



The Fitz Files

DEVON'S TREASURED BROADCASTING LEGEND DAVID FITZGERALD SHARES STORIES OLD AND NEW WITH READERS

Extraordinary exploits of a man who insists his is an ordinary life

FORMER Royal Marine Lee 'Frank' Spencer has written a book, *The Rowing Marine*, focusing on his 'ordinary' life.

Serving for 24 years in the corps, Lee lost his leg in a road traffic accident after stopping to help at the scene of a crash. Born in Dagenham, Lee and his wife Claire now live on the edge of Dartmoor. After coming through three operational tours of Afghanistan unscathed, he admits the irony of being injured and losing his right leg after being hit by the engine block of a car as he was assisting a stranded motorist who had collided with the central reservation of the M3 in Surrey in 2014.

Lee tells me: "If it hadn't been for the quick actions of a passerby, a Rastafarian called Frank and his daughter... I would be dead. He's now my brother. It was a long slow recovery, but I have had some incredible opportunities along the way including rowing the Atlantic with the world's first physically disabled crew of four."

In 2015 Lee set-off to row 3,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean. The Row2Recovery team of four injured veterans had just three legs between them. In February 2016, some 46 days, six hours and 49 minutes later, they rowed into Antigua and the record books as the world's first physically disabled crew of four to row any ocean.

"Then came another real challenge, my solo row from Europe to South America and a chance to break the record. I finished in Cayenne, French Guiana having faced forty foot waves and a bout of gastroenteritis during the voyage and all while sleeping for just two hours at a time... It was tough. But I managed that trip in just 60 days, breaking the able-bodied record for the route by 36 days. The Guinness Book of record certificates are framed and are at the top of the stairs."

I ask Lee: "So, the book is out soon, where does it take us and how did you start writing?"

He tells me: "I started to put down my adventures on paper, just for myself and then got asked by a big publishing house to write a book before rowing the Atlantic on that solo trip. This was something that was not on my radar, I literally taught myself how to write.

"Previously I worked within the Marines as a volunteer for special duties, concentrating on human intelligence so I could write reports and breakdowns at that kind of level. But a book about what I had done... descriptive writing ... I had to teach myself how to do that.

"Sadly, that publisher melted away but I kept on constructing the story, not only of the crossings but of my life growing up in Dagenham. Finally, another publisher showed an interest and the book comes out in November, which is amazing... it's been a long journey in itself."

In my former career within radio, I used to speak to Lee on those incredible journeys, updating the county on his progress. But on one occasion I got bumped ... we tried to get through but his sat phone was engaged?

Lee says: "It was the strangest message I have ever had. I was expecting you and then this voice said ... Hello Lee, this is not Fitz, it's Prince Harry. Surreal! He's not just a supporter of me but of anyone who's been in the armed forces and in particular, wounded personnel.

"He has been amazing and I know people who say that they've had their life saved by the things that Prince Harry has done. In particular the Invictus Games has played a big part in so many people's lives, which was completely his idea, and he is not just a figurehead. He runs behind it



Former Royal Marine Lee Spencer in his moment of triumph © Ant Upton



Lee with confirmation of his record-breaking exploits. Below: the keynote speaker



Putting in the hard yards... crashing, thunderous waves push the former Commando all the way

and pushes in every way and that makes an actual difference to a lot of veterans... to their lives and the people around them."

I say to Lee: "You have made a massive difference to people's lives, but I have got to ask, where does the book take us?"

He replies: "So, the book itself has two strands, two separate stories that come together at the end and without trying to give too much away, one is a blog... I suppose that is the right thing to call it in modern parlance... a blog that focuses on my journey across the Atlantic, but it also reflects how I got to the start line.

"I don't hold back, there have been some incredible low points. My mother died just as I was about to set off and obviously everything had to be put on hold. Then about halfway across I got smashed with about five big... big waves and it was petrifying. Also, the last two weeks in particular were very difficult indeed, constantly searching the horizon and my soul. A physical and mental challenge."

I tell him: "Now you are telling the story on stage, and you are inspiring people."

"Yes, not something you go to your careers teacher about and say I'd like to be a keynote speaker, but it happened!

"When I first lost my leg, I started being asked if I would speak at dinners, you know the sort of thing... standing up and saying a few words about disability and overcoming adversity. In fact, that is where we first met, at The Soar Mill Cove Hotel in the South Hams. It kind of developed from there into a mission.

"My mantra is to redefine perceptions, challenge stigma, drive change and ensure everyone has the opportunity to lead a life of dignity. I don't mind admitting that I struggled with it at first because basically standing up in front of hundreds of people and saying how 'brilliant' I was didn't really sit well with me. But then I had an epiphany moment where I could understand... the fact... that there's literally nothing special about me. The phrase that I use is that I'm ordinary... things have happened to me which I accept, they're not down to me but I have faced the challenges. That attitude gives it a relevance to the people in the audience, and I feel better about sharing my experiences.

"Let me get the message across again, there's literally nothing extraordinary about me. On my stage shows I talk about my life, it allows me to highlight what I've managed to achieve, which has been the extraordinary bit, but by being a very ordinary person. Does that make sense?"

I think it does. The story of an ordinary man doing extraordinary things is called *The Rowing Marine* and will be out in November, published by Frontline books.