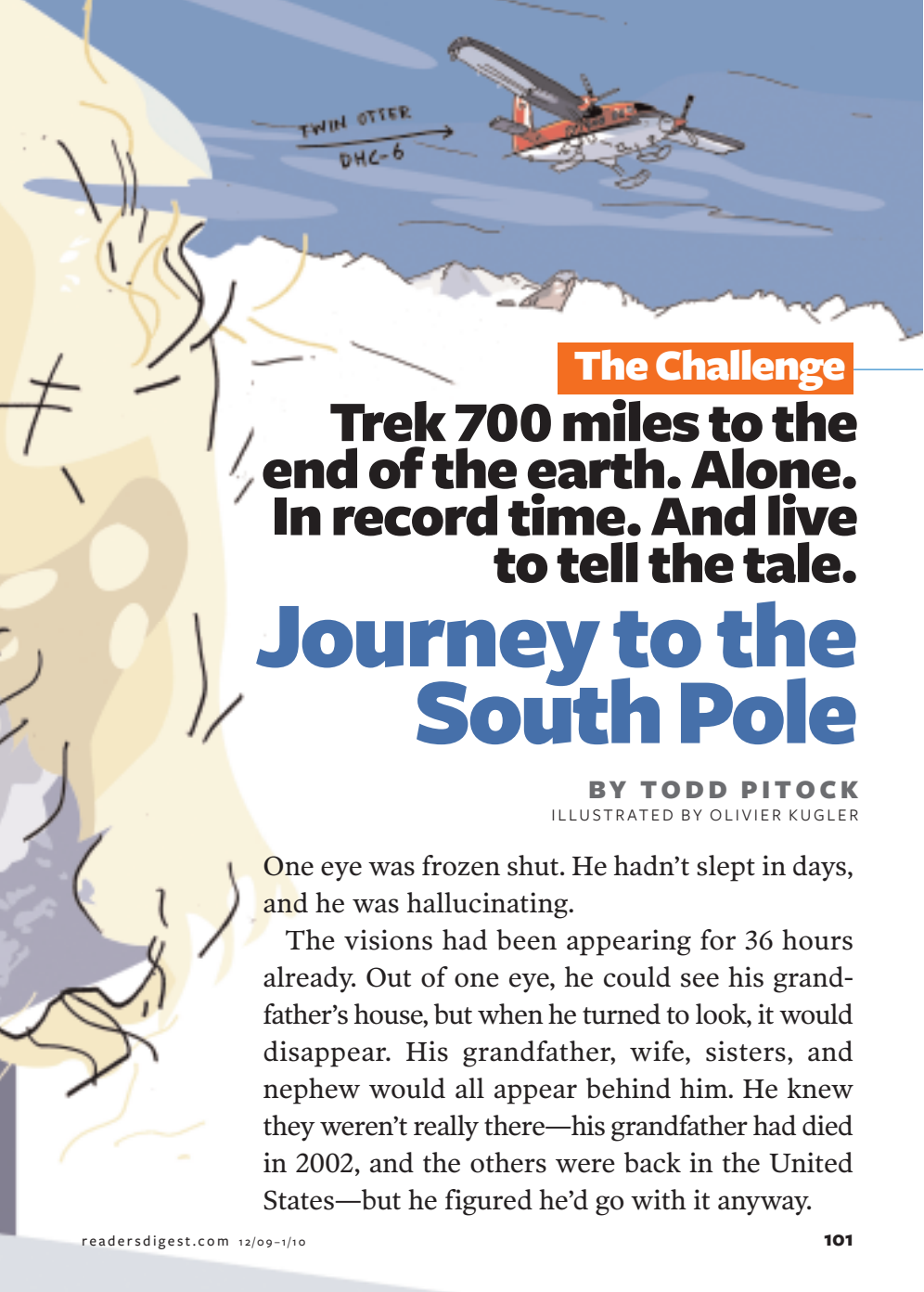


WHEN THEY LAND YOU ON THE ICE AND THAT PLANE TAKES OFF

YOU THINK THIS WOULD BE A ROMANTIC MOMENT...

BUT IT IS NOT.





## The Challenge

**Trek 700 miles to the end of the earth. Alone. In record time. And live to tell the tale.**

# Journey to the South Pole

BY TODD PITOCK

ILLUSTRATED BY OLIVIER KUGLER

One eye was frozen shut. He hadn't slept in days, and he was hallucinating.

The visions had been appearing for 36 hours already. Out of one eye, he could see his grandfather's house, but when he turned to look, it would disappear. His grandfather, wife, sisters, and nephew would all appear behind him. He knew they weren't really there—his grandfather had died in 2002, and the others were back in the United States—but he figured he'd go with it anyway.

“We’re going to be okay,” he told his visions. “We’re going to make it.”

He kept repeating the last line, knowing even as he spoke that his chances of survival were diminishing by the hour.

**Todd Carmichael**, a 45-year-old adventurer from Philadelphia, had spent 39 days alone in Antarctica, where he’d walked almost 700 miles pulling a sled he’d named Betty the Pig. He’d lost 50 pounds, and his chest was as tight as if his ribs were bound in plaster. The wind, sometimes reaching 100 mph, struck his body like a boxer’s blows.

The Pig—piled with 260 pounds of supplies, mostly food, when Carmichael started out more than a month earlier—was down to 60 pounds. But he’d lost so much strength that the sled felt just as heavy as before. He suspected his feet were frostbitten but couldn’t take off a boot to check; if he did, his foot would swell and he wouldn’t be able to get the boot back on. Many trekkers had died because of bad feet.

He’d been hiking for more than 40

hours without stopping. The finish line—the American-operated research station at the South Pole—was so close, he thought he could see it. The trouble was, he couldn’t be sure it wasn’t another hallucination.

He faced a crucial choice: Keep pulling the sled and risk imminent collapse and death. Or drop the Pig and walk on without his gear and supplies. There was no margin for error if he misjudged the distance or if the station wasn’t really there.

He dropped the Pig.

“I’ll come back for you,” he said. “I won’t leave you here. I’ll come back.”

**Carmichael had set out** on a similar journey the year before. But weeks of unrelenting blizzards—fierce weather even by Antarctica’s forbidding standard—had forced him to call for rescue. Quitting had been humiliating. At home, he’d fallen into a depression.

“Failure stays with you,” says Carmichael, six feet three with a shaved dome, deep-set eyes, and broad shoul-

**Day 7** “Zero visibility, extremely low temperatures, blowing winds. It’s going to be a rough day.”

ders. “That feeling, from the moment I was evacuated, did not go away, day in and day out. I lived in it. I couldn’t move on.” The only thing that would assuage him was to try again. This time, he set his sights on a world record.

Fewer than a dozen people had ever done what Carmichael was attempting: 690 miles alone, unassisted, and unsupported—no food drops, no medical care, no animals pulling the sled—from the west coast of the Southern Ocean to the Geographic South Pole. The record for the fastest solo trek, which Carmichael was aiming to break, was held by a British woman, Hannah McKeand: 39 days, 9 hours, and 33 minutes. Carmichael would be the first American.

“It’s no different from challenges other people might want to face,” Carmichael said before he departed, on November 12, 2008. “This just happens to be mine. It’s a very primal thing, the desire and willingness to trek across vast

distances. We’ve loaded up carts and pulled since the dawn of man.”

His wife, Lauren Hart, 42, understood this about him. They met in 2004, when she was interviewing him for a Philadelphia TV station. She asked why he’d never married. “Because I’m a trekker,” he said. She recognized that his journeys weren’t just a hobby; rather, they tapped into something deeply nomadic in him—something that went beyond competition to embrace, as he put it, “that sense of being completely off the grid.”

They married in 2005, and at home Carmichael was a devoted, even conventional husband, running the business he founded—La Colombe Torrefaction, a high-end coffee roaster and retailer—and accompanying his wife to Philadelphia Flyers games, where she sings the national anthem. She missed him when he left on long treks, but she didn’t try to stop him. A cancer survivor, Hart knew what it



meant to reach exhaustion and press on. After Carmichael failed in his first Antarctic attempt, it was his wife who encouraged him to set out again.

He did it with another loved one in mind. His grandfather, a World War II pilot, had painted “*Tout Jour Prest*,” Old French for “always ready,” on his plane. Carmichael had the phrase tattooed on his right arm.

## Day 22 “My cheeks ache so bad. I feel like I’ve been punched in the face. Cold hurts.”

The temperature was 35 below zero when Carmichael began his trek. At Hercules Inlet, the starting point, he duct taped his cheekbones and nose to soften the impact of frost and wind. He pulled on his wool Flyers cap and goggles, strapped on cross-country skis, and harnessed Betty the Pig to his shoulders. He glanced at his marine compass, his main navigational tool, which he secured below his chin by soldering quarter-inch copper pipes into a kind of metal bow tie. Then he set off.

The first incline ran unrelenting for 57 miles, the slope intensifying the impact of 65 mph gusts that could knock the air out of your lungs. The wind had sculpted snow and ice into formations called *sastrugi*, sometimes as tall as a man, sometimes as wide as a ship. Otherwise, there was nothing to see—just a vast, barren landscape.

Eight miles in, Carmichael’s ski binding broke, then a ski pole. Calling off the trek at that point would have

made sense. He had never planned to walk to the Pole.

But he couldn’t quit. From age 17, when he’d traversed Washington’s Columbia Basin desert for a week by himself, to dozens of other solo treks across forbidding routes through the Sahara and Saudi deserts, he’d conceded defeat only once, in Antarctica.

“I’ve come so far, and I’m never

going to get another shot,” he told the video camera he brought to record and verify the journey. He was disheartened—but still determined to beat the record.

*Tout jour prest.*

**Within two weeks**, he was 50 miles behind McKeand’s pace. He recalibrated, increasing his daily schedule from seven to ten 70-minute marches—a goal of 19.7 miles per day—to make up the deficit. In business, Carmichael believed the key to success was sticking to a plan without compromise. If you let yourself slip, laxness would defeat you.

“You can never stray from your routine,” he said. “If you rely on adrenaline or emotion, you burn out. Inspiration comes from doing the work, not as a catalyst to do the work.”

But keeping to a plan isn’t always possible, and it didn’t take long for some of Carmichael’s worst fears to materialize. In Antarctica, nature it-

one side of the ledge, held on tight, and pulled himself up.

It was the closest he'd ever come to losing his life. And it was only his fourth day out.

Problems accumulated like falling snow. A neoprene veil he'd attached to his goggles stiffened into a board of frost and rubbed the skin off his nose. His cheeks swelled from the cold as though he'd been to a bad dentist.

On day seven, in white-out conditions, Carmichael arrived at a long tract veined with crevasses. He wouldn't have had a problem crossing them on skis—but on foot, it was treacherous. He checked in with Patriot Hills, the base camp, using his satellite phone. "Do not move," they told him. "Absolutely do not move."

Carmichael took stock of his position relative to McKeand's record. I'll take that advice under consideration, he thought to himself, and pressed on.

**Now he was covering** at least 19 miles a day. Once, he went 26.6 miles, thought to be the longest anyone has trekked in Antarctica in a single day. His agony



self lays traps. Tiny shards of ice collect on one side of a crevasse until they bridge the gap, creating a solid-looking veneer hiding a seemingly endless blue abyss. Carmichael stepped on one such bridge only to feel the ground yawn beneath his feet. He caught himself on



was matched by surges of joy, when he believed he was doing what he was put on earth to do.

“The object of life is not to avoid pain,” he said into the camera. “Beautiful things sometimes require pain, and this is one of them.” Another time he contemplated how he kept going. “I think, It could be worse,” he said. “I think of my wife. She survived non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a year of chemotherapy. That’s a lot worse than this.”

He had another reason to be positive. He and Hart were in the process

of adopting a six-year-old Ethiopian girl named Yemi. He was excited about becoming a father.

And life on the ice kept him busy. Via satellite, he’d get text messages from people around the world following his trek. He used every waking minute to read, prep food, set up his tent. When it was time to rest, he’d zip himself into his cocoon sleeping bag, cover his eyes to block out the 24-hour light, and sleep



until his alarm went off. Then he'd scarf down 1,000 calories of porridge and 850 calories of chocolate-mint patties and sausages. Food kept him warm. Eating every time he took a break, with big meals at breakfast and dinner, he ingested 8,000 calories a day. But he burned 12,000, a deficit that caused him to lose more than a pound a day.

**Determination** and discouragement ebbed and flowed. By day 27, Carmichael was heavy with doubt. His face was battered, and he had burn marks under his eyes.

"I'm beginning to question whether it's physically possible to do this," he

drate food. He wanted to speak with his wife, but his satellite phone was dead. He reached for the backup to find that it, too, was useless.

He thought of Robert Falcon Scott, the British polar explorer who in 1912 had perished, along with his team, 11 miles from safety. "I'm two days away from the Pole. No one knows where I am. There's a small possibility I could die out here," Carmichael said.

By now his muscles had lost their elasticity and hung from his bones like loose rope. For days he'd been coughing up flecks of blood from "Eskimo lung," frostbite on the lung tissue.

That's when the hallucinations began.

## **Day 27** "It's really tough mentally. This is the closest I've come to packing it in."

said to the camera. In vast fields of snow, he sank to his knees with each step. The constant plunging and lifting was like being on a StairMaster for 14 hours a day.

On day 35, he was still 20 miles behind McKeand's pace. Yet the record would soon be the least of his worries.

**About 80 miles** from the Pole, Carmichael's GPS broke. His compass would only point him to the magnetic pole, hundreds of miles from his destination—the research station. He needed a more precise measure to be sure of his direction. If he could remember the last position he'd read on the GPS, he might live. If not, he would die.

That wasn't all. His stove gave out, so he had no way to melt snow or hy-

He saw his relatives, and the station appeared as a speck in the distance. Was it there? Was it two miles away—or ten?

The Pig carried his tent and all his supplies. It had kept him alive, and he'd become as emotionally attached to it as a toddler to a blanket. But now it was a millstone. He unhooked it.

He took only his camera, started off, hesitated, turned back. Without the Pig, his sense of isolation was total and profound. He willed himself on. Whenever he lost sight of the station, he'd turn to check his tracks and make sure he wasn't walking in circles.

And then, on December 21, having trekked 47 straight hours, he stepped up onto the wide airstrip of the South Pole station.

Inside, they'd known Carmichael was



coming but weren't sure when he'd arrive. A woman came out and waved to him. She pointed to the ceremonial pole, which he touched as he verified his time. He'd broken the record: 39 days, 7 hours, and 49 minutes, less than two hours ahead of McKeand.

**Carmichael was elated.** But he knew he looked bad and sounded confused. He told the woman who greeted him that he had to go back out to the ice:

**Day 37** **“I’ve got three bags of food left and I need to get there in three days. I have to do this. I have to try.”**

“I have to get the Pig.” She didn't understand, but he was too exhausted to explain. She took him inside.

“What can we do for you?”

“I'd just like something to eat,” Carmichael said.

After more than a month of 4,000-calorie-a-day deficits, he felt as if his brain were out of gas. He could smell eggs and maple syrup on a big buffet nearby. He hadn't had a proper meal in almost six weeks.

“I'm sorry,” she told him, “but we can't feed tourists.”

“I just need calories,” he said. “Just give me some condiments and I'll be fine. I just need some sugar.”

But the station policy was strict: Provisions were for authorized personnel. The station gets about 100 visitors a season, mostly wealthy tourists who fly in to stand next to the ceremonial pole, take a photo, and depart.

A handful of trekkers on expedition teams come in, almost all of them through a club called Ski Last Degree, which arranges treks from the 89th to the 90th degree south latitude, a 69-mile journey. And eight or ten hardcore trekkers—the sort of people who, like Carmichael, regard Everest as a glorified Disney World—arrive every year in small groups. They, like anyone who comes through, are required to be self-sustaining.

Carmichael had arranged to have Patriot Hills drop supplies, and they had arrived as planned. But he didn't know where they were and didn't have the strength to pull the box apart anyway. He was also battling to breathe.

He convinced the woman to ask the station manager to make an exception. While she was gone, a kitchen worker who had heard the exchange gave him two big cookies piled with frosting, which he wolfed down. Then he went out to the tent that the station provides for visitors, who aren't allowed to sleep inside the buildings. He curled up on the icy floor and fell asleep.

By now the staff realized that Carmichael wasn't a tourist and needed help. When the station manager found him coughing up quantities of blood in his sleep, the medical staff rushed to act. Carmichael could see the panic in their eyes as they looked at an X-ray of his



lungs. They started him on a nebulizer. It took 48 hours to get his lung capacity to 50 percent.

“He was lucky,” says Wayne Moore, the physician assistant who treated Carmichael. “I think he had maybe 24 hours to live. His airway would have swollen to the point where he wouldn’t have been able to move air.”

Carmichael’s timing was also fortunate. “The next day, visibility went down to a quarter mile and stayed like that for days,” Moore says. “There was no way he would have seen the station.”

**Everyone at the station** wanted to see Carmichael. Once he was stable, he offered to give a talk about his experience to the staff. “I thought five or six people would come,” he recalls. More than 150 showed up.

The road to recovery was longer than his four days at the station and the three days to get back to Philadelphia. A few weeks later, his skin was

still burned, and he was still 20 pounds underweight. But that was okay. He had achieved a goal that had obsessed him.

When asked what motivated him on the ice, he talked about the paradox of being self-reliant while also needing other people. The hundreds of text messages he received, many from people who’d survived cancer or other challenges, helped keep his spirits up.

“On one hand, I felt like I couldn’t fail in front of all these people who were counting on me,” he says. But then, thinking about what they’d overcome inspired him too. “Inspiration is like love. It’s something you get in proportion to what you give.”

Soon he would give—and receive—even more. When Hart met him at the airport in Philadelphia, she had news of their daughter. “Yemi,” she told him, “will be ours in a few months.”

*Tout jour prest*, he thought. Always ready. ■