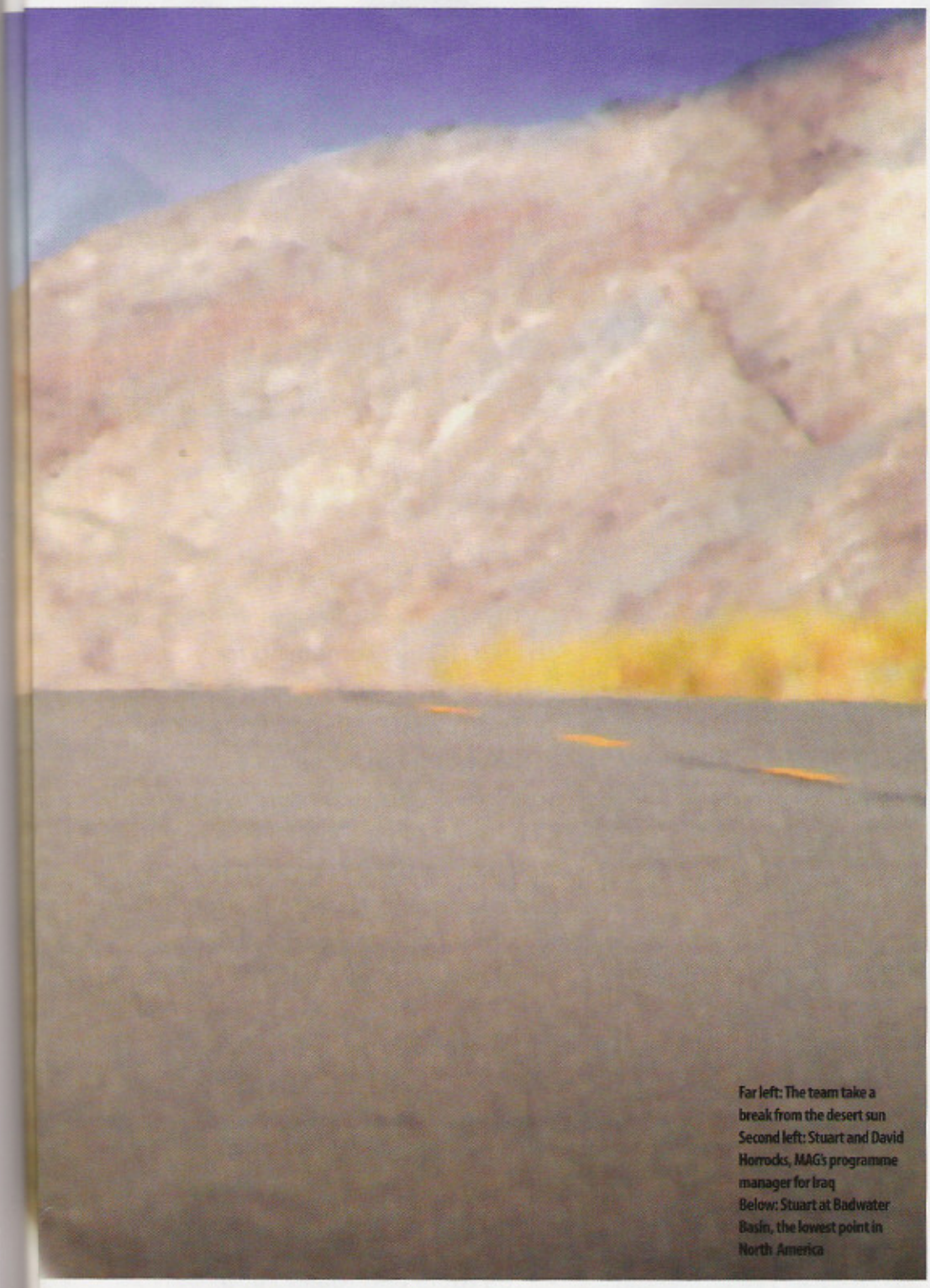
Into Death Valley again

After **Stuart Hughes** lost a leg in Iraq he turned to his bike for mobility… and then rode it into one of the harshest landscapes on earth…



Far left: The team take a break from the desert sun
Second left: Stuart and David Horrocks, MAG's programme manager for Iraq
Below: Stuart at Badwater Basin, the lowest point in North America

The state of the art machine is custom-built from the lightest carbon fibre and aluminium components, and handmade by a team of dedicated British engineers. If only the bike that propelled me across Death Valley in California was made to the same specifications as my prosthetic leg.

The mere suggestion of crossing a desert on two wheels would have been unthinkable to me a few years ago. But on 2 April 2003, I smelled explosives and burned meat and knew immediately that my life would never be the same again.

I had been sent to Iraq two months earlier by the BBC in anticipation of imminent war. I was working as a news producer in the Kurdish-controlled north of the country as part of a three-man team, which also included veteran Middle East correspondent Jim Muir and award-winning Iranian cameraman, Kaveh Golestan. As the American-led assault on Iraq gathered pace we reported from across the region and prepared for our anticipated dash to Baghdad if – or more likely when – the Iraqi capital fell.

My war, however, did not turn out as planned. During a routine assignment to film a trench abandoned by retreating Iraqi soldiers I stepped on a hidden anti-personnel landmine. The 240g of high explosives packed inside tore off my right heel, driving dirt and fractured bone deep inside my leg.

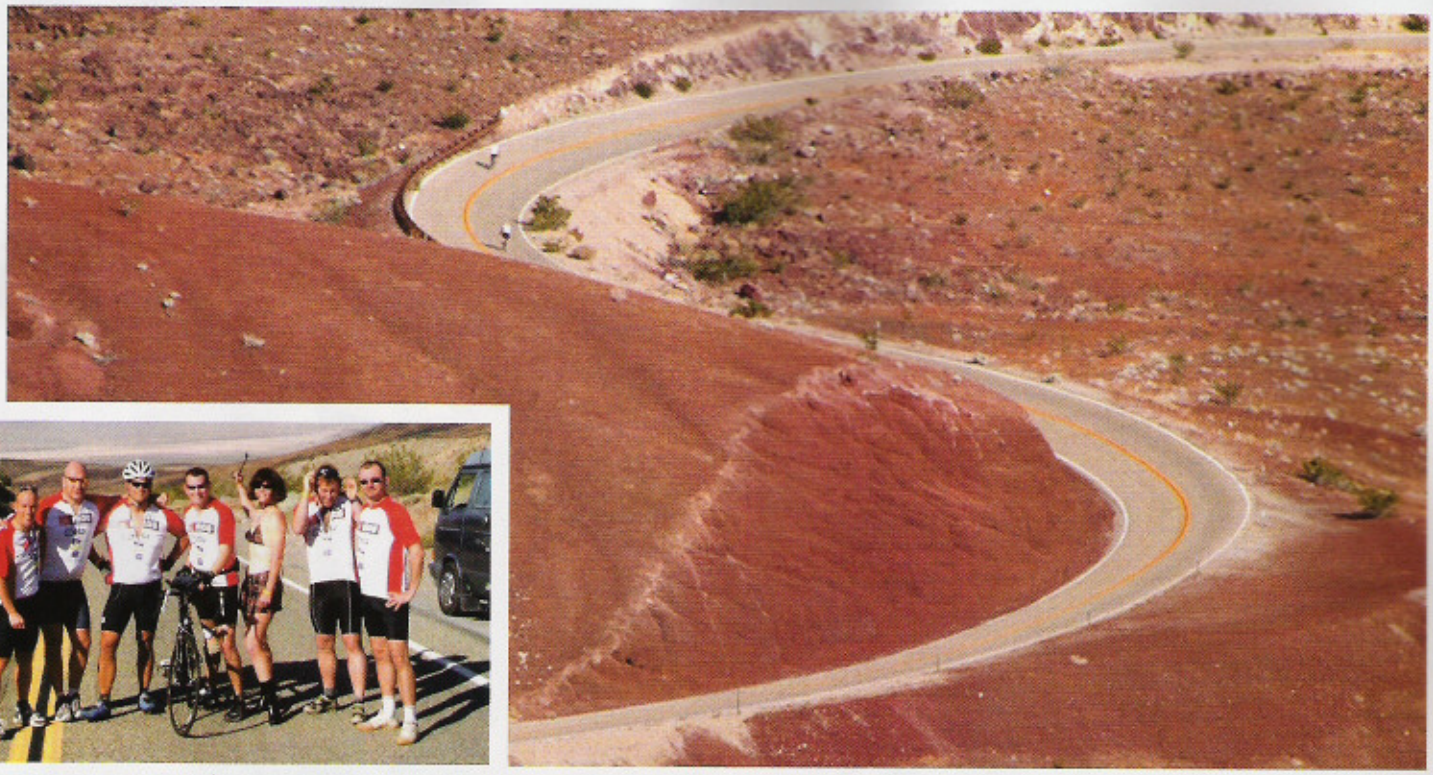
Hearing the blast and thinking we were coming under mortar fire, Kaveh acted instinctively and tried to run for safety. But instead he ran deeper into the minefield, triggering two more mines buried beneath the ground. Kaveh was killed instantly.

I was given emergency treatment by American Special Forces surgeons before being flown back to the UK. Doctors worked hard to save my mangled foot and lower leg but the damage was too extensive for reconstructive surgery to have had any chance of success. Five days after stepping on the mine, I underwent a below-knee amputation.

It was during the long and painful rehabilitation process that I began cycling.

Two months after the amputation I was fitted with my first prosthetic leg. My residual limb – which I christened 'Mr Stumpy' – was still painfully swollen and tender. I couldn't walk further than a few hundred yards without wincing. Even a simple errand such as getting to the corner shop to buy the newspaper felt like running a marathon but I hated the idea of using a car for short journeys. It occurred to me that a bike could be the answer because it would mean I wouldn't have to transfer all my body weight through my injured leg. I bought myself a cheap bike and found that, sure enough, cycling was much more comfortable than walking. I was elated. I had managed to regain some of my lost mobility and independence.

My prosthetist explained that walking with an artificial leg uses up to 20 per cent more energy, so the fitter I was, the easier



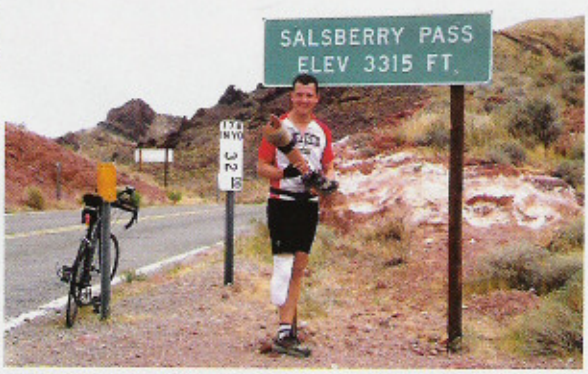
it would be to cope with the additional strain my body was being put under. Cycling became an important part of my rehab. It was certainly preferable to spending hours working out in the dull surroundings of the hospital gym. It also acted as a valuable stress-buster as I began to come to terms with the trauma of losing a limb.

Not that learning to cycle as an amputee was without its challenges. Most annoyingly, my prosthesis would keep slipping off the pedal at unexpected moments because it didn't flex at the ankle like flesh and bone. SPD pedals weren't an option because clipping in and out of them required a more subtle range of movements than the artificial limb was capable of. The internet revealed that other amputees had already come up with a solution – good, old-fashioned pedal cages and foot straps. Problem solved!

During my rehab I became a patron of the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), a humanitarian organisation which clears landmines in war torn countries around the world – including the part of Iraq where I was injured. Cycling 200 miles across Death Valley seemed like the perfect way to test just how 'disabled' I really was. A core team of two, me and BBC safety advisor Craig Summers, soon swelled to six. Some, such as Ironman finisher Matt Willson and triathlete Brian Britt, were experienced cyclists. Others, me included, were relative beginners.

Choosing the right time of year was critical if we were to prevent our tyres dissolving into melted chocolate on the road. Average temperatures in Death Valley hover around 40 degrees celsius through the summer months. Only the Sahara Desert has managed to surpass Death Valley's all-time record temperature of 57 degrees. On that day in 1913, one observer noted, "it was so hot that swallows were falling dead out of the sky." Not that the soaring temperatures deter dozens of masochists from taking part each year in the Badwater Ultramarathon, an unimaginably brutal 135-mile slog through the Valley in mid-July. For us mere mortals the milder months of late autumn seemed like a much more realistic option, offering a perfect combination of comfortably warm conditions in the mid 20s, little chance of rain and light winds.

Left: Mistress Derailleur Leslie Tappan whips the team into shape
Below: Stuart stretches one leg – and takes off the other – after another desert climb



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And so, in early November, we set off from the town of Lone Pine, at the crossroads between the jagged peaks of the Sierra Nevada and the western edge of Death Valley. Mount Whitney, the highest point in the United States outside Alaska, loomed at our backs like a disapproving schoolteacher as we headed southeast along Highway 136. The first leg of 48 miles was deliberately gentle to give everyone a chance to acclimatise and iron out any unexpected mechanical problems. After almost 20 miles on the flat we began our first climb to an elevation of 1600m and the landmark of Father Crowley Point, named after the Irish missionary who became known as the 'Padre of the Desert'. Then it was downhill all the way, an exhilarating 20 mile descent into the western-style resort of Panamint Springs. Later, as the rest of the team bedded down for the night in the huge RV we had rented as our support vehicle, I laid out our bike bags on the dusty ground, marvelling at the vast desert sky above as I drifted off to sleep.

The first non-Native Americans passed through Death Valley in 1849, in search of a shortcut from Nevada to the Californian gold rush towns to the west. These pioneers gave the area its name after barely surviving the trip across the desert. Within a few decades the native Timbisha Shoshone people were being forced out of their homeland by the mining companies who exploited the region's mineral deposits, most notably borax, a harsh alkaline used in the manufacture of soap. I knew our second day's cycling would be as harsh as the chemical that was hauled by the ton on the back of mules during the 1880s. In fact, I'd been dreading it from the day I looked at the topographic map prepared for participants of the Furnace Creek 508, an annual endurance cycling event organised by the same sadists who are responsible for the Badwater Ultramarathon. After a 5 mile descent, Highway 190 ascends tortuously for 8 unbroken miles to the top of Towne Pass at 1500m. As a climbing novice, the prospect filled me with dread. I soon discovered that my artificial leg, an amazing a piece of engineering though it is, reveals its limitations on the climbs.

With no foot, ankle or shin muscles in my amputated right leg, my remaining joints were forced to work overtime to power me up the hill. My prosthetic limb began to feel like a clumsy spare part instead of a natural extension of my body. At one point, I stopped to refuel and seek a few moments of respite from the desert sun. While trying to dismount my bike, my prosthesis became caught in its foot strap. As I tried to tug it free the silicone sock that connects it to my real leg slid off with a sweaty plop. I tried in vain to maintain my balance before slumping into the dust, my prosthesis still dangling lamely from the pedal. It was an indignity Michael Rasmussen will never have to encounter!

Thankfully, as we rounded another switchback, our indefatigable support team had a morale-boosting surprise waiting for us. Leslie Tappan, nurse, super-soigneur and broom wagon driver extraordinaire had transformed herself into Mistress Derailleur. Dressed in an outlandish wig and miniskirt, and brandishing a riding crop, she whipped us towards the summit, shouting encouragement. It was the perfect tonic for tired legs and two and three quarter hours after setting out from Panamint Springs, we reached the top of Towne Pass. At the summit we came across a group of Porsche test drivers putting next year's models through their paces. We consoled ourselves with the fact that, although they had much more impressive wheels than us, they'd never have Mistress Derailleur on their team!

We celebrated our success in completing the most difficult stretch of the ride, soaking in the views of the Panamint Valley and the Argus Mountain Range, before clicking on our helmets for the descent we'd all been looking forward to – an unbroken 19 mile ride back down to sea level. Buzzing with adrenaline, we freewheeled into Furnace Creek, the centre of Death Valley's tourist trade. After travelling through arid mountains, tinted red by the oxidised minerals trapped in the rocks, the sight of the lush greens and fairways of the Furnace Creek Ranch's 18-hole golf course seemed surreal, as though mankind was trying to thumb its nose at nature by imposing acres of manicured grass amid the raw beauty of the desert.

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From the heights of Towne Pass, our third day's cycling took us to the depths of Badwater Basin, which at 855m below sea level is the lowest point in the western Hemisphere. Between two and four thousand years ago, the giant lake that existed on the valley floor evaporated to create a thick crust of salt. The desiccated plain sucked every drop of moisture from the air, forcing us to take on extra fluids to ward off dehydration. Smooth blacktop gave way to rutted and pock-marked asphalt as we continued south away from the main roads and tourist routes, slowing our progress and causing the one and only puncture of the entire trip. Yet the journey through this shimmering dried-out pond provided some of the most memorable cycling of the entire trip.

Organised accommodation is non-existent this deep inside Death Valley, so we grabbed a few hours' rest next to the abandoned gold mine of Ashford Mill. A coyote circled our camp, looking for scraps, as we prepared our bikes for the final day's cycling.

Just two more climbs stood between us and the finish line – the twin peaks of Jubilee Pass (390m) and Salsberry Pass (1010m). After the rigours of day two they seemed like mere hillocks. A left turn onto at the hamlet of Shoshone marked the start of the home stretch – a 27 mile blast along Highway 127. I tucked down onto my aero bars and stepped up the pace as we rode north. With the GPS showing a total distance of 199 miles the team regrouped and we rode together into Death Valley Junction – journey's end.

There were no cheering crowds to greet our arrival, just a few curious desert rats, their faces weathered from years in the desert sun. But I didn't need a round of applause or a medal to feel a deep sense of satisfaction at having retraced the route of the '49ers. I thought back to the day in April 2003 when the surgeon told me I was going to lose part of my leg. I had watched the war I'd covered for the previous two months play out on television from my hospital bed, firmly believing that my life was over. How wrong I was. Less than three years later I was fitter and stronger than I'd been in my life. I'd discovered a passion for cycling. I'd succeeded in a challenge that never would have occurred to me had I not stepped on that landmine. And with more than £15,000 raised in sponsorship for the life-saving work of the Mines Advisory Group, we'd helped rid the world of a few of the world's real death valleys. ■

Below: Stuart and his bike strike a pose during their Death Valley ride