

EXERCISE

# RAPID ZAMBEZI

For the Royal Navy, adventurous training and sport are fundamental parts of service life. Paddlesport offers a chance to expose service personnel to the maritime environment, building teamwork, resilience, and a breadth of experiences that support our working lives.

Lt Cdr Oliver Taylor-Wood RN — red boat

Lt David Fenwick RN — green boat

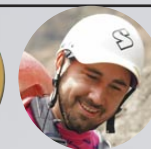
CPO Andrew Pipes — red boat with headcam

PO (ATI) Gareth Smith — injured guy

Cpl Neil Lutas — black boat

L/Cpl Daniel Netherwood — purple boat

Ms Lowri Davies — blue boat — Flow Free kayaks coach/guide



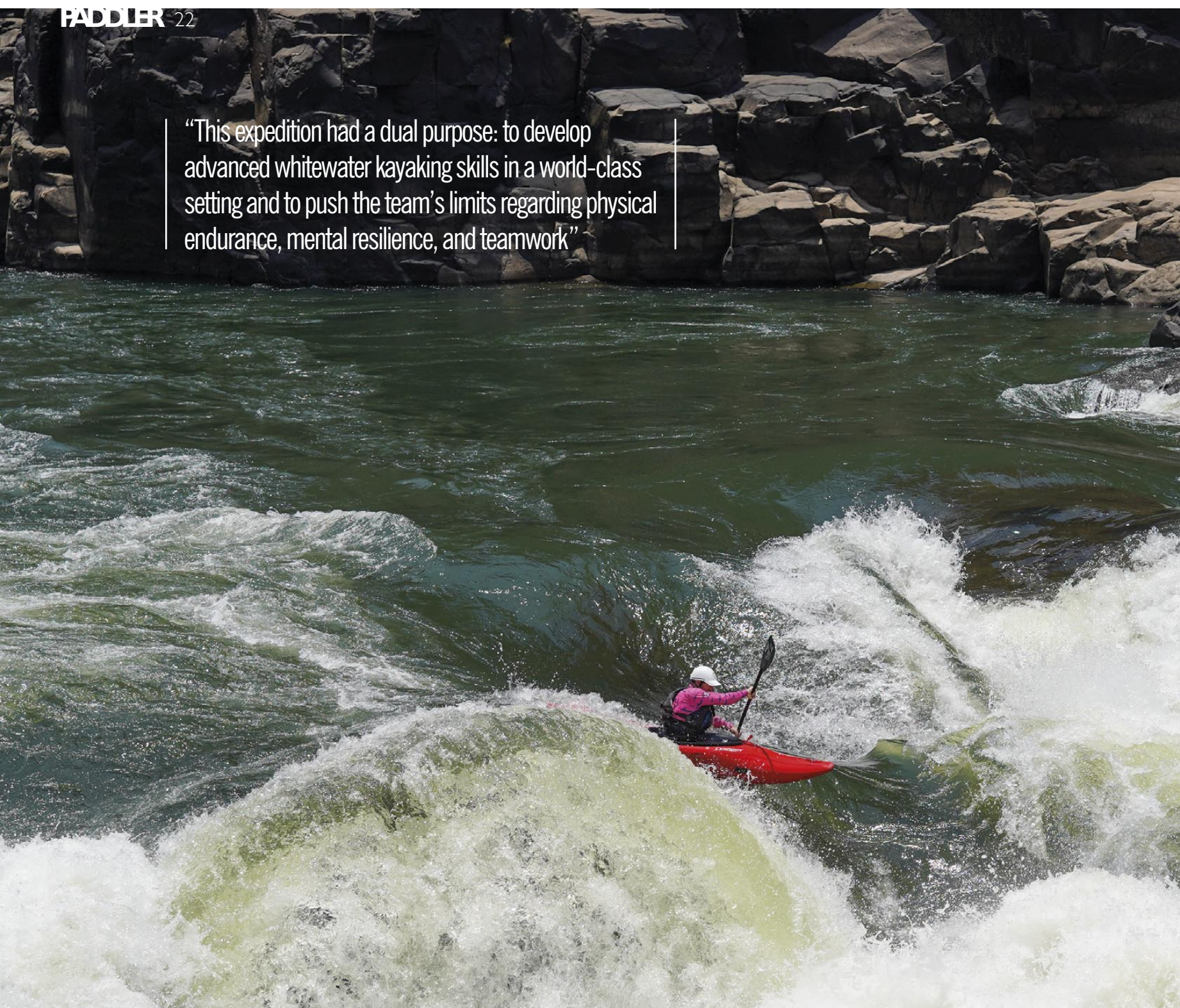
Words: Lt Cdr Oliver Taylor-Wood RN

Photos: xxxxxx





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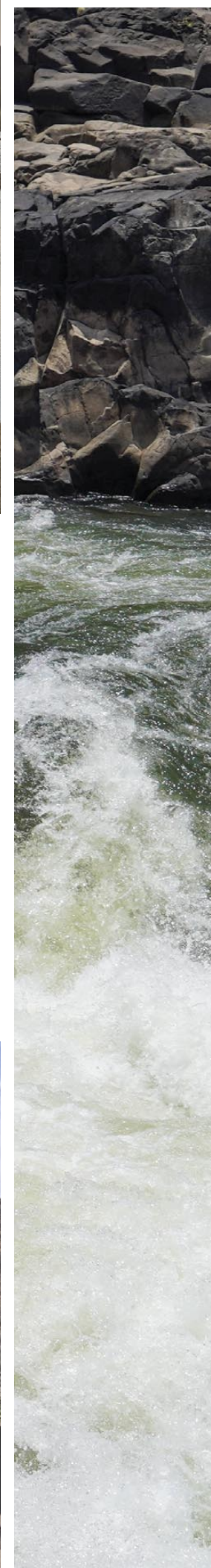
In November, the Royal Navy Paddlesport Association (RNPA) conducted an expedition to Zambia, where they faced the challenge of navigating the exhilarating rapids of the world-famous Zambezi River. Exercise RAPID ZAMBEZI started just beneath the awe-inspiring Victoria Falls, the team navigated a series of high-volume rapids from 1-25, pushing skill and determination in one of the planet’s most demanding whitewater environments. This expedition had a dual purpose: to develop advanced whitewater kayaking skills in a world-class setting and to push the team’s limits regarding physical endurance, mental resilience, and teamwork. The stunning scenery along the Zambezi provided a rare opportunity to promote kayaking and adventure training within the Royal Navy and the wider armed forces. It underscored the versatility and toughness required to succeed in challenging environments on land or water.

### THE ZAMBEZI: A TEST OF NERVE AND SKILL

The Zambezi River is renowned for its powerful rapids and dramatic landscapes, making it a prime

location for extreme adventure sports. Above Victoria Falls, the river flows calmly through Zambia’s Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, teeming with wildlife like elephants, hippos, and crocodiles along its sandy banks. But as the river approaches the falls, the tranquil waters quickly give way to ferocious rapids. Locally known as Mosi-oa-Tunya, meaning ‘The Smoke That Thunders,’ the falls create a deafening roar and a mist that billows into the air as the river plunges into the Batoka Gorge below, carving out one of the world’s most renowned stretches of whitewater.

For the Royal Navy team, the journey began in the turbulent waters just below Victoria Falls, where the force of the river’s flow immediately introduced them to the intensity of the Zambezi’s rapids. The river meanders through the Batoka Gorge, where 25 rapids with names like ‘The Devil’s Toilet Bowl,’ ‘Stairway to Heaven,’ ‘Commercial Suicide,’ and ‘Oblivion’ awaited. Each rapid tested the team’s skill, concentration, and teamwork, offering an unparalleled river-running experience not found in the UK or Europe.







### NAVIGATING THE GORGE

In addition to the technical demands of whitewater kayaking, the team faced the physical challenge of navigating the Batoka Gorge. Temperatures soared above 38 degrees, far beyond normal for the season, adding an extra layer of difficulty to an already gruelling expedition. The kayakers had to carefully manage hydration, pacing, and recovery to avoid heat exhaustion while navigating the fast-moving currents and unpredictable river conditions. The walks in and out of the gorge were also punishing, with steep, rocky paths and precarious wooden ladders. The team was left in awe of the local porters, who effortlessly carried multiple kayaks up the treacherous terrain – and, on one occasion, even a kayaker himself!

### NOT ALL PLAIN SAILING

No matter how many risk assessments you write and how much preparation you put in, accidents will happen in extreme environments. On day two of the expedition, the team had to deal with just that. While scouting Rapid 4, which had some rather sizable waves and holes to navigate at low water, a team member fell and badly injured his ankle. On a Grade 3 river next to road or path access in the UK, this wouldn't be too much of an issue, but deep in the Batoka Gorge, we knew we needed to act – fast!

With team members supporting the casualty, the remaining worked on getting communications back to SAFFAR (our in-country support) and, very fortuitously, managed to flag a passing rafting group for assistance. Hot weather exasperated the blood loss on a very deep cut, so getting the casualty to a primary healthcare facility quickly was essential. While a serious situation, the team quickly worked together to stabilise the situation, plan an evacuation, and, of course, kept morale high throughout with a good, if sometimes morbid sense of military humour.

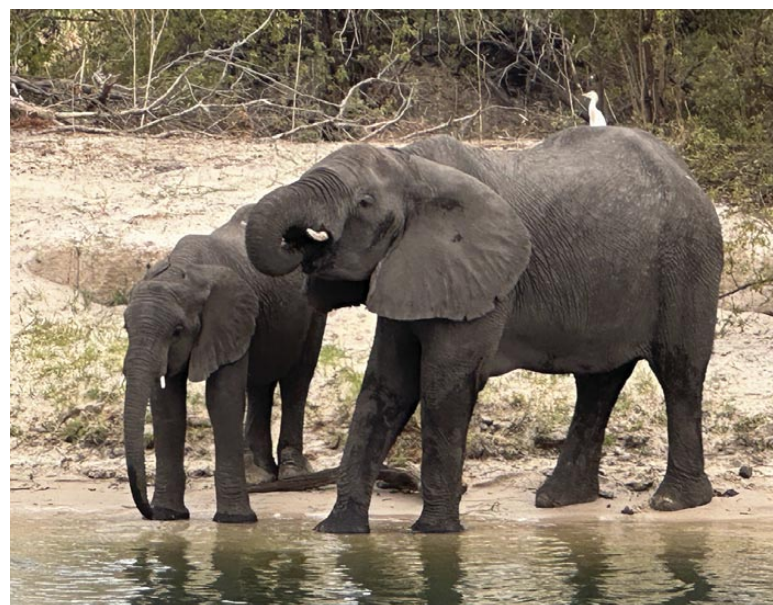
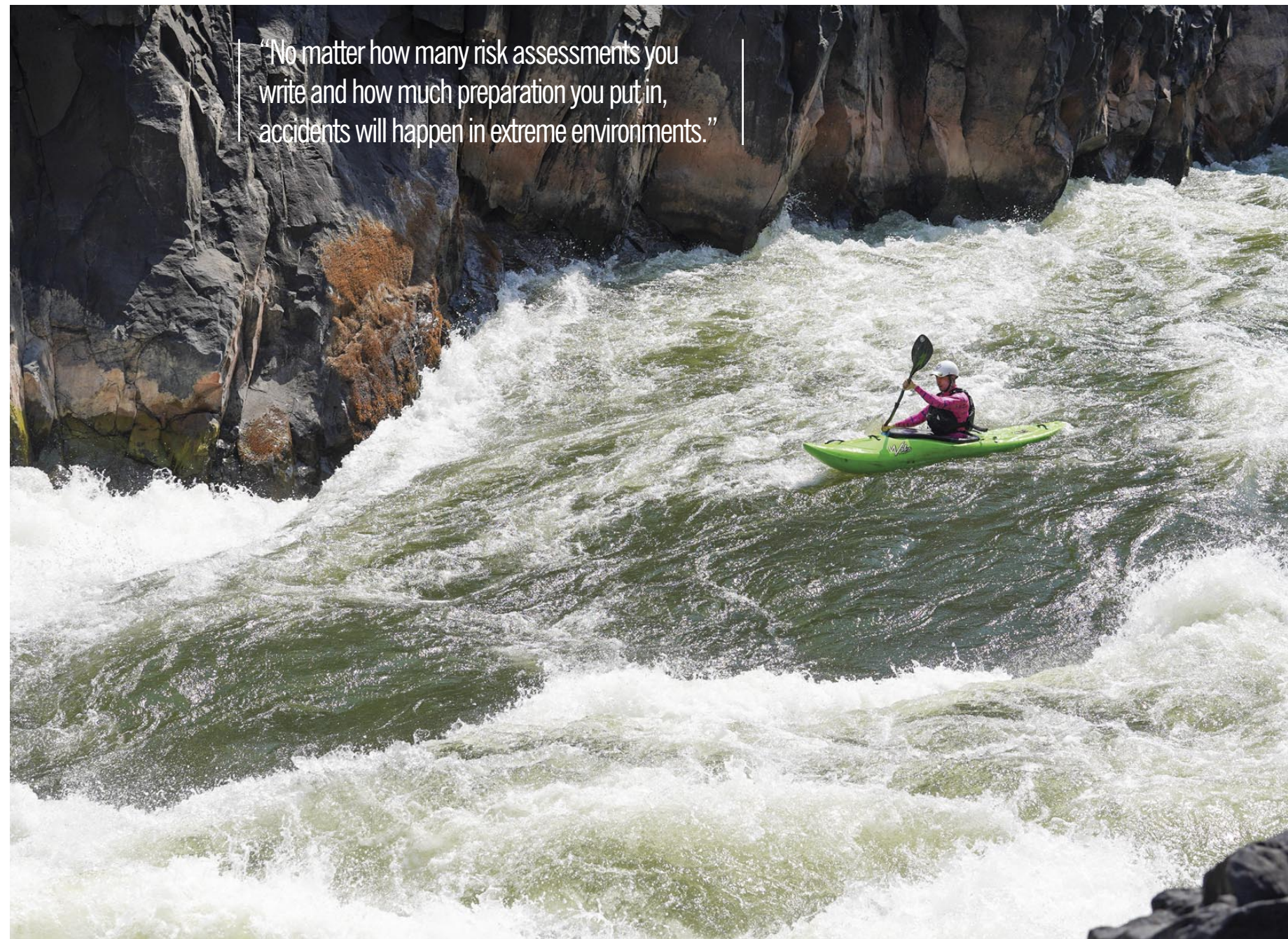
The team decided to meet local porters at Rapid 6, the closest exit point, around one-kilometre downriver from the incident location. This meant the casualty would need to raft down one of the largest rapids on the river, the famous Rapid Number 5. The remaining members paddled behind and, within around 45 minutes, were able to hand the casualty over to porters who carried him out of the gorge – anything to get out of the walkout! A trip to the primary healthcare provider in Livingstone ended in eight stitches, all provided by the resident South African doctor.

### TOP TIPS FOR YOUR OWN ZAMBEZI EXPEDITION

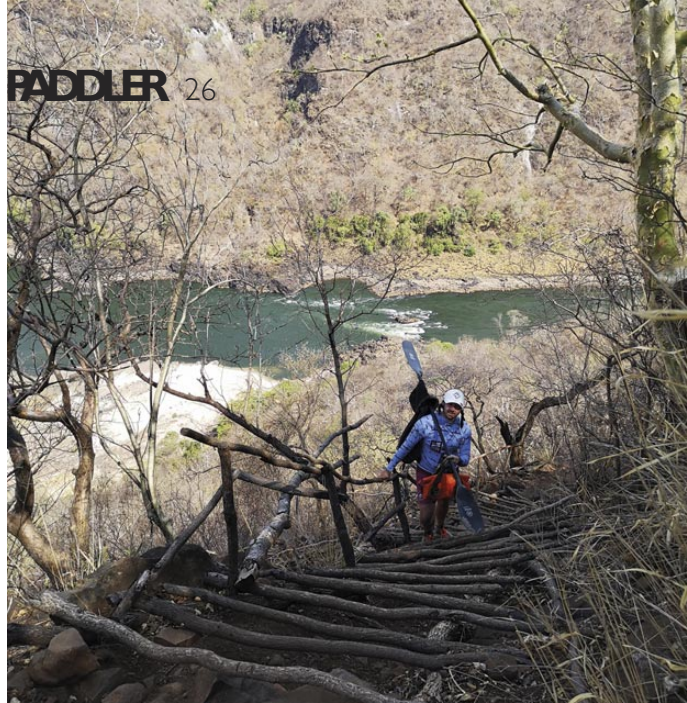
Use the experts. Use a reputable guide and logistics provider with country and river knowledge. While you might save a few £££ going alone, you'll get so much more by using someone who knows the lines, knows the people and, importantly, will keep you safe. We used Lowri Davies from Flow Free Kayaking; she supports a lot of our military activity and has been a key element in planning and delivering expeditions in France, Germany, Austria and now Zambia. For logistics, we used Sven at SAFFAR. Everyone on the river knows Sven, who has over 20 years of experience supporting paddlers in the region.

### EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN.

It is essential on any river, but especially when paddling in remote environments, to have an emergency action plan. You need a detailed knowledge of where you can exit the river, what support you can get, and in what timeframe. We used a phone with a local SIM and a Garmin In-Reach for comms, had medical kits spread across boats, and even had a portable defibrillator (better to be safe than sorry). When an incident happens, all that preparation supports your initial response.







### HEAT

While hiking into and out of the gorge, the temperature can be extreme, and you are exposed for much of it; we had up to three degrees on three of our six days of paddling. Water bottles are essential, and you need to plan on carrying at least three litres even on short days (Rapids No. 1 to 14). Suncream is a must, and UVB long-sleeved rash vests or sun hoodies will limit your risk of sunburn.

### TRAINING

Paddling training is important, and any chance to get on the river, practice rolling in a pool, or use surf to train your 'big water' skills will be important. Physically, however, the walk-ins and walkouts are tough. Hiking, step machines, and lower body strength workouts prior to travel will help.

### FOOD/ACCOMMODATION

Livingstone is full of good restaurants and accommodation. Food is relatively cheap outside of the hotels, and no one on our trip had a bad meal – the crocodile pizza is highly recommended! We stayed

at Fawty Towers. It was much cheaper than many of the riverbank hotels but still had a pool, air conditioning, bar, and restaurant, and it was perfect for paddlers.

Adventure training has long been a key element of military preparedness, fostering leadership, teamwork, and resilience. The Zambezi expedition serves as a powerful testament to the Royal Navy's commitment to pushing the limits of adventure training. It inspires future generations of sailors and marines to embrace the spirit of adventure while building the mental and physical strength needed to thrive in any environment.

Our thanks go to the Royal Navy Adventurous Training HQ, Royal Navy & Royal Marines Charity, The Royal Navy Sports Lottery, Navy Sport, Team Forces, FlowFree, SAFPAR and Dewestone for supporting the expedition.

