



Adventurer Jay Watson back in Melbourne this week. His partner, Peter Bland, is in hospital in Chile. Photo: NICHOLAS KOOPER

By sea, sled and stretcher, two men cross a stormy Antarctic Peninsula

By LARISSA DUBECKI

Antarctic adventurers Peter Bland and Jay Watson are testament to the adage that necessity is the mother of invention.

The pair intended to make their sea kayak double as a sled on their world-record assault on the Antarctic Peninsula last month. But, being optimists, they never imagined the sled would have to become a stretcher.

A storm struck after 21 days of sledging and kayaking over nearly 600 kilometres. The two Victorians were only a day from achieving the first unsupported crossing of the Antarctic Peninsula — a feat attempted unsuccessfully three times since 1901.

An avalanche swept Bland 40 metres over an ice cliff after he ventured out of their tent during a storm on January 30.

"I couldn't hear anything because of the noise of the storm. But when Peter didn't return and I called out and there was no answer, I poked my head out and then I knew he was gone," Watson said yesterday after arriving back in Australia on Tuesday.

Bland had a fractured skull, broken ribs and dislocated hip. He was trapped in an ice crevice for



An injured Peter Bland is carried to a helicopter after being rescued.

two nights while his partner started a rescue that was to take an agonisingly slow three days.

"I knew I had to get all the gear and supplies down to him, so I threw them down and hoped he could move enough to get to them. Then it took me about four hours to traverse down myself," Watson said.

It was only after two freezing

days and nights in the crevice that three crew members from the expedition's support yacht *Tooluko* arrived and the injured man was winched out.

"I always thought that if he survived the first night he'd be OK," Watson said.

It took another night to transport Bland on a stretcher on the kayak to a point where a helicop-



ter sent by the Chilean Government could pick him up.

Displaying the true spirit of adventure, Watson went on to finish the expedition after ensuring the safety of Bland, who is now in a stable condition in a military hospital in Punta Arenas, in Chile.

"It was only eight kilometres," he said half-apologetically. "We were so close."