

Paul T: Well, thank you for joining me, my name's Paul [Tees 00:00:15] and on this edition of the If/When Podcast, we're going to be talking about overcoming adversity and we have some very special guests today. We're joined by Lieutenant Hugo Mitchell-Heggs of the Royal Navy, and Tom Parsons of Jacob. So, Hugo and Tom, [00:00:30] thank you both so much for joining me today. To get us started, Hugo, tell us about this journey that you and your teammates undertook and why did you do it?

Hugo Mitchell-H...: Yes. Thank you very much for having me Paul, and it's great it to be here, great to be able to speak to all my good friends over at Jacobs again. Yeah, it's weird thinking about it, that actually exactly this time last year, I was on a little boat, just pushing off from the Canary Islands on my way to Antigua. [00:01:00] The campaign was HMS Audacious, so we had of four serving Royal Navy submariners, who planned this fantastic campaign to row across the Atlantic Ocean. So, 3,000 miles, about just under 5,000 kilometers, from the Canary Islands, Antigua. So expecting to be in shifts of two hours on, two hours off, and experiencing the full spectrum of highs and lows, and everything that comes with it. It was wonderful.

Paul T: And so [00:01:30] why'd you take this audacious trip? Ore-dacious trip I should say.

Hugo Mitchell-H...: Ore-dacious trip. Well for us as submariners, we operate beneath the waves. We're very much familiar with that world, the isolation, the watch patterns, being in challenging environments and looking after each other as a team. So for us, it was really more of an opportunity to maybe showcase ourselves to the world [00:02:00] in a different way. Not many know about the environment, and what we do, but being able to showcase submariners in the public eye, challenge ourselves, show that we're capable of more than just the normal day to day we do on deployed submarines was a great opportunity. And obviously there's that stigma associated with us, they call us sun-dodgers to avoid the sunshine.

So that was always going to be a bit of a challenge for us, but no, jokes aside, it was just all [00:02:30] about adventure and pushing ourselves. And of course, with something of this scale, you can also do some great stuff with charity. So actually, really on point with what Tom is all about, it was all about mental health and wellbeing, and trying to champion that you can be in the most extreme conditions, in the most extreme isolation, in moments of adversity, but still maintain a stable wellbeing by looking after each other, and a whole load of other stuff I'm sure [00:03:00] we'll talk about.

Paul T: So to recap, it was a 37 day journey, and it was just you and three of your teammates out alone on, I mean, it's a pretty tricked out rowboat, but essentially it's a small boat and you have no one else, but yourselves, to depend on. Right? If you get into big trouble out there in the middle of the Atlantic

Ocean, it's not easy to come rescue you. So, [00:03:30] what was one of the more frightening moments of the trip and how did you overcome it?

Hugo Mitchell-H...: Oh, there were, I mean, there were some plenty of them, the boat, just to put it into perspective, was seven meters long, 28 feet. So, maybe just a bit longer than a car. A small cabinet each end for us to sleep in. And then the rest of the time you're on this deck, completely exposed at the same level as the water. When you've got waves that were [00:04:00] 20 to 40 feet high, you feel so tiny and vulnerable, and kind of almost meaningless from the grand scheme of everything. The terrifying moments there were plenty of them. I think maybe the first day, the first night where we'd been out, we trained, we prepared really well.

We'd been out in some quite aggressive conditions in the English Channel. We'd been out in the Irish Sea, which I thought was [00:04:30] really nasty at times. I'd never seen anything like this. And our first two days we had, I like to say it was like living on a log flume in a waterpark. And just keeping your wits about you when you were tired, you are struggling to keep food down, the waves are sometimes hitting you side on, so you don't know where they're coming from, it's pitch black. That took a little bit of getting used to, it took a little while to bleed into [00:05:00] it. And that's almost dangerous in a way because you develop this overconfidence.

And it takes so little for the conditions to change, and become completely terrifying again. What we did have a capsized, and that was a very powerful moment, there's some incredible things that happened when that happened. And it almost happened too fast to be scared, it was all about muscle memory and trust, and just getting [00:05:30] through a dark moment. But for that one time we capsized, there were about 10, 15 times where we lost control of the boat. We were side onto the waves, 40 feet high, and you are almost anticipating a capsized. And at that time, you're just in survival mode, everyone is out on deck, clipped on, three up rowing, just trying to turn the boat back to get back on side, and you can feel the wind trying to pull [00:06:00] the boat. The wind is literally stronger than all three of us rowing on deck, but the fourth guy trying to stay in the boat, you do feel quite tiny in those conditions.

Paul T: Wow. That is really powerful, I mean, I'm getting just a little seasick just hearing you describe it, but-

Hugo Mitchell-H...: Me too.

Paul T: Yeah. So, imagining the scene, and Tom, I want to bring you here in on this, the idea of teamwork, and the [00:06:30] vulnerability, and the necessity of really putting your life in the hands of your three teammates and stuff, and Tom, hearing Hugo talk about his story, and what he's been going through, and you've worked with him for a while now, and you really know his story pretty well. What have you learned you think is relevant, from a mental health perspective,

that could be helpful for people dealing with a different type of isolation, namely being locked down [00:07:00] during the pandemic?

Tom Parsons:

Yeah. It's a great question because I think we're all just inspired by Hugo's story. I think everybody globally, you're not human if you haven't really felt the challenges of today. We've all felt it might be a health concern or worry for elderly parents, or somebody vulnerable in our circles. Or that social isolation from our friends or family, or [00:07:30] uncertainty over loss of income in the households. All these uncertainties. And when we heard Hugo's story, we just thought, wow, here's a group of four guys who found a purpose, in terms of a mental health charity, and wanted go on this amazing journey for 37 days. And in some respects put their life and their sanity on the line for this amazing purpose, for a mental health purpose.

[00:08:00] But when we did a deep dive into the story with Hugo on the similarities between some of the struggles that we all have in life, there were many, right? And one that really stood out for me, in talking with Hugo, was the importance of showing vulnerability. Okay? So these four guys are rowing for 37 days, two hours on, two hours off, right? Against those harsh conditions that are unimaginable to many of us. [00:08:30] Like there must have been times where Hugo and his team were struggling mentally, physically, emotionally, and how important it was to be able to put your hand up and say, do you know what, I need help. I'm struggling today. And talking with Hugo the last few months, he said that was a really important aspect of their team to be able to show vulnerability, to be able to ask for help, and then to be able to have each other's backs.

And I think now more than ever in business and in life, [00:09:00] we need to have each other's backs. We need to make those phone calls. We need to just ask each other the question, are you okay today? And Hugo, I think from talking to you, that really stood out, the bond that you guys created in overcoming adversity, but showing that leadership and that vulnerability to ask for help in the bad days, and to express your emotions, was something that I really took away from a mental health perspective. I think it was a great lesson for [00:09:30] certainly everybody in our company, in Jacobs and anybody, I think, listening to the emotions that you guys were feeling along the journey, and the conversations that you had. That was a real takeaway for me.

Paul T:

Yeah. You think about it, you really have to be forthright and honest about, in an extreme condition like that, what your capabilities are, I imagine. Because if you're trying to fake it till you [00:10:00] make it, you're not being honest with yourself about what you're able to do at that moment. You're not only jeopardizing yourself, but you're putting your teammates at risk as well. And then, it's also trusting your teammates to be able to help you, and not condemn you or whatnot. Like, hey come on, pull your weight or whatever, get on your case, but to actually realize, okay, he needs help. For the good of the team, we

need to all come together and then help him when he needs [00:10:30] help, because at some point we'll need help.

So Hugo, kind of on this theme, and having lived this experience at sea and isolation, obviously there's some parallels like we've been talking about with folks globally, who suddenly find themselves in a very disrupted state of life. What advice would you give to people who are struggling with social isolation?

Hugo Mitchell-H...: That's a great question. And you know what, actually, [00:11:00] I mentioned earlier that whether it is working on a submarine or rowing an ocean, it gives you that perspective, of what it takes to endure and overcome that challenging environment. Cause that's the environment you're stuck in, but as Tom put really well, you're not a human being if you don't find it challenging. And even now, I completely echo what many are feeling. I've not enjoyed this year. [00:11:30] I've tried to apply some of the mantra and the experience of those environments I've been in, to try and make it better.

I think some of those real things that I found really helpful, that I didn't really have a choice. When you were stuck on the ocean, you've got two choices, you've got row or don't row. One of them gets you to the end. One of them gets you through the day. One of them gets you to the other end. To this wonderful island of Antigua, [00:12:00] and then the other one doesn't get you anywhere. And I think, probably putting that into something that makes a bit more sense, it was just about having that routine and breaking it down, and living for each war stroke and each shift at a time, each two hour shift. And that would build into a day. And I think in all that, it's taking the time to appreciate all the little wins, all those little things that we all take for granted in day to day life.

[00:12:30] And I do it, I'm guilty of it now, but at the time, for me like having a chocolate bar was heaven. Having a wash once a week was the best thing in the world, what a treat. And just these little things. And it took maybe all these little moments, of small luxuries that I normally take for granted in day to day life, and I probably do take for granted now. You celebrate those little wins. And now I think it's trying to maybe change your perspective. [00:13:00] So fitting that into your routine, just accepting that, I got up, I went for a walk. I got through that meeting, it went well, we got through the day, celebrate those little wins, I think it's one of those really special things.

And it's back also to that human interaction thing. We've got people all around us. We've got colleagues, we've got friends, we've got family. Making time to reach out to them. They're your teammates, they're your crew through [00:13:30] all of this. As you said earlier about vulnerability, this doesn't have to be with colleagues. It doesn't have to be with friends or fa... whatever, it's making time. So it's being authentic, being vulnerable, that incites a level of trust. People know you for the real you, so they feel that they can turn to you. They feel that they can help you. For me, that was something really echoed with me on the Atlantic, [00:14:00] it's not even showing weakness, it's showing that

I was having a hard time to some of my crew mates, allowed them to be open with me.

It built a natural trust between us, that developed over time. And because that trust, when things really went wrong, I knew that they'd have my back, and they did go wrong. Things did really, really go wrong out there, and being able to put that trust, it empowers people to be able to step up, by building that. And if you stonewall people, they don't know what's going on, [00:14:30] they can't help. And likewise, you can't help if they're doing the same to you, it's just about communication. And that's just managed through day to day interaction, and checking in with people, and just being a bit authentic, I suppose.

Paul T: Yeah. And I think when you find yourself in a situation like that, and kind of like in similar to what we're all finding ourselves in now, it really strips away a lot of the superfluous trappings of life. In your [00:15:00] experience, I mean, it's pretty extreme, I mean, you kind of mentioned you couldn't just get up out of the boat and just go for a walk or, I need some alone time or anything. I mean, your day to day life was stripped away from you. So then, the focus on your peers, on your colleagues, on your fellow humans became vitally important. Right? And we strip away all this other stuff, these distractions, it makes us [00:15:30] much more attuned to how important other people are to us. And so, I kind of think that one of the dangers that we have now with the pandemic, is people self-isolating on top of the lockdown. And like you said, like stonewalling and not reaching out to people, and Tom, from a mental health standpoint, what strategies have you seen that have been effective in helping people suddenly working from home for months on end?

Tom Parsons: [00:16:00] Yeah. Good question. And some of the lessons from Hugo's story was, how do you overcome something, when you can't see the end of it? Right? So I'm sure on day one Hugo, when you started that journey, when you're rowing for two hours, and then you get a two hour break, if you were thinking, I have 37 more days of this, you were probably completely fatigued. And I know you were from talking to you on day one. And if you were to focus on even another [00:16:30] 37 days, I know hand in hand from speaking to you, you never would've got there. And I think that lesson of just taking it one day at a time, just focus on winning the day, that was a huge takeaway for me.

Because when this global pandemic started, I was looking at, okay, we're in this for six weeks. And then, that's the end of it, just a lockdown. And when you're looking at a date and time, you don't know when it's going to end. It really messes with your mind. [00:17:00] So I think now more never, a key lesson is to be present. A quote that I have on my phone that really helps keep me grounded, Paul, it's a quote from Ghandi and it says, "We should learn as if we live forever and we should live as if we'll die tomorrow." And actually, if you think about that for a second, I love it, right? Because, we should always be looking to learn, and grow, and develop, and along our journey, right, I'm sure we've learned a lot about ourselves during this global pandemic. [00:17:30]

About our own characters and the character of other people, and we should continue to learn.

But the second part of that is, "We should live as if we'll die tomorrow." And that's so apt, because we don't know what tomorrow will bring. And in Hugo's case, he didn't know what tomorrow would bring. And if he was worried about tomorrow, he would've never overcome the day. So I think it's a real lesson. And from a mental health perspective, if there was one tool I could share with people, it's called, the [00:18:00] circles of control. Right? And it's a tool I came across, and I use it in sport, where you just draw two circles, right? One circle is, what's in my control right now? And the other circle, what's not in my control? Right? And just write down what's in my control, my health, what I eat, who I speak to, my habits in a day to day basis.

Right? What's outside of our control might be the news, might be this global pandemic, might be the future of business, the future of work. Right? [00:18:30] But if we focus all our energy on tomorrow, on what's outside of our control, that's when I think we struggle mentally, because we have no control over our lives. But the beauty of Hugo's story is that, living in the moment, just focusing on every role, just focusing on every hour, ultimately that got the guys and got that team over the line. And something that at the start seemed impossible, four guys, no ocean rowing experience, [00:19:00] are going to row 3,000 miles across the Atlantic, forget about it. No chance. But when they broke it down into these mini goals every hour, every day, every week, eventually they got to that destination. I think that's how we should approach mental health. So great takeaway from Hugo's story.

Hugo Mitchell-H...: [crosstalk 00:19:19] I love that, Tom. Yeah.

Paul T: Yeah. You're right. Cause you can get swallowed up so easy if you're focused on the big picture. If [00:19:30] you think about just how massive everything is, life, and how little control we actually have over our lives. So it's like if you break it down to what you can control, on the small level, and focus on those daily wins, I mean, that seems to be a really powerful strategy for kind of dealing with that. Hugo, what would you say are the core lessons, or a core lesson, that you learned about overcoming adversity, that we would all [00:20:00] do well to keep in mind?

Hugo Mitchell-H...: Overcoming adversity for me, it was more than just an individual thing. It's how we did it amongst each other. So again, back to what Tom said minutes ago, is how you learn about each other, and how you react to something that's not ideal, whether it's a bad day, [00:20:30] or things not quite going your way, you're back to the uncontrollables, how you react to those, how you do the bits that are within your control. And we had a few moments.

We had ones that might not seem like a big deal, but for me were adversity, it was a race that we were in on the Atlantics, we were racing other teams. And

we decided to take a very northerly route. The wind didn't quite work in our favor, and we ended up being blown backwards for about a day. [00:21:00] Whilst all of the southern teams were flying past us. And it's how do you deal with things not quite going your way? We couldn't do anything about the weather. How do we re-baseline, how do we deal with ourselves in that moment? How do you go back to thinking about what is in your control? What was in our control was we can change our course. We can change our objective. We can change our shift pattern. There are things that we can do. It's that emotional resilience, to being able to come up with a very sensible [00:21:30] way of getting through stuff. That's the pragmatic way, that is the controllables and uncontrollables.

For me, back to what we were talking about earlier. And this is again the favorite story, is that moment of how vulnerability and authenticity leads to being able to get through adverse moments. I had this moment where I was sleeping in the cabin, we'd got past that hard bit where we were being blown backwards. [00:22:00] The waves had picked up. It was back to being on the log flume. I was fast asleep in that back cabin, getting some much needed rest. I'd been asleep about half an hour, and then about 50, 60 liters of water came in through the cabin door. Everything in that cabin was rolling on top of me, I went upside down and it was a brief moment of feeling like I was in a human size washing machine. And what had happened on deck was our boat had spun sideways. And we'd capsized in the middle of the night, out about [00:22:30] five, 600 miles from Antigua.

For me, in that moment, that was our biggest moment of overcoming adversity as a team, that was, that everything that had led to that moment of being authentic, of showing vulnerability, of building an ethos, a culture, led to the two guys on deck, taking charge of the situation, getting the boat back in a safe position. Because in the cabins, you can't open the hatches because they would flood, [00:23:00] the boat wouldn't self-right, you'd be upside down. You would be sitting ducks in the water, in horrendous conditions, potentially life threatening. But, so putting that complete faith in people, who you've empowered with trust, to be able to look after you, was probably the most powerful moment of my life.

That one, that will stay with me forever, is knowing that in that moment, I knew that I was in safe hands because [00:23:30] we developed that through good teamwork, through good chat. And I mean, teamwork is such a buzzword, isn't it? It was just a case of trust, which had come through all these small things, all this buildup of things. So for me, that is the pinnacle of overcoming adversity, was just being able to trust people, and that doesn't come by just flicking a switch. That takes work. It takes work to be able to overcome it. See, [00:24:00] that's the powerful one for me.

Paul T: No, I can imagine. So, picture of the scene, you are in this little cabin and it's flooding with water, and you know rationally, if you open the door, you're going

to flood the cabin, and the boat won't be able to right itself. But there's got to be a bit of a sense of powerlessness, because you want to preserve your life, right? You want to flee from the danger, but you can't do anything. You can't take action because [00:24:30] if you read it right, if you took action, you would just make the situation worse.

So you just have to have faith that the two guys on deck are going to do their job, and they're going to take care of business, and that you all will come through it. And it's easy for us to talk about teamwork when we're sitting in our offices and having coffee or tea, and talking about meetings. But when you're out in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and it's your life on the line, I mean that's really got to take [00:25:00] some real, I think fortitude.

Hugo Mitchell-H...: I think it is exactly the same though. It develops a culture, whether it's an organization, a sports team, a family, whatever, it's developing it in culture. It's all well and good having posters that say we have a good culture, but it's the practice, isn't it? It's practicing all those little things that make a culture and ethos really special, [00:25:30] living it, because when it's needed, whether it's capsizing, or when you're under pressure to deliver a project, and things aren't quite going your way. It's how you overcome those moments together, look after each other. Because again, there's things beyond it. There's moments beyond it where you can reflect on it and you've learned, and you've overcome that together, and that makes it even more [00:26:00] special.

Paul T: So Tom, same question for you. What are the core lessons about overcoming adversity that we would all do well to keep in mind?

Tom Parsons: Yeah. Well, I think the first thing we need to keep in mind, and listening to Hugo, what really resonates with me is, I think first of all, we need to recognize that being faced with adversity isn't always a bad thing. Right? And just reflect for a minute, right? Again, anybody listening to this, [00:26:30] we cannot, no matter how much we steer our lives, we can't escape setbacks. We're going to have conflict. We're going to have difficult projects. Like how many of us are going to struggle with physical illness, the prevalence of cancers in our families or our friends? Unfortunately, we've all, or we will, experience bereavement or relationship breakups. So, setbacks are going to happen. And what's really interesting is, [00:27:00] Hugo put his hand up with his team to say, I want 37 days of extreme setbacks and adversity to allow us to personally grow.

So, all the adversity that we're faced right now, we can either look at it completely negatively and think, I wish this didn't happen. Like why me? And be in that kind of blame or fault mindset, or we can be in that [00:27:30] mindset of, do you know what, I'm going to take this on. I'm going to use this responsibility. I'm going to allow this setback in my life to grow and learn and develop. And that's what resilience is. And you know, when we look at our mental health program in Jacobs, and I think a lot of us are talking about this buzzword, resiliency. You can't develop resilience in life if you don't learn how

to overcome setbacks. One of my favorite books is, Feel The [00:28:00] Fear And Do It Anyways.

I had an extreme fear for flying for two years. And if I just stopped flying, I look at all the amazing stories and memories I have from just getting around the world in my role with Jacobs, or personally, and I think, Hugo facing all those fears and overcoming them, I know from talking to Hugo, is your character must have increased. You must have learned so much about yourself [00:28:30] and others. And I hope this year people reflect on what they've learned from adversity. And I was reflecting today on why do we do what we do? We're all chasing this thing called maybe happiness or contentment, right? And an equation I found today actually in thinking about this, what is a definition of contentment? Right? And I have it written down here cause I'm an engineer by trade and I love equations.

[00:29:00] And it is, to want what you have divided by to have what you want, and think about it, to want what you have to divide by, to have what you want. So sometimes, we just need to forget about what we want and just reflect what do we have in our lives. And I don't know about you, Hugo, but when you came off that journey, did it help instill a sense of gratitude in what you had in your life? Appreciation for [00:29:30] the small things, let it be a Mars Bar, or bottled water, or a hot meal, or like-

Hugo Mitchell-H...: A shower.

Tom Parsons: A shower, or six hours sleep. Because I give out that I have a 13 month old child, and I'm only getting four hours of sleep a night. So you guys getting an hour of sleep over two or three days, I'm sure the sense of gratitude must have increased after your journey.

Hugo Mitchell-H...: No, definitely. It definitely [00:30:00] amplified my sense of perspective, a sense of perspective I already had, being a submariner, being deployed for, I mean, months on end where those small luxuries, where we all take for granted in life, aren't there, but it definitely emphasized what matters, made you grateful for such basic things. I wouldn't say it changed me as a person, but it definitely enriched my personality. I think it's as you say very well, [00:30:30] you can see what the human body's capable of, that we can put ourselves through some quite incredible things where we're so flexible, so moldable as creatures. We go through this whole transition through our lives, and to be able to see, where relatively normal people get through this, is quite eyeopening about what else one can do. What else can we put ourselves through? And I'm not talking about incredible adventures, but [00:31:00] definitely in day to day life, how we can go about being better human beings. And it has certainly enriched me in that perspective. Yeah, definitely.

Paul T: Well so, Hugo, my last question for today is, if you could do it all over again, what would you have done differently?

Hugo Mitchell-H...: Really good question. I think I would've brought more Nutella. What I said last [00:31:30] time, I would definitely bring more Nutella. Actually, I mean this is more talking about the technicalities of rowing, but there's no blueprint to do it perfectly. You'll see different people have done it in the world, and people try different things out to do it. And again, it's back to controllables and uncontrollables, but one of the controllables is, it's almost impossible to eat for your first four days. It's just such a shock to the human body to go [00:32:00] into two hours on, two hours off, add sunshine, seasickness, the actual pattern wearing, and exhaustion, so on. It definitely has a huge impact on your ability to kind of keep calories down. And so definitely more tasty foods to be able to circumnavigate seasickness.

Yeah, very kindly pointed out to us was our routing. Probably try and pick a better router next time to point us in the right direction. I think we were actually the team who covered the most miles. [00:32:30] I think it's a 3,000 mile crossing. We must have done about 3,100. I think we did an extra couple days worth of rowing, because of that route that took us so far north, we ended up having to do this funny Z shape across the Atlantic. But you know what, that was all part of our journey. That was all part of our journey, is if it had been quick and easy, we wouldn't have experienced those life-enriching moments. Yeah, as Tom puts it, adverse [00:33:00] moments that build you as a character. Yeah. Definitely get a better router to point you in the right direction. Interesting stuff.

Paul T: Well, you had the journey you were meant to have. Right? And I mean, what an amazing experience. So, Hugo and Tom, thank you both so much for talking with me today. It's a fascinating story and there's a lot of lessons that we can learn from it. Not many of us will get to say that we rowed across the Atlantic, but [00:33:30] you're going out there and you're doing that for those of us at home, but we're learning lessons from the journey that you made. And Tom, thank you so much for your wise words about what we can do, to kind of be present in the moment. And I think for me, kind of the focus on looking at those adverse conditions as positives and not as negatives, and it's all about mindset, and how you're framing the context of what you're being confronted with. So Hugo and Tom, thank you both so much.

Hugo Mitchell-H...: [00:34:00] Thank you very much. In fact, definitely next time I need to bring a Tom Parsons with me, cause what we need is Ghandi quotes on a day to day basis, to get us through the, yeah, I'll definitely bring more Ghandi quotes with me next time. Yeah. Thanks again, guys. Really appreciate it.

Tom Parsons: Really enjoyed that. Thanks folks.