

Antarctic rower sets new world records

Jamie Douglas-Hamilton prescribed himself the perfect remedy for getting over open heart surgery in August 2022. He has just finished rowing 407 miles across the Southern Ocean and Scotia Sea in Antarctica.

The intrepid Scot set eight Guinness World Records while doing so, three of which are world firsts in the record books. The three firsts are the first row from Antarctica, the first row on the Scotia Sea, and the first to row the Southern Ocean from South to North. It was also the longest and fastest row on Southern Ocean and the fastest polar row in history.



The Shackleton Mission honoured Harry McNish, the carpenter who sailed on the ill-fated Ernest Shackleton expedition in the early 1900s. McNish was denied the Polar Medal and Jamie Douglas-Hamilton has called for it to be awarded posthumously.

Douglas-Hamilton now has a collection of fifteen Guinness World Records to his name. He joined an international crew of six, comprising Captain Fiann Paul (Iceland), Mike Matson (USA), Jamie Douglas-Hamilton (Great Britain), Lisa Farthofer (Austria), Brian Krauskopf (USA), and Stefan Ivanov (Bulgaria) who all set off on 11 January this year unassisted and without wind power.

The crew planned to row to South Georgia inspired by the rescue mission on the James Caird which was built by Harry McNish and which saved Shackleton's men. It is considered one of the greatest survival stories and small boat voyages of all time.

From the start conditions were horrendous and the crew narrowly escaped a fast-moving ice flow when leaving King

George Island.

Jamie explained, "We rowed in 90-minute shifts eight times per day in huge seas, burning over 10,000 calories per day. The waves were enormous and was like looking up at fast moving walls of water the size of warehouses. We came so close to fully capsizing many times in the freezing water.



"We all suffered from sea sickness to some degree and one member had chronic sea sickness to the point he couldn't hold any food or liquid down and was evacuated to the supervising vessel following us before getting hypothermia.

"The strong Westerly and North Westerly winds made getting far enough North to reach South Georgia less and less likely and if we had continued, we would have had less than 50% chance of getting there. This became all the more clear with one rower down and several others developing frost bite. The temperature was averaging one degree but with the wind chill and 100% humidity we were borderline hypothermic."

Jamie continued, “These rowing boats are designed for the warm weather of mid Atlantic crossings and the cabins were like cold, humid fridges with everything being soaking wet. Our legs would sometimes shake uncontrollably and then this moved to our torso and came close to hypothermia.”



Lisa Farthofer (Austria) who made history in becoming the first female to row the Southern Ocean said, “The fight against the cold was one of the toughest. Each time getting inside the cabin trying to rest, the cold was sneaking back into my body. After the first days my toes and fingers were suffering the most as there is no chance to get dry combined with the cold water temperature, wind chill, rare sunshine, my toes got frost bite.

Jamie continued, “Despite only lasting six days, this row was tough – tougher than previous rows across the Drake Passage and Indian Ocean – and I returned home with frostnip in my fingers and feet (stage before frost bite) which is a very painful condition that takes months to fully recover from.

“Despite all the suffering there were beautiful moments being followed by penguins, whales, orcas and seeing enormous ice burgs the size of towns and rowing past islands that look like the top of Himalayan peaks and the beautiful colours of the Iceland these are memories I will treasure forever.

Jamie continued, “Unfortunately, we weren’t able to row as far to reach South Georgia as we had initially planned but we are delighted to have reached the South Orkney Islands achieving eight world records and have so much new respect for Harry McNish who made a small wooden lifeboat seaworthy in the world’s stormiest seas with the most limited of tools, nails and wood. He was the true hero of the Shackleton expedition who was the reason they all survived. I hope the story of the injustice is known and I will be campaigning for Harry McNish to be awarded the polar medal posthumously.”

Feeling unwell during early 2022, Jamie was shocked to discover that he had a leaking aortic valve, a hereditary condition requiring immediate open-heart surgery to replace the aortic valve in his heart. In August 2022, he underwent an operation at Edinburgh’s Royal Infirmary. Jamie is raising funds for the British Heart Foundation in honour of his experience and the care and support he received.





Jamie Douglas-Hamilton All photos Ewan Harvey
Jamie said: "Five months ago I was lying in a hospital bed having just undergone open heart surgery. The operation made

me feel like I had been hit by a bus, but I was determined to take on the challenge and used this as a focus during recovery and training and was so pleased to be able to take part and complete this expedition.

“As tough and gruelling as the row was, I never missed a shift or was worried about my heart. I hope this inspires others and gives hope to those who have a similar diagnosis that you can recover and have a more active life than before.”

Jamie said, “I’m honoured to have rowed on behalf of Harry McNish and hope that people now look at the history of the Shackleton expedition differently. Chippy wasn’t a mutineer, but the hero and master craftsman who spoke up when needed in the interest of the whole crew and saved them all. I couldn’t be prouder to have given my Mrs Chippy expedition badge to Harry’s nephew.”

John McNish, Harry McNish’s great nephew said, “The McNish family will be forever grateful to the crew of Mrs Chippy for risking life and limb to raise awareness of our great uncle ‘Harry McNish’. They have done more with this expedition and the PR telling the real story than 60 years of letter writing to have Harry awarded the polar medal. Thank you Jamie and crew.”

To donate to Jamie’s British Heart Foundation cause please visit: <https://www.justgiving.com/page/jamie-row-challenge>

To donate £10 do so by texting SCOTIA to 70607 (*the bill payer will be charged £10. BHF will receive 100% of this charge. The bill payer will also be charged one message at the standard network rate by the network provider*).



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Preparing to leave King George Island All photos Ewan Harvey



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