht that was already leaking badly (the finish of your 4 hour watch at the helm meant 200 strokes on the old fashioned pump before retiring).

We wended our way in by fending off with bamboo poles, gaff hooks and sometimes even feet, and many a time we had to retreat to find another way. But eventually we did get through to the rocky coast, and the next day we were able to be photographed standing on an ice flow in the relatively open bay that is Angmagssalik harbour. We met Danes, we cuddled husky puppies, we were invited into timber homes, and thoroughly enjoyed our time there. But it is always time to move on, and we were at the reason for Major Tilman's trip. Being a climber, he loved to scale hitherto unclimbed peaks, and there is every likelihood that, with this place being so remote, there were hundreds of peaks awaiting his un - stepped pleasure.

We motored down the coast and turned into Scholdugen Fiord. The East coast of Greenland is fractured by glaciers that have carved long channels down to the sea. They go inland for around 25 miles or so and are about a quarter of a mile wide. One can only barely imagine the gargantuan and ponderous forces that have carved these fissures over countless eons of time. Up the length of the fiords, glaciers carve regularly, sending thousands of tons of ice and snow plunging into the water below. We had only just arrived at the base of a glacier when we witnessed a great sight - the sight and sound of a glacier carving. It was memorable. First the movement seems to be pre-empted with a sound like a drum roll, that definitely attracts your attention.

Creaking and cracking sounds follow, and the ice finally splits, and then its sheer bulk seems to be in slow motion as it falls away, dropping thousands of tons to the slush ice waiting below, bombing into the water with stunning brutality. A big wave of water is expelled, but instead of roaring over and engulfing us like a tidal wave, it is subdued by the slush, and does no more than rock the boat.

We spent about 2 weeks, in two fiords, the only sound being the oft heard carving of glaciers, and an occasional piece of small ice drift against our hull. Were we bored? Far from it. The water teemed with fish, catfish and salmon. And at night, we had the aurora borealis, the Northern Lights, playing for us like it was our own cinema theatre. We were simply left in awe, words struggle to describe the magnificent beauty of the night sky scene. Best I can do is say it was like the shimmering and twisting folds of mighty window drapes, blowing in an unseen wind, and exposing the door to another world. Greens, purples, violets, constantly changing colours of every hue, constantly folding, unfolding, twining and then disappearing, only to reappear as another vision of light and beauty. We watched nightly until the cold air drove us back into the snug of the cabin.

But it was time to climb the hills. Major Bill Tilman had chosen me as I had done some skiing and some sailing (albeit little of both I confess, but sailing around the South Pacific on a tiny boat must have impressed him). So one morning after a hearty breakfast all of us crew, save the 60 year old cook, set off with packs and ropes, tents and food up, up a steep moss covered slope, breakfast all of us crew, save the 60 year old cook, set off with packs and ropes, tents and food up, up a steep moss covered slope, that flanked a nearby glacier. The climb took us more than 2000' above sea level, and there far far below, like a match head, was our yellow hulled boat, just visible in the clear air, amongst much curious ice.

The others left Bill and I after a cup of tea, and we prepared our camp. The larger rocks were scraped away till we had a

bed of smaller rocks. Over this a two man tent was erected, and before it got too cold a meal was brewed. The English must delight in self punishment, and food is to be endured not enjoyed (though the cup of tea is an entirely different matter). So dinner was the shared contents of a tin of pemmican. I am sure (well I sure hope anyway) that they still don't make and sell this stuff, even to cave divers, 747 bungy jumpers, naked mountain walkers, or dribbling idiots. It is (I imagine) some kind of meat extract, a bit like marmite with fat and meat, and was long favoured by Captain Randolph Scott and other maniac extreme explorers. It is said that they died or went mad due to the lead poisoning from when their tinned food was sealed. I think it's more likely that they had more than two helpings of pemmican. Needless to say, I only had one, and I am still alive today. It was just bloody awful stuff!

Next day, we roped across fascinating fissures across the glacier, with bottomless depths and the brightest of green blue ice. One slip, and we would never be seen again. As no one other than Major Tilman on board could navigate, I wonder what would have happened if we hadn't returned?

On the far side of the glacier, a rock wall rose for another 2000'. I am no climber, though I don't have much fear of heights and have a good sense of balance still. We made it to the top, to discover we were on a knife edge- a foot over and it plunged down and have a good sense of balance still. We made it to the top, to discover we were on a knife edge- a foot over and it plunged down a nearly sheer slope all the way to the sea. A wonderful place to be. Bill (Tilman) pulled out an old can and we wrote our names and dated it and then piled a cairn of rocks over the top. I had climbed onto my first and only virgin (peak). We retraced, this time glissading down a very steep snow line. "Hold onto your ice axe at the head, use the top of the handle in the snow as a brake and a rudder, oh, and don't go too fast as you will lose control and end up a pile of broken bones on those rocks way down there."

We had earlier so laboriously climbed, chipped footholds in ice walls, and hand climbing some rather interesting rock. Now, it was sooo much fun as we slithered all the way down to base, arriving much too soon, and after packing our gear back down the hill we were able to hail the boat, our home. We visited another fiord, and met up with the men at a weather station on a very remote island called Tingiamuit. before sailing off back to Lymington, England. After 3 months away, coming back might have been an anti - climax, but it proved to be far from it. Near the English Channel again, a real storm blew up. 80 knots of wind, and simply enormous seas. Then on the second night we came within a few metres or so of being run down by a large freighter."

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Mischief in a Storm

So we headed back to England.

The first two days were hellish. Once away from the ice, we sat becalmed, rolling and cursing on a lumpy unforgiving windless sea. Mischief rolls deeply, and it was exhausting with the effort of even sitting in one place. So there was joy when early on Sunday morning at last a wind had sprung up, and we were all very pleased to be running with the wind on our port beam, South East and heading for England. Hardly had we got going but the staysail tore right across its centre section, so after breakfast (porridge and bread and jam, tea) we changed the jib for the genoa, bent the hanks from one staysail and hammered them onto the other, which was then hoisted.

Why after breakfast, you might well ask. Mischief was surely an anachronism, a relic of the past trying hard just to stay alive in the present. The saving grace for this slow lumbering old boat, was that most operations could really be done without great haste. The mainsail might take 5 minutes to raise, the anchor 15 minutes. It took three husky young males considerable physical effort to raise sails, haul anchor and reef, without much in the way of modern aids, certainly without any sheet winches, and only a very rudimentary anchor winch. So breakfast first, if possible, then to work.

But no matter how much we were enjoying this trip, every watch was now just so very good, for we were heading towards home. Ah, the delight of contemplative thought. Good food, soft arms and a steady pillow, such are blessed rosy dreams of homeward bound men of the sea. This was so much in my mind, so many plans, so many things to be done, that I was really anxious to see England again and blessed every mile that crept onto the pages of the log. Then in the afternoon the wind died of despair again, and the day and night were spent with more wind-less rolling. The sky was overcast and cold (49 degrees F) and we all stayed below between watches. Then on the last day of August, things took a definite turn. Then a sudden squall out of nowhere during the night got us up to put a reef in the mainsail, that had been just slatting back and forth for hours.

The wind went light again and the reef had to come out and the sail pulled up again- a job which took the three strongest of us quite a few minutes of hard physical effort to achieve, but it freshened by lunch, by dinner the reef had to go back in and the wind increased so we were fighting the tiller all night.

The 1st September (1965) was the day my brother Neil left New Zealand for England, and I calculated that at the time

his ship was pulling away, down the Waitemata Harbour, I was hanging for my life on a tiller in a violent rain squall, in a gale force wind in the North Atlantic- this was not a lot of fun. Mischief was on her ear, water was engulfing the bulwarks and often seas would climb into the cockpit, only to disappear down the drain holes away again. The wind incessantly howled and moaned in the rigging. Long trails of spume, foam like sea froth, snaked across the water surface, while the seas were driven to a frenzy, agitated and cursing as they scrambled over one another. Spray was whipped from breaking crests and travelled hundreds of yards down wind, till being lost from sight, in the mist of its fellows.

This continued, with a pattern of drenching rain squalls every 10 - 15 minutes, all day, all night and the next day as well. That day we did 115 miles, our second best mileage for the whole trip. Then, as the wind was still freshening, we reefed the main right down to the size of a bed-sheet, with only a small jib at the bow.

The deck watches above were exhilarating while below was misery for those with wet bunks - mine was upper amidships on port side and thankfully remained dry, though water squirted through seams in many places around the boat. But we were heading for home and each foaming crest, each ponderous swell carried us still closer. At the end of a week we were 500 miles from Greenland (which included three days doing less than 50 miles a day - 2 miles per hour - in very light conditions).

Then the inevitable happened - the wind again dropped right away. The barograph soared to 1028m/bars- 18 above normal. Neil would be succumbing to the charms of the native dancers of the Cook Islands while we were rolling around, helplessly becalmed. We are now fuming with frustration and despair at every light spell, but buoyed with hope and joy whenever another patch of wind came dancing across the water. We continued with fickle winds and squalls on the 12th day sighting the loom of Blasket Lighthouse in Ireland.

And on 16th September, 80 days from when we last were here, we sighted Lands End, England. With 180 miles to go, we expected the trip to be virtually over. How far from the truth can you get!

At 2.00am, the shipping forecast quote " Force 8 - 10 winds Whole Gale to Storm Warning to all shipping." We saw at dawn a pleasant sky of alto cumulus clouds (sunny to fair, generally good conditions) that belied a rapidly dropping barometer. The mainsail came down and up went the storm trysail, a storm mainsail. We left the staysail standing, and hanked on a ladies handkerchief of a storm jib. This must have all looked somewhat comical, as the wind speed was around 3 knots, our own boat speed about 1 knot. Subsequent events fully justified the prudent precautions though.

At 06.00 the next morning, there was a marked increase in the wind, both in sound and pressure. The barometer, following a very rapid fall, steadied at 4 below the seasonal average. By 10.00 am it was blowing lustily and before midday it was upon us. A solid hard punching Force 8, it pummelled and punished us with short steep angry seas. The rain eased, but its place was taken by solid walls of water, angrily climbing on board, like so many green pirates - armed with firehoses!

The first big sea, a breaking comber that exploded on the deck, came through the saloon skylight as if it wasn't there, and liberally soaked everyone and everything within reach. The second comber stove in part of the bulwarks on the lee side. This turned out to be a blessing, for all the water awash on the deck could now quickly and easily be away and overboard.

Two more seas flooded the cockpit awash with water that couldn't drain away quickly enough, and by the third big wave the oil drums lashed on the deck started to loosen under the strain. Being my watch, I had the unenviable task of securing them- and oil drums do not co-operate freely.

By 4.00pm, 16.00 hours, the time had well and truly come to heave to. The little trysail was eased, and allowed to belly loosely. The staysail was dropped and the tiny storm jib way out on the bowsprit was backed, in other words, the weather sheet was tensioned. This way the wind was pushing the sails in opposing directions, effectively nullifying each other, and we stayed more or less where we were. Though the wind continued to rise, and we were doing about 2 knots, we would have made much more if running before the wind under bare poles.

The moan in the rigging increased to a whine, and all around was unleashed fury, the like of which I had never seen before. The spray from the breaking wave tops, and from when dashed against the hull, was simply torn away, at unbelievable speed. When it rained, the water was like driving needles and I found it impossible to look into the wind. On the lee side of the boat, for she was lying part way on to the waves (quartering to the seas), the wind eddied and swirled like fast moving Catherine Wheels, before whipping away to help tumble another crest.

Seas as high as our imagination would allow, and then some, towered over us. Not another ship was to be seen, not a bird, nor any other living thing was to be seen when the storm was at its worst. We were buffeted and bruised, but Mischief rode it out surprisingly well, and while we were hove to, very few waves came aboard. I confess to finding the experience of being in such primal conditions actually pretty exciting, I was enjoying being there. Besides, we had great faith in our skipper and his boat, but perhaps a little youthful naivety helped!

Winds of 85 mph were recorded. The Channel ferry services were completely disrupted and cancelled. A ferry went onto a sandbank, putting it out of action, and very severe damage was done around the coast. All coastal shipping was either in port or hove to. While re-lashing the staysail, something, probably the jib sheet block, gave me crack on the head and sent me flying. I went over the side, but just managed to grab the guard rail and scramble back on board. It gave me quite a turn, but apart from a bit of blood and a lump on the head, no harm was done.

A worse scare happened in the early hours of the next morning. It was the second night, and it was my watch. On the end of my watch I was chatting with Noddy, who was about to relieve me, as we watched the lights of a ship crossing our stern. We were hove to I was chatting with Noddy, who was about to relieve me, as we watched the lights of a ship crossing our stern. We were hove to without any navigation lights on, as they blew out whenever they were lit (they were traditional very old kerosene lamps). We felt safe - besides we hadn't seen another ship in a month.

Then suddenly, it appeared that the red light on the bow of the other ship was joined by a green one. Then as we watched, we could see, every time we both were up on a wave top, that clearly visible were a green and a red light. In other words, the ship was coming straight for us.

We were immobilised, and had no motor running The storm jib just holding our head against the lashed timber tiller and other sails, and we were safely going nowhere. Bristol Pilot cutters are resoundingly good sea boats, but we were literally parked at sea.

Major Bill came running. He grabbed a spotlight and ran it over our boat. The ship kept coming beginning to loom higher and higher out of the gloom. He faced the spot onto our tiny sail and onto the bridge of the ship, and the beam was rising higher as with each second the ship came closer. We were paralysed, I can't even remember if we thought about life jackets or not, though if we weren't chopped up by the propellers we would surely die of cold long before we could be rescued.

The ship now was only yards away. The bow was rearing above our heads, massive and black and ugly in the dark. He kept the spotlight on and we could see the whole bridge was lit up, but we could not see any faces. I believe that largely it was their bow wave, and perhaps a single passing wave, that may have just pushed us just sufficiently out of the way (with perhaps a wee hand from God and the ship's helmsperson - who knows.) We didn't even actually touch, but I can still see the bridge steering station going over the top of our mast, and an unseen voice screaming abuse at us. He would have had as big a fright as we did. We escaped, shaken and unscathed.

By morning we emerged into increasing sunshine, unscathed (if a little shaken), reducing winds, lessening sky and the beginning of some cloudless days.

Two days later we were back up the gentle river of Lymington and Mischief had completed another voyage. Brian being on Mischief was a great experience, and Major Bill Tilman has now passed into the annals of maritime folklore. To sail with him was an honour and a pleasure.

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