



2391 (Parkstone) Squadron of the Air Training Corps

'Exped99'
Aid Mission To Nicaragua

An expedition report by Cdt Sgt. Robert "Indy" Clitheroe

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INTRODUCTION

About 18 months ago, the 2391 (Parkstone) Squadron of the Air Training Corps started to plan an aid mission to Bluefields, a town on the eastern coast of Nicaragua. Our mission, which became known as 'Exped99', was to continue with construction work at a local children's school.

In order to complete our planning, our expedition leaders worked with Sqn Ldr Mike Cole (RAF Ret'd) who had been involved in a number of projects in the area since 1991. Mike Cole's involvement was critical as he knew the local area very well and also knew the Nicaraguan President and other local dignitaries.

We were to learn that Nicaragua was the fifth poorest country in the world and had also been badly hit by natural disasters over recent years, one of the most devastating being Hurricane Mitch which destroyed a huge number of buildings on the eastern "Moskito" coast and had killed many people and made many others homeless. Obviously, a country which has been hit by such a large number of natural disasters will have a lot of problems to face as it recovers and the local people still face an uphill struggle as they start to rebuild their daily lives.

Our team was to consist of a number of adult team members and us cadets, there would be both male and females on the team. Prior to going to Nicaragua, we were to take part in a number of team events and when we finally got over there, we were to spend two weeks working on the project itself, with an initial day spent acclimatising and a day's rest and recuperation at the end.

As well as the work itself, we were also going to get a weekend off, hopefully this was going to give us the opportunity to see something of the surrounding countryside and to meet some of the local people.

Our expedition was going to cost a lot of money and it would have to be self-funded, so we all spent a lot of time raising funds and getting our expedition reported through the local papers and radio stations, as well as through presentations to various groups such as the RAFA, the British Legion and our schools and colleges.

I hoped to be part of a very worthwhile team and I hoped that I could get to know the local people and make really good friends with them and my fellow team members. I'm glad to say I did these things.

What follows, is my account of some of my experiences working on the project and some of the successes that our team achieved.

TEAM SELECTION

Hundreds of cadets throughout the whole of East Dorset were eligible to go on the expedition and a large number actually applied to go. The final team of cadets were selected through written applications and a 3-person board interview. In the end, 9 cadets were selected, 4 male and 5 female. There were to be 4 adults on the expedition, three male and one female. I was the only person to be chosen from my detached flight, although a female cadet from our parent squadron was also chosen.

The selection process itself was very nerve-racking for me. Partly because taking part in it was so important to me and I knew how much competition there was going to be, this was going to make it very hard for me to get a placement in the team.

The big day arrived and it was my turn for the board interview. I had been doing some research on my local area as I knew that part of the interview was going to be questions on how much I knew about my local area. I was very nervous about the whole interview but I was also feeling quite confident because I was going to get the opportunity to tell the board members about me as a person, and as a potential team member.

About a week later I got a letter sent to me at home. I opened it, and there was the good news informing me that I had been selected to be part of the team. At that time I was so excited and proud that nothing else mattered to me, However a bit later on I felt very disappointed for a friend of mine who was not chosen for the team. Although he had been chosen as a reserve, he was unable to get the time off work not knowing if he was going or not.

I knew a number of the cadets who were finally selected through our summer camps and other activities, but I did not know all of them. I missed the very first team meeting as I was playing Rugby for the Air Cadets and so it was a while before I got to meet everyone. Besides the expedition members (cadets and adult staff), there were a number of adults on the UK support team who helped with a lot of the organisation, such as financial management of the expedition.

My first impressions of the team were that we would all get on as a team and as individual friends. We all hit it off as soon as we got to know each other. I personally think that dropping ranks was the best thing to do because I felt as if it wasn't an ATC event and also because we could all be friends rather than order each other around. I don't think you can become friends on an expedition if someone has to use rank. Each of us had a different character type and I thought that was really good because another challenge the team faced was in how to deal with each other and accept each other.

For example, one of the cadets is very forward and lets you know exactly what she is thinking and at first I did not know how to react to her. I soon realised that this was just an example of how she interacted with people and understood that she was not going to say something just to make you happy. We all learned to accept each other for who we were, including the officers.

It was important to bring different character types and to have both male and females on the team, it definitely made us a stronger team. We were able to understand and accept each other, which is important in life and is the basis for making lifetime friends.

I really believe that the balance of the team was right and that it gave us all the chance to learn. Experience is not what happens to you, but what you make of what happens.

TEAM EVENTS

Prior to the expedition we took part in a number of team events, these were held in order to help build team spirit and to get our expedition publicised, as well as to help with fund raising.

Our first weekend away together as a team was at RAF Uxbridge in London. The main reason for the trip was to meet the Nicaraguan ambassador to the U.K. but we also did some other activities. We went to the Natural History Museum and basically got to know one another by taking part in various team activities based around researching Nicaragua.



'Exped99' cadets with the Nicaraguan Ambassador in London.

By the time RIAT and the Studland Fair came along, we were all really good friends and knew how to treat and react to one another. It was clear to me that the events really helped build a great team spirit and therefore our moral was high.

At RIAT I really noticed the different characters of the team members, the hot weather made some people very touchy and others got very tired. This was our first encounter where the team members characters changed because of the heat and we had to modify how we interacted with each other.

As well as team-building activities and the meeting with the Nicaraguan Ambassador, we also went to Salisbury to meet Sir Edward Heath, our patron. Both the Ambassador and Sir Edward Heath were very enthusiastic about what we were going to do and we were very grateful for their direct support.

FUND RAISING

I found it very difficult to balance fund raising activities along with all my other commitments. I had to think about how I could spend time raising funds alongside my GCSE and GNVQ coursework and exams, I also continued to play Rugby for my club, county and for the Air Cadets (I ended up playing for the Corps this year!). I also had to take part in other Exped99 activities as well as keep up my part-time job. I found it very hard to do all these things but I somehow got it all done.



After playing for the Air Training Corps, Clitheroe decided not to go fundraising that day.

At no point did I ever think of quitting the team, but I did have to give up my part time job as a Chef because I was committed to taking part in mandatory Exped99 team activities and I also had to concentrate on raising funds. I prioritised what I worked on, making my schoolwork my first priority and Exped99 activities, including fundraising, second. I learned about what things are important to you when you have a lot to consider in a busy lifestyle.

Most of the funds I raised came from hiring myself out to local people. I prepared a brief portfolio, describing myself and my strengths. I also included a couple of press clippings about our project and a press clipping on an article about me when I played Rugby for the Air Cadets at Corps level. My portfolio included some stuff about our project and outlined what I thought I could do for people. A number of people gave me multiple jobs and I was surprised that I got so many jobs.

I enjoyed working for people and hiring myself out to them. I learned new skills, such as gutter clearing, lawn mowing and weeding. I also learned how to install machinery in a School and a little about installing 3-phase electricity circuits. I also did some household painting and treated wood fences and sheds, all things I had never done before. By doing all these new things, I think it has helped me become more confident with people.

I have to admit that some of the jobs were a bit rushed because I was misjudged sometimes how long something would take to do, but I still learned about time-management from this. Doing these jobs did make it hard for me to balance my time to do anything else but again I think I learned a lot about balancing the things that were important to me.

A lot of my customers were elderly and I really believe that although they paid me for what I did, I was helping them do things that they could not do themselves.

If people did not want any work doing, I would ask them if they wanted any raffle tickets and if they had anything they could donate for sale in our boot fairs. Along with another cadet, I gave a presentation about Nicaragua and Exped99 to the Christchurch RAFA, this went very well and we raised over £150 just from this event.

We had a couple of team fundraising events, we visited a supermarket and sold raffle tickets to the public and told them about our expedition, we also held a couple of boot fairs. Apart from the team events, I think we all came up with different ways to raise funds, some of us held coffee mornings, others did sponsored walks, their own boot fairs and other things. We all probably did things we had never done before in order to get the money together.

A surprise occurred when we learned we would have to increase the amount that needed to be raised because of the unfavourable foreign exchange rates, we had to find another £2,500 - Having to find the extra money just made us more determined to reach the goal.

We initially had to raise £14,500.00 but due to bad foreign exchange rates, we eventually had to raise over £17,000.00 which we achieved. At certain points, there were times when I thought that we would not make the target but towards the end we started to get on a role and it was very pleasing to see the money mounting up. We had to take into account that we would have to pay the shortfall ourselves if we had not been successful but we were all prepared for that consequence and thankfully this did not come about.

I think that future fundraising events will be easier for me because I will know how to balance what I'm involved in and now know more about how to raise funds.

PARENTS SUPPORT GROUP

The parents of the cadets got together and created a Parents Support Group (PSG), mainly to help us with fundraising but also to help keep up awareness in our local communities of what we were doing. The PSG held a charity auction by writing to companies and asking for items they could auction. They got over 100 lots together and raised over £2,000.- for us. The PSG also held a quiz night which added to our funds.

The cadets all thought that it was important for the parents to be involved and they were able to raise a large amount of money by holding the auction and quiz night. My mother and father both felt like part of the overall team and said that it was important to them to feel involved in what we were doing. For us cadets it was important that we had the direct support of our parents and not just for the fundraising they were able to achieve. I think they also got a lot out of it.

FINAL EXPEDITION BRIEFING

A few weeks before the expedition we held a final team briefing to go over all the last minute items that needed to be completed. All the team events were now completed and all the money had been raised, it finally hit us that the expedition was edging closer and closer every day.

All of the cadets and parents felt as if a weight had been lifted off their shoulders when we found out that we had finally raised all of the money we needed. From now on, all we had to concentrate on was getting the final bits of our individual kit list together. I still had to go and get items such as my water purification kit and the emergency medical pack. It was a bit of a last minute scramble for some items, but I finally managed to get everything I needed.

THE JOURNEY

Most of us met the Wimborne squadron coach, which was to take us to RAF Uxbridge for an overnight stay, in the long stay car park at Ringwood. We had done all the main loading up the night before at the Wimborne Squadron. We had packed all the medical stuff we were taking over there for the local people, including crutches and tons of Panadol tablets. We also took loads of soft toys and clothes over there for distribution in Bluefields.

As we had done all the main kit loading the evening before, by the time we got on the coach, all we had to do was take our day bags on board and say our farewells to our friends and family, many of who had come to see us off. Cameras were clicking and people were hugging but eventually the time came for us to set off.



Getting ready to leave Ringwood

After our overnight stay at RAF Uxbridge, we set off the next morning for Heathrow Airport. After dropping off her children, the Nicaraguan Ambassador came to see us off at the Airport. The Ambassador wished us all good luck and said that we would have a fantastic time, adding that she was very grateful for what we were doing and that it was great that we were helping her people.

We all travelled in our official Exped99 gear, which consisted of uniform trousers, shirts, boots along with our polo shirts and fleeces - which both had the special Air Training Corp/Nicaragua logo embroidered on them.

I think the general public had mixed impressions about us, the more curious ones would sometimes ask us what we were all doing and we would tell them about the expedition and where we were going. I hope they were all impressed because we all felt proud about what we were about to do.

The flights to Nicaragua were generally all on time, however there were some ground delays, about 20 minutes, on the way to Managua from Miami. I felt both nervous and excited about the flights. Apart from a Hercules flight last year, it had been about 12 years since I had last been on an airliner and this was certainly the longest journey I had ever done. There were two team members who were feeling very nervous and were quite scared. I noticed that they were both comforting each other, which I thought was really great.

I was at my most nervous on the first flight out of Heathrow, as the aircraft gained speed down the runway it started to shake, it seemed really violent to me but it soon passed. On one of the flights I noticed a steamy cold gas coming out from the sides of the overhead lockers, we were told by the crew that this was "normal" and was nothing to worry about!

So, with all this excitement going on, by the time we finally arrived in Managua, many hours later, all the team - except me - were fast asleep. I was really surprised that I did not feel particularly tired when I first got off the plane, but this soon changed.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

As soon as we all stepped off the aircraft in Managua, we all felt the impact of the heat and especially the humidity. I became very tired carrying the bags in the heat and I started to sweat quite heavily. The first thing I noticed was that the weather was entirely different to both the U.K. and Miami. There was a storm, complete with thunder and lightning, going on not far away and yet it was still very hot and humid. I noticed other difference to the U.K. like palm trees lining the roads and the quality of the roads themselves.

When I first got into my hotel room I noticed lots of little lizards on the side of the walls. We later noticed them all over the hotel. They were small, about 4 inches long and we learned that if there was a lizard in your room in the evening this was a good sign because they fed mainly on mosquitoes. Mind you, we did not like the idea of finding them in our boots in the morning or in our clothes. On average there were about 7 or 8 lizards per room, which meant that hopefully there were going to be no mozzies in the room, but there still were!

I was very surprised that I did not feel tired when I got up the next morning at 6.30 local time, considering that we had all just completed a 31 hour journey (in time and body clocks).

Our first day in Nicaragua was spent acclimatising, ready for the work ahead in Bluefields. We took a trip up an active volcano, named Masaya. The Volcano was in a nearby national park, about an hours ride away from Managua, we got there in a mini bus. We got dropped off halfway up the slope of the volcano and we had to walk the rest of the way up to the top. At one point, there was a class of school kids also visiting the national park and we all stopped and spoke to them, or tried to! They were very friendly towards us and we all enjoyed our time with them. Needless to say we all had cameras with us and each of us took loads of pictures.



Our new Nicaraguan friends on a trip to the volcano at Masaya.

I thought I was finding it quite difficult to acclimatise at first, but I soon got into the feel of it. I noticed that other team members seemed to be finding it more difficult than me, especially with the sulphur gases in the air around the volcano. At times it was very difficult for us to breath, but I tried to raise everyone's spirits.

I looked out for all my team mates when it came to drinking liquids and keeping protected against the very hot sun. As I felt OK, and seemed to be coping with the heat I felt I could spend more time looking after everyone else who looked like they were struggling a bit. However I found out that everyone was also looking out for me as they knew how I burn easily from the sun and I was still sweating quite heavily. I guess we all looked after each other, without each other being aware of it! This was definitely the way to continue.

Another difference from the U.K. were the buildings, both in style and quality of construction. The buildings we saw on that first day were small, old, rusty and some seemed to be falling down. It was not just the buildings that were in that condition, the roads as well had seen better days. It looked as if nobody using the roads cared about safety. The cars, buses and motorcycles all had totally bald tyres, rusty parts hanging off them and most did not have number plates. There were even people sitting on the roofs of cars and people on motorcycles without helmets.

The local people we met that first day were Spanish speakers and although I could not understand too much of what was being said to me, they were all very friendly towards us.

BLUEFIELDS AND THE WORK PROJECT

After we completed our first day acclimatising in Managua on the Western coast, we took a "La Costina" airlines flight to Bluefields, which is about 200 miles away on the Eastern coast of Nicaragua.



Arrival in Bluefields

During the flight, all you could see from the aircraft was green hills and rivers, with the odd shack here and there. Bluefields, we were told, had a population of about 12,000 people but we were later to find out that it was closer to about 50,000 and increasing in size every day.

The people were generally very friendly and polite in their manner, except for a few people who told us to go home and we noticed that we were often called "Gringos", as people thought we were Americans.

The hotel that we stayed whilst we were in Bluefields was called the "Tia Irene", it was very clean considering the weather conditions such as all the sun and rain. For the first two nights, 3 other male cadets and I stayed in a room which was supposed to be for 3 people. Not only did the room have one to many in it but it did not have air-conditioning in it and it was very hot at night. Although we moved into another room later on, it was in this first room that we made our first friends, "Bruce" and "Lee" the cockroaches.

Apart from meeting our two new friends, we learned that we had to use the toilet differently to back home. Apparently we were not to put toilet paper down the toilet as it could block it up. We found out that this was true, the hard way.

The most exciting bit about each room was the showers. The showerheads were somehow electrified, so if we accidentally touched the showerhead whilst having a shower, we would receive a generous electric shock.

After we had got to see a little of Bluefields, and the condition that the local people lived in, I wondered how they could live like this. It was also clear that some areas of the town were much more wealthy than others and the difference between the rich people and those who lived in poverty was there for all to see.

The "Verbo" school, where we were to be working for the next few weeks, looked exactly the same as in all the photographs we had been shown back in the UK. Apart from all looking out for the safety and well-being of each other we operated under a few strict rules, those being; no usage of military ranks, no drinking alcoholic drinks and no smoking.



Our first view of Verbo school, Bluefields.

Prior to leaving the UK, we did not know the exact project we would be working on at the school, initially we were told that we may be building a clinic at the school but we found out upon arrival that we would be digging out and laying the concrete foundations for another school building.

The school, and therefore the project we were to work on, was about 1.5 miles away from our hotel. I don't think we had fully acclimatised by the time we were to start work because on the first workday we walked up to the school and by the time we all got there, we were all tired and we hadn't even begun work yet. Luckily, Mr Child arranged for a land rover to give us lift to the school each day after that.

At the end of each work day, we would walk back to the hotel, which was very tiring after working so hard all day. In total, we spent about 10 full days actually working on the school and we all had a mixture of jobs to keep us interested and reasonably well rested. For example, I did jobs such as digging deep foundation holes, about 4 feet wide and deep, mixing cement and concrete and moving logs, but before we could lay any concrete we had to first dig out the top 6 inches of soil and generally prepare the site.



Preparing the site for concreting.

It was really all great fun, we used tools like pick axes, sledge hammers, shovels, a cement mixer (that kept overheating), and wheelbarrows. We also had to make our own cement tamper out of some spare wood. We used the tamper to get the cement level and to help get air out of the mix.

All the jobs seemed extra hard in the heat, especially moving about 20 big bags of cement. Myself and Mr Bodger were called in for that challenge. We learned how hard it was for people to live in those hot and uncomfortable conditions. We had thunderstorms every day in the afternoons but it did not seem to clear the air and it remained very hot and humid all the time we were there.

Although it was very hot every day, I found the heat easier to cope with as each day passed. However, I was sweating so heavily the whole time that after about 30 minutes of working, my shirt was totally soaked with sweat! I have to say that I enjoyed every single job I did on the expedition and I did not dislike anything we had to do in Nicaragua.



We are now well advanced with the concrete laying.



Nearly there!



Finished!!!!

We needed to keep up our energy for all the jobs we were doing, but our diet was fairly boring to say the least. Our meals consisted of a mixture of chicken or fish with rice. In fact, we had rice with every meal. However, I do remember one very special occasion when we had steak (and rice!).

One evening after we had finished work for the day, the team stopped off at a house on the way back to the hotel. The house was owned by two young American preachers who were based in the town. Every day, they let the local children into their home and by the time we got there, there were about 20 of the local children in their home, as well as a local English/Spanish speaking translator.

A little later that evening, Mr Child asked me to present the Dorset and Wilts Air Training Corps Exped99 plaque to one of the female teachers from the Verbo school. I felt very proud to be asked and was delighted to present it to her. As I was handing over the plaque there was an electrical black out, a common event in Bluefields, and I had to give the presentation by candlelight. I thanked them for their hospitality and for making us feel welcome in Bluefields and then handed over the plaque. The translator translated everything I had said into Spanish and then I got a round of applause from all the children and then the rest of our team joined in, which was quite funny.

After I had presented the plaque, Mr Child said that I had done very well and that my speech was really good. I have to say that Mr Child's words made me feel really good about myself.



The plaque we presented to the Verbo School.

I said earlier that we spent about 10 actual working days on the project in total, however our work days were broken up into two sessions with a couple of less physical days in the middle. On these days off, we went "up-jungle" to a place called Sandy Bay. This was an area a few hours ride away by Panga boat. A Panga is a very long and narrow boat with a massive 200 horsepower outboard engine on the back. They are very fast craft and great fun to ride in.

The trip was quite long, and at times a bit tedious, although the views were incredible. I'm glad I took my camera along because I now I have some great photographs to remind me of the trip.

When we got to Sandy Bay we entered the village and almost immediately we saw some of the local people slaughtering a turtle. It seemed very cruel to us all that they should be killing such a rare animal but it was obviously the way that the local people had to live in order to survive and so we had to accept what they were doing.



The Turtle holding pens at Sandy Bay.

We had taken a lot of soft toys up to Sandy Bay to give to the village children, we took a walk up the coast to a church and I helped to hand out the toys with Mike Cole. All the toys were gone in seconds and although the toys were not particularly well made, or new, they obviously meant a great deal to all of the boys and girls in the village. I guess that there were about 100 kids gathered around Mike Cole and I and we just could not hear ourselves speak for all the screaming and shouting of the local children.

I had mixed feelings about handing out the toys, I'm not sure if the children particularly appreciated what we were doing, I think they just wanted to get their hands on the toys we had brought with us!

This episode really made me think about the material things that I had back in the UK. Seeing these children fight over such relatively small things made me realise how lucky I am, and I'm sure I would be fighting the same as they were if I was so unused to having material possessions. It made me realise how much I took for granted.



The walk back from Sandy Bay

While we were in Sandy Bay, I decided to take a walk along the beach one evening. As I was walking along I found a dead shark washed up on the beach, it was about 2.5 feet in length and I have to say that although it was only a little shark, I'm glad I did not come across its mum or dad in the sea while I was swimming. One of my team members had a similar experience when he was in the water and a small dead shark floated past with a big lump bitten out of it. Needless to say, we could imagine what it was that had taken such a big bite out of the shark. What worried us most was that we had been told that the water was totally safe to swim in! After our break at Sandy Bay we all returned to Bluefields by boat, ready for our final period of work at the school.

We realised that we were behind in our work plans and so we had to pull out all the stops in order to complete what we had gone there to do. On the penultimate day I was working

so hard, and without a break, that I got a touch of heat-stroke. I felt very sick and had very bad pains in my kidneys and lower back, my urine was also very discoloured, in fact it was almost black. I felt so bad that I had to go and lie down for the remainder of the day. I got visits from every member of the team, all checking to see if I was alright - which was really good of them.



The Exped99 cadet team

I think that the way we all looked after each other on the trip was an example of the excellent team spirit that we all had, we really did all look out for each other. For example, one of my team-mates made sure I drank plenty of liquids in order to keep my body properly hydrated. Everyone was concerned for everyone else on the expedition and it did not matter if someone felt ill or depressed about something, we all pulled together and did our best for each other.

Looking back on the expedition, we were all able to work as a team, which was an important part of the overall success that we had on Exped99. As a team, and speaking for myself, we achieved what we set out to do, which was to help people who had far less materially than we had. During the time I was in Nicaragua, I learned so much about myself and other people and I'm so glad that I was selected for the mission.



We met this Officer on a visit to a Nicaraguan Air Force base



We made friends with these locally employed workmen at the school.

BEING BACK HOME

When we finally got back to the UK, our friends and family were there to greet us back. For me though, it didn't feel right as it felt as though we should all still be back in Nicaragua working on the project. It's hard to explain, but I felt sad and did not know what to do with myself when I got back to our house. My parents missed me a great deal, even my brother, but I did not feel any different for seeing them again, and I did not know why. I had lived with my team mates for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for the past 19 days, and then, we all went our own ways. For the first few days, I felt lonely for not being in their company. I had a great feeling of anticlimax and after I had phoned a few of my team-mates, partly to remind them to take their anti-malaria tablets, but also to see how they felt, I realised that they felt the same way as I did. In fact the majority of us were feeling a bit sad.



I think my mum was pleased to have me back.

I certainly noticed the cold when I got back. I had been used to working hard in very hot weather and now that I was back in the UK, where it was a lot cooler, I realised that I had finally acclimatised to Nicaragua!

As a surprise, my mum and dad had redecorated my room while I was away and it certainly looked a lot tidier than how I left it 19 days earlier!

Needless to say, I had a ton of clothes that needed to be washed and it was all a very strange shade of brown. My mum wanted me to empty my rucksack out on the lawn outside - just in case anything large and hairy with lots of legs crept out. Luckily I seemed to have left all creepy-crawlies back in Nicaragua.

Home definitely felt different, it did not feel the same and I wanted to be back in Nicaragua.

WHAT DID I LEARN ?

I wanted to go on the expedition because I was interested in experiencing the way in which people, less fortunate than myself, managed their daily lives. I found it amazing how they coped with things and how they get by on a day to day basis with an absolute minimum amount of money and help. The Nicaraguan people are a proud race but they need help going forward and I really am glad that I was able to help them in some small way.

It was obvious that we are far more fortunate than the people in Nicaragua, in a material sense, but other things surprised me. For example, if we need hospital treatment in this

country, we have all the things we need and the hospitals are clean and hygienic. In Nicaragua they do not have these things and this is a very sad thought. People told me that you can actually catch malaria while spending time in hospital there and that there is a lack of facilities and medicines in their hospitals that we just take for granted in the U.K.

The Air Training Corps in general has made me more confident with people and the Exped99 fundraising activities and presentations to my school have helped me become more confident still. I have really enjoyed every bit of the 18 months preparation for the expedition and I got to know some really good people. We all got to know each other really well - which is important factor for success in a team, and being on the team will help me in other areas of my life. For example, understanding people better, building my self confidence and a willingness to help others. I also understand the importance of working as a team.

I raised more money than I thought I could at the start, I think that this was quite an achievement given all my other commitments this year. As a team, we were all surprised at how much money we had actually raised.

It was important to me to be a good team player because everyone was counting on me to be able to do all the heavy duty stuff and it gave me a real sense of purpose on the team. Going on an expedition like Exped99 makes you appreciate how fortunate we are, it shocked me to see how the Nicaraguan people had to live. In comparison we have so much, their lives are more about survival than enjoyment and this really has made a lasting impression on me.

The expedition reinforced my understanding that there are people in need of help in every part of the world. For example, in the U.K. I have taken part in local HYPED projects, HYPED is a local charity that helps young homeless people in Dorset. Seeing people in need on your own doorstep makes you realise that even developed countries, such as England, needs to help a number of its less fortunate people.

CONCLUSION

What we did was worthwhile, we were able to help other people who had a much harder life than us. On a personal level, it made the members of the expedition think differently about life and about how we can help each other. I don't know for sure if I did make a difference to the team, but then again other team members might say that I did. Personally, I think that I did help with the overall success of the project, just as all my team mates did. After all, we completed the work project that we went to Nicaragua for.

Warrant Officer Child had set us our main objective, which was to completely prepare a site for further construction. We planned, prepared, and completed all of the tasks we had been set. We finished the digging and the cementing, which was a very hard target considering the heat and daily thunderstorms but we got there in the end.

Personally I wouldn't change the way in which the expedition was planned or performed. I am very glad that I went on the expedition and I would certainly want to do something of this nature again.

I have thought about how this project has changed me and my immediate thoughts are that I am a much more confident person, in terms of making friends and generally communicating with people and a realisation that I achieved much more than I initially thought I could. I think these are big things to learn.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We had the support of a lot of people over the last 18 months or so, consequently there are a lot of people I would like to thank for all the things they did for us. I'd like to thank the UK support team for all their work - mostly done behind the scenes, also the Parent Support Group for helping us to raise funds and for giving us our celebration party on our return. I would also like to thank all of the people that helped me raise funds and all the people that paid me for all the jobs I did for them.

The whole of the Exped99 team are very grateful for the support of Sir Edward Heath, our patron, and the Nicaraguan Ambassador to the U.K. Their direct support was very influential in helping us raise our project funds.

However, we owe most of the success of our expedition to our adult team leaders. Mr and Mrs Child, Mr Dunn and Mr Bodger laid on the best organised event that I have ever had the privilege to be a part of, and it has taken a huge amount of their personal time to make this a successful mission. They organised everything from the interview boards and selection of team members, to the visits to see the Nicaraguan Ambassador and Sir Edward Heath. They organised team events like the Royal International Air Tattoo at Fairford, the Studland Bay Fare car parking, Boot Fairs, flight arrangements, hotels, health requirements, Uxbridge stopovers, baggage allowances, the tons of medical stuff we took with us and a thousand other things. In short, they have been the stars of the show. I know that there was an incredible amount of time given by our expedition leaders that lead to the ultimate success of the trip. They deserve a lot of credit and recognition for this lifelong memory experience we now all have.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow cadet team members, who will be my friends for life. There is a lot of love and trust in the team and unbelievable amounts of support amongst friends and I will always remember that.

