

Below: Four decades on the original Darién Gap El Primero will take pride of place in the Zenith museum and is to make a come back this summer in the form of a limited edition replica. **Opposite page:** A crew of Royal Engineers was responsible for the digging, laying ladders, cutting trees, winching etc to keep the Range Rover's moving through the jungle and allowing the team to become the first vehicle-based expedition to traverse both American continents north-to-south through the Darién Gap. Photographs courtesy of the British Motor Industry Heritage trust (BMIHT).



A collage featuring a vintage newspaper clipping, a Zenith El Primero chronograph watch, and a photograph of a man in a jungle. The newspaper clipping includes the headline "Mission «danger»" and text about Major J. N. Blanford-Snell and his expedition. The watch is a gold-tone chronograph with a metal bracelet. The photograph shows a man in a white hat and green uniform walking through a dense jungle.

Mission «danger»

Le Major J. N. Blanford-Snell, avec son chronographe Zenith El Primero aux poches. Chef d'une extraordinaire expédition sur le continent américain, il est en train de faire feu, il en a tout le mérite et l'exactitude dans sa tâche. Le caractère imprévisible de l'expédition n'est pas sans conséquence sur la santé des hommes. La traversée de la zone de mangrove est particulièrement dangereuse. Le Panama et de la

Il est né en... C'est au... Les... prim... apprendiss... que travaill... pays... M. C... la nature... vivre... «... sous les sapins... toutefois, ce qu... entend par sacs est plutôt une ferme... isolée à 1200 m d'altitude, à la Barigüe... juste à la frontière des communes du... Locha et de La Chaux-de-Fonds» et qu'il... n'a cessé de transformer depuis 10 ans... Tout à tour maçon, peintre, bricoleur, il... fait tout lui-même dans sa grande maison... et se repose de son travail, dit-on, en... faisant de l'accordéon ou du saxo. «Sur... tout de l'accordéon... s'empresse-t-il de pré... senter, non pas de classique. Et il m'est... arrivé de passer, surtout au fusain... Ça... personne... mon sport... est le ski de fond et... également le mar... à l'épousée voici 22... trois enfants... dernière de la... premier fils pro-

pas

Le son... cément, de... même... arci, ou la... petite touc... dans l'œil... Non pas p... spécialement... ment on se... pas tout... spécialement... a bien... fait son travail... Ceci n'est pas... un... (service) rendu... aucune... mise de fonds... gratuit. Mais nul n'en dira... assez sur... la chaleur communicative et cette brusque impression d'exister vraiment que l'on ressent à son contact

A Test of Time

Here's how to really test a watch: put it on the wrist of one of the world's leading explorers and leave it there for more than 30 years while he walks, climbs, sails, drives and rides elephants around the world. *QP* meets Colonel John Blashford-Snell and finds out about what is possibly the most well used Zenith in existence. **Simon de Burton**



Some time last year, Zenith's chief executive Jean-Frederic Dufour was rooting around in a dusty file of old press cuttings as part of his so-far very successful mission to further the brand's progress by learning from its impressive range of past glories. As well as discovering that a Zenith chronograph had once been strapped to the undercarriage of a jumbo jet as a publicity stunt, Dufour also gleaned from the musty documents that a particular El Primero had been part of one of the most remarkable expeditions of the 20th century – the 1971/72 assault by the British Trans-Americas expedition on the Darién Gap, that narrow stretch of land linking north and south America that comprises a combination of bottomless swamps and impenetrable jungle.

The Gap is a mere 100 miles long and 30 wide, but it was four months before the two specially-equipped Range Rovers chosen to tackle the trip emerged battered, bruised, bog-damaged – but still unutterably British – onto the southern section of the Pan American highway on St George's day, 23 April 1972. The party comprised "ragged, filthy men and women, mules and vehicles", at the head of which was a triumphant Major John Blashford-Snell, the 35-year-old Army officer and seasoned explorer who had led the expedition throughout.

The event attracted worldwide media attention and has become the stuff of legend in vehicle 'overlanding' circles – but the most interesting thing that Dufour discovered

from the press clippings archive was the long-forgotten fact that, while Range Rover had supplied the vehicles for the expedition, it was Zenith that had supplied the watches. And so it was that Blashford-Snell, now a 74-year-old Colonel with an OBE, was sitting in the Dorset office he calls 'expedition base' when a call came in from Switzerland enquiring about his welfare.

"It caught me totally unawares – Mr Dufour had discovered the connection between Zenith and our expedition and had the presence of mind to see whether or not I was still alive," the good-humoured Colonel told *QP*. "He had looked up the old press cuttings, tracked me down and wanted to ask all about my watch.

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From left to right: Colonel John Blashford-Snell meets Jean-Frederic Dufour; The Colonel visits the Zenith workshops; Jungle struggles before finally conquering the infamous Gap; Colonel John Blashford-Snell OBE DSc (Hon) Deng (hc) FRSGS today and in 1972.



"There were about 60 people involved in the Darién Gap expedition – which was undoubtedly the toughest trip I have ever done – and Zenith presented us with 12 El Primero chronographs for the leading members of the team. They received much admiration from everyone, and I became so fond of mine that I continued to wear it for decades afterwards."

Automatic advantage

Colonel Blashford-Snell observed that the self-winding movement – which had only been perfected in chronograph format in 1969 – is a boon to explorers as the consequences of forgetting to wind a non-automatic watch when miles from civilisation can be significant.

"I must have worn that watch on every expedition I went on for years," he recalls. "All

over South America, Burma, India, through the war in Oman, during the river expedition in Zaire and all through the development of Operation Raleigh. It originally had a metal bracelet, but I found that a bit uncomfortable when my wrist expanded in very hot climates so I changed it for an extremely cheap, expandable one."

During their initial conversation, Dufour invited the Colonel to Zenith HQ in La Chaux-de-Fonds where he was presented with a brand new El Primero. "I had stopped wearing my original watch after the second hand came loose, although it still kept perfect time," explained the Colonel. "When Mr Dufour offered me a new one, I said that he had better take mine back in exchange."

That original 'Blashers' watch will now serve as a prime exhibit in the Zenith museum due

to open in a couple of years time – but the brand is already in the process of creating a limited edition replica of the explorer's original retro-cool, white dial El Primero with black subdials, black tachymeter ring and orange-coloured seconds hand which is expected to be ready in early summer.

Meanwhile, the man himself is gearing-up for his latest expedition to Mongolia's Gobi desert in order to install a drinking water well for the inhabitants of a remote oasis in the Khongor sand dunes. And, yes – that new Zenith will surely be in for a good dunking or two.

Further information:

www.johnblashfordsnell.org.uk
www.range-rover-classic.com
www.zenith-watches.com

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