



HISTORICAL BADASS

The Man Who Cut Off His Toes

Peter Freuchen called himself a 'vagrant Viking.' That only begins to tell his story

In 1947, when the untested Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl consulted with Peter Freuchen at The Explorers Club in New York about his imminent Kon-Tiki voyage, the giant Dane's blue-gray eyes lit up: "Damn it boys! I should like to go with you!" To Heyerdahl, Freuchen looked "big as a barn door and bristling with beard...like a messenger from the open tundra. It is as though he were going about with a grizzly bear on a lead."

Native Greenlanders called the craggy, six-foot seven-inch daredevil *Petersuaq*—"Peter the Great," and he hurled harpoons and hunted ice-bears with the best of them. He'd caught the Arctic bug while studying medicine in Copenhagen, after watching a student revue about polar explorers. In 1906, he quit school and sailed to Greenland with the ethnologist Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen as stoker on a steamer where "the air was thick, the food repulsive, the language foul."

Freuchen seemed to have nine lives and quickly began using them up. On that first trip alone, an avalanche trapped him for three days in a cabin, and he fell into a crevasse while wintering on the island. One foggy afternoon, the camp cook, mistaking Freuchen for a bear, nearly shot him.

He returned to Greenland in 1910 to start a trading post 800 miles from the pole, and his bouts with death continued. On a sledging journey south, he broke through rotten sea ice but managed to hitch the dogs to the sled and had them pull it back out. Next, rappelling off a glacier with sealskin ropes, nearly snowblind, he accidentally punctured his thigh with a harpoon head.

In one of his closest calls, Freuchen was caught in a blizzard and took shelter in a snow cave he built between rocks and his sled. Overnight, it grew a near-impervious crust from his breath and he became trapped. What happened next is unclear—Freuchen related different versions in each of his memoirs. In one telling, he dug through the cave with the edge of a piece of polar bear skin he "sharpened" repeatedly by spitting on it and letting the saliva freeze. In another, he formed a knife with his own frozen feces and chipped his way out.

In the process, his left foot turned into an ice block. After thawing it, when the dead flesh had sloughed off,

Freuchen amputated the gangrenous parts with a hammer and chisel. "Perhaps one could get used to cutting off toes," he later quipped, "but there were not enough of them to get sufficient practice." Doctors would later remove his foot.

Women found him irresistible. When Rockwell Kent's wife admired Freuchen's bushy red beard (in which he sometimes stored a pencil), he cut off a chunk and gave it to her. At the 1934 German premiere of the Oscar-winning movie *Eskimo* (based on one of his books, filmed in Alaska, and in which he played a villain), he shocked high-ranking Nazis by lifting filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl—Adolf Hitler's alleged paramour—playfully above his head. Riefenstahl liked being swept off her feet, Freuchen later wrote, because "her boyfriend had probably not the strength for such pranks."

Part Jewish and a Social Democrat, Freuchen decried Nazi concentration camps and called for Danish athletes to boycott the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. His books were banned in the Reich. He fought with the Danish resistance and was arrested by the Germans, who sentenced him to death. The Gestapo cross-examined and tortured him and took away his prosthetic, but he escaped and soon bolted for Sweden, where he sent contraband back to his Danish friends.

A lifelong author and one-time magazine editor, he continued to write books after the war and worked as a screenwriter and movie consultant. An expert on the "Seven Seas," he won the \$64,000 question on the eponymous game show in 1956.

In 1957, 10 years after the Explorers Club meeting, death finally caught up with the old salt who'd crossed Greenland by dog team. His heart failed at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska when he stubbornly carried his own luggage up a long stairway. He had ventured north one last time to retrace his wanderings for a TV documentary. It would have been fitting if Freuchen had been burned in a longship, but his ashes were scattered instead by plane over Thule's North Star Bay. He was 71.

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