READING COMPREHENSION B2.2

Read the following newspaper article about an expedition and answer questions 1-7 on the next page by typing A, B, C or D in the box next to each number.

An awfully big adventure

The Taklamakan Desert in western China is one of the last unexplored places on earth. It is also one of the most dangerous. Charles Blackmore crossed it, and lived to tell the tale.

There are very few big adventures left and very few heroes. Children's stories used to specialise in them - courageous explorers with sunburnt, leathery skin and eyes narrowed by straining to see into far horizons on their journeys into the unknown. These days you no longer find such people in fiction, let alone in real life. Or so I thought until I met Charles Blackmore.

Blackmore's great adventure consisted of leading an expedition across one of the last unexplored places on earth, the Taklamakan Desert in western China. Its name means 'once entered you never come out', but local people call it the Desert of Death. He recalled the dangers and exhilaration of that amazing trek, in the calm atmosphere of his family home.

The team he led was composed of four Britons (one of them the party's medical officer), an American photographer, four Chinese (all experts on the area), 30 camels and six camel handlers. It later turned out that the camel handlers had never worked with camels before, but were long-distance lorry drivers: a misunderstanding that could have cost everyone their lives and certainly jeopardised the expedition' s success. This mixed bunch set out to cross 1,200 kilometres of the world's least hospitable desert and Charles Blackmore has written a mesmerising account of their journey.

At the time, he was about to leave the Army after 14 happy years. He launched the expedition for fun, to fill a gap in his life, to prove something. 'I had always assumed I'd spend my whole life in the Army. I had been offered promotion but suddenly I felt I wanted to see who Charles Blackmore really was, outside all that. It was a tremendous gamble. Tina, my wife, was very worried that I wouldn't come back as nobody had ever done that route; we went into it blind. In the event, it took 59 days to cross from west to east, and the desert was very kind to us.'

Anyone reading his extraordinary account of that crossing will wonder at the use of the word 'kind'. The team suffered unspeakable hardships: dysentery; extremes of temperature; severe thirst and dehydration; the loss of part of their precious water supply. 'But', Blackmore explains, 'when we were at the limits of our own endurance and the camels had gone without water for seven days, we managed to find some. We didn't experience the Taklamakan's legendary sandstorms. And we never hit the raw, biting desert cold that would have totally immobilised us. That' s not to say that we weren't fighting against hurdles the whole time. The fine sand got into everything, especially blisters and wounds. The high dunes were torture to climb, for us and for the heavily laden camels, which often rolled over onto us.

'What drove me on more than anything else was the need to survive. We had no contingency plan. Neither our budget nor time allowed one. No aircraft ever flew over us. Once we got into the sandhills we were completely on our own.

'I knew I had the mental stamina for the trip but I was very scared of my physical ability to do it. I remember day one - we sat at the edge of the desert and it was such an inferno that you couldn't breathe. I thought, "We've got to do it now!" At that moment I was a very scared man.'

If it was like that at the beginning, how did they feel towards the end? 'When you've walked for 1,000 kilometres you're not going to duck out. You've endured so much; you've got so much behind you. We were very thin, but very muscular and sinewy despite our physical exhaustion. My body was well-toned and my legs were like pistons. I could walk over anything.'

Midway through the book, Blackmore went on to describe lying in the desert gazing up at a full moon, thinking of his family. How conscious was he of the ordeal it must have been for them? 'Inside me there's someone trying to find peace with himself. When I have doubts about myself now, I go back to the image of the desert and think, well, we managed to pull that together. As a personal achievement, I feel prouder of that expedition than of anything else I've done. Yet in terms of a lifetime' s achievement, I think of my family and the happiness we share - against that yardstick, the desert does not measure up, does not compare.'

Has Charles Blackmore found peace? 'I yearn for the challenge - for the open spaces - the resolve of it all. We were buoyed up by the sense of purpose. I find it difficult now to be part of the uniformity of modern life.

CAE 2: Eoi Zamora 2006

LIVEWORKSHEETS

1 Meeting Charles Blackmore changed the writer's opinion about

A) the content of children's fiction.
B) the nature of desert exploration.
C) the existence of traditional heroes.
D) the activities of explorers.

2 When the expedition members set off, some of the group

A) posed an unexpected risk.
B) disagreed with each other.
C) were doubtful of success.
D) went on ahead of the others.

3 Blackmore had decided to set up the expedition because

A) he was certain he could complete it.
B) he wanted to write a book.
C) his aims in life had changed.
D) his self-confidence was low.

4 Which of the following best describes the team's experience of the desert?

A) They were not able to have enough rest.
B) It presented continual difficulties.
C) They sometimes could not make any progress at all.
D) It was worse than they had expected.

5 Which of the following did Blackmore experience during the trip?

A) frustration at the lack of funding.
B) regret about the lack of planning.
C) realisation that they would receive no help.
D) fear that he would let his companions down.

6 According to Blackmore, what enabled him to finish the expedition?

A) his strength of will
B) his physical preparation
C) his closeness to his family
D) his understanding of the desert

7 How does Blackmore feel now that the expedition is over?

A) tired but pleased to be home
B) regretful about his family's distress
C) unsure of his ability to repeat it
D) unsettled by the experience

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