

Shackleton – The Transantarctic Expedition

A presentation by Bruce Rosenberg
to the Military History Study Group
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Last October I gave a talk to our Military History Group about Sir Ernest Shackleton.

Strictly speaking it shouldn't come under Military History, although Shackleton was an officer in the Royal Navy Reserve. It's a story of leadership.

Shackleton has become to be regarded as one of exploration's great leaders; a man of incredible courage, a man who led from the front, who would never give in even in the direst adversity, and who saved the lives of all his party.

The story of the loss of his ship *Endurance* and the subsequent rescue is now well known and is now the subject example in many motivational schools.

But it was not always so, and the great rescue was overshadowed by the Great War, and for many years was known only to those interested in polar exploration.

In the early thirties the postman came to one of his sisters living in London and said "I see the name Shackleton. Any relation to the famous cricketer?"

"Sorry, I'm afraid not"

"That's a pity, I thought there was someone famous here".

Sir Edmund Hillary in the forward of a book written by Frank Wolsey, captain of *Endurance* says that he was of the opinion that quite a few people would know about Amundsen, Scott and Admiral Byrd, but few would have heard of Shackleton. That was written in 1977!

These events took place during the first two years of the War.

It was Shackleton's third voyage: the first was with Scott in 1901-1903 in the ship *Discovery* and really was a bit of a fiasco. Scott, Shackleton and Dr Edward Wilson made an attempt on the Pole, crossed the Ross Ice Shelf; about the size of NSW, and stopped at the foot of the great Antarctic Range.

It was a poorly planned expedition, they nearly lost their lives, Shackleton got scurvy, was invalided home against his will. Relations between the two men were forever strained.

In 1907 Shackleton took his own expedition, passed their previous latitude of 82.16 degrees South, and with three others climbed the great glacier he named the Beardmore after one his backers, up to nearly 11000 feet man-hauling sledges all the way; came down to the polar plateau and reached latitude 88.23 South-only 97 miles from the pole.

Incredible hardship made them turn back or die.

This paved the way to the success of Amundsen in December 1911, and then Scott the following March.

All of us know that tragic ending.

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Shackleton had returned to England to a hero's welcome.

He was knighted by the King.

He was invited to speak at the Albert Hall.

He became the darling of the newspapers.

He stormed across Europe and America giving lecture tours.

He was a guest in several Royal households in Europe.

But now he was at a loose end.

His business ventures had failed.

The Pole had been conquered by Amundsen and Scott.

He was restless and desperate to go South again.

So he decided that the next challenge was to cross the Antarctic Continent from coast to coast via the Pole.

He said: "apart from its historic value it will be a journey of great scientific value"

The idea was to use two parties-one from the Weddell Sea on the eastern edge of the Antarctic Peninsula to cross a great swathe of unmapped land to the Pole; this was to be called the Western Party and to consist of five men; the other, to be called the Ross Sea Party, to leave from the old hut on Ross Island at McMurdo Sound and to follow his earlier route across the great Ross Ice Shelf, laying depots all the way to the top of the Beardmore Glacier-to an altitude of nearly ten thousand feet.

It was very ambitious venture-even foolhardy.

It was greeted with scepticism in England-in some quarters even derision and scorn.

Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, complained : "The Pole has already been discovered-what is the point of another expedition?"

After all, Scott and his four companions had died on their venture.

Shackleton was prepared for the question.

"Every step will be an advance in geographical science" he said."It will be learned whether the great Victorian chain of mountains which has been traced from the Ross Sea to the Pole extends across the Continent and thus links up with the Andes of South America"

But really he was interested only in adventure.

He made his announcement in January 1914.

He was flooded with applications from the public.

Five thousand applied to go. He chose fifty six men for both parties.

After his usual trouble in raising funds, the Government gave ten thousand pounds, the RGS one thousand, several others good sums, and many of the Public Schools in England and Scotland raised money for the dog teams. Some of the dogs were named after the schools.

But three big donors, Dudley Docker of Birmingham, Miss Dorothy Stancomb-Wills and Sir James Caird gave hefty sums, and their names were given to the three lifeboats that took the expedition to safety on Elephant Island; The James Caird being the one in which Shackleton made his famous journey to find rescue, and thus becoming one of the most famous small boats in maritime history.

He bought two ships -one in Norway which he re-named “Endurance”. The other for the Ross Sea Party was “Aurora” bought from Douglas Mawson and used by him on the Australian expedition in two years earlier.

Then he had to select scientists, specialists and crew for both ships, and enough stores and equipment to last at least two years.

He appointed his trusty friend Frank Wild as 2 i/c and was fortunate to find Frank Worsley, a New Zealander to command the Endurance. He took a third Frank, Frank Hurley who had already made his name with Mawson, and negotiated a contract to use his films and photographs after the voyage. Another very valuable and experienced man was Tom Crean as second officer. Crean had been with Scott too.

Endurance was to have sailed from Southampton on the morning of 4th August when the news arrived that Great Britain had declared war on Germany. He immediately mustered his men on deck and broke the news. Then he said he hoped there would be no objection if he offered the ship and the services of all 28 men to the Royal Navy. There was not a murmur of complaint.

Shackleton made a signal to the Admiralty asking also that if accepted the expedition be regarded as a single unit.

One hour later Churchill sent back a one word reply. ”Proceed”.

Endurance sailed to Buenos Aires, and thence directly to the island of South Georgia, arriving in November 1914. There was a Norwegian whaling community on the island with all very experienced and ice-hardened men.

They strongly advised Shackleton to turn back because the ice that year was unusually heavy and much farther north than normal.

But Endurance left the island on 5th December sailing south-east towards the South Sandwich Island group. Two days later they sighted icebergs and that evening the ice was already gripping the hull.

On the 18th January the ship was trapped.

From the masthead lookout all they could see was ice – packed heavily and firmly around the ship in every direction.

After days of inactivity, Shackleton ordered the fires to be put out to conserve fuel. They had been consuming about ½ a ton of coal each day.

They collected seal meat for themselves and the dogs.

After two weeks a lead opened up and he ordered a good head of steam on the engines, and sent all hands onto the floe with icepicks, shovels, and saws.

For two full days they chipped and worked to get the ship into the lead. They achieved about 400 yards. That was it.

On 22nd February Endurance touched Latitude of 77 degrees, the furthest South of her drift. She was fully trapped for the winter.

The seals were disappearing and the birds leaving.

On 24th, ship's routine ceased – the Endurance had become a base.

They called their new winter quarters “The Ritz”. They took out their frustrations by playing football and hockey on the ice. They started the world's first dog-team Derby.

The dogs had been put ashore in a series of kennels along a wire rope to which their leads were attached.

These new lodgings were called “dogloos”.

They started training the dogs for sledging work. They became efficient, but some of the animals started to sicken.

The ship continued to drift all through March and April.

On the 1st May they said goodbye to the sun.

They celebrated Empire Day on 24th.

By early July there were glows of sunrise on the horizon.

The temperature had gone down to -23 degrees F.

Then up came the blizzards. Winds of around 70 knots and opposing ice floes were moving against each other at the rate of about 200 yards per hour.

Tremendous pressure was building up against the hull.

The end came on Sunday 23rd of October.

Her starboard quarter was forced against the floe. The sternpost was twisted and the planking started to buckle. The ship started to leak and they all manned the pumps.

On 27th Shackleton ordered the ship to be abandoned.

They had been locked in the ice for ten months-actually 281 days, and had drifted nearly 1200 miles.

The three lifeboats were lowered to the ice.

As much of the gear, stores, sledges and provisions as could be taken were removed.

They established what they called Ocean Camp about a mile and a half away on a thick floe. There were five tents, and the total complement of 28 men.

Endurance sank on 21st November.

They stayed at Ocean Camp for another month, but by now the ice was starting to break up. So they started to haul two of the boats across the ice once more.

The going was so tough that they made 7 ½ miles in seven days. By the end of December they established another base, this time called Patience Camp. Here they stayed through January, February and March 1916 as the ice beneath gently drifted.

At one stage the heavy north east swell was rocking the floe. A larger undulation than usual lifted the floe under the seamen's tent, and split it in halves – one on either side of the crack. Quite by chance, Shackleton found one of the men in the sea, still in his sleeping bag. Somehow, he reached down, grabbed him and with one almighty heave, hauled the dead weight of man and sleeping bag half-full of water onto the floe. A few minutes later, Holness, the seaman was rummaging through the wet bag, and complained that he'd lost his tin of tobacco!

Shackleton decided that the only way to survive was to make for Paulet Island off the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula, where he knew there were the remains of a hut.

But Paulet Island was 350 miles away.

He sent Hurley and another man back to Ocean Camp with dog teams to recover more stores. They were successful despite several times falling through thin ice up to their waists.

Shackleton then sent 18 men to drag the third lifeboat back.

Their floe was drifting to the east, away from their target.

On 9th April the ice had broken up enough to drop the boats into the sea. They had enormous trouble in getting the stores on board, and not enough ice for fresh water.

They decided to sail and row to Elephant Island, about 60 miles away.

After three days at sea, some were seasick, all desperately thirsty, Worsley, the Endurance's captain managed to get a sunsight, only to find they had drifted further away.

Then a gale sprang up and the next two days were horrific. The temperature plummeted and so did morale. When they weren't rowing they huddled together for warmth, while showers of snow and spray covered their bodies.

After six days at sea the island was less than 20 miles away, but another huge gale came up and the Dudley Docker nearly capsized. For hours they were baling for their very lives, some vomiting repeatedly.

At dawn on 15th April the gale dropped, and the three boats managed to get ashore on a narrow rocky beach on Elephant Island. It was the first time they had stood on land for nearly 17 months.

They then found that the beach was too shallow and that the high-watermark was above them. So they had to reconnoitre and found one slightly better, about seven miles along the coast. They then got back into the boats and rowed there.

They turned two of the lifeboats upside down and proceeded to make a home under them.

Shackleton realised that no-one would ever find them on this tiny remote island, so he decided to take the biggest lifeboat, the James Caird, to seek help and rescue from the whalers on South Georgia.

South Georgia is about 120 miles long and 20 miles across and is 800 miles east of Elephant Island.

McNeish, the ship's carpenter found some canvas amongst the stores and put a deck covering over the boat, using some sledge runners and lids of some of the stores cases. He also fitted the mast of one of the other boats fore and aft inside the James Caird forming a hogback and thus strengthening the keel. They used sandbags and rocks for extra ballast.

Worsley was the navigator. Also in the crew were Tom Crean, McNeish and two hefty seamen, Vincent and McCarthy. And Ernest Shackleton.

Worsley had a sextant, aneroid, prismatic compass, some charts and a pair of binoculars.

The boat journey of the twenty-foot James Caird is one of the great stories of the sea.

The ocean south of Cape Horn in the middle of May is one of the most tempestuous in the world and there are almost unceasing gales.

The voyage took sixteen days.

They were continually wet and freezing. They worked two watches, four hours on, four hours off,

with two hourly spells at the tiller, and when off watch tried to climb into sodden sleeping bags and lie on the rocky ballast.

Sometimes the gales were so strong that they hove-to, and just drifted as the seas would take them.

Sometimes the little boat was between huge waves so that the sail flapped idly in the calm between the crests.

The gales come from the Antarctic Continent and the temperature goes below zero. The spray froze on the boat and they were always chipping off ice.

The boat started to lose resiliency. The weight of the ice was hampering her. They broke away the spare oars and threw them overboard. There were still two left to get ashore.

They threw over the side two sleeping bags each weighing about 40 pounds. Then the painter with the sea anchor parted.

On the seventh day the winds abated and the sun came out.

Worsley managed to get a reading. They were nearly half-way.

On the eleventh day the seas had got up, and they were experiencing snow squalls and a cross-sea.

Shackleton looked astern, and saw as he says the biggest wave he had seen in all his 26 years at sea. The little boat was tossed like a cork and they were baling for their lives. But she survived.

Things were getting worse. They had little fresh water because salt was getting in everywhere. Their mouths were dry and their tongues were swelling. They were suffering from raging thirst.

Finally after sixteen days they sighted South Georgia.

To find such a small island with one sun sight and dead reckoning is an astonishing achievement of navigation.

But another gale came up and according to Shackleton one of the worst hurricanes any one of them had ever experienced.

They were off the island but on a lee shore.

They saw a large bay, and steered straight for it. Great glaciers came down to the sea, and there were angry reefs on either side.

They saw a gap in the reef but then they were turned back and blown out of the bay.

Eventually they tacked into a passage so narrow that they had to take in the oars. They ran aground on a beach.

They heard a gurgling sound and found a stream of fresh water.

They found a cave and some young albatrosses which went into a stew.

They formed a camp which they called Peggotty Camp.

But of course they were on the weather side of South Georgia and the whaling station was on the other side.

There is a mountain range forming a spine down the length of the island, and there are something like 160 glaciers. It had never been charted, let alone climbed, but it was the only way to get help.

Two of the men were exhausted, so Shackleton left the other to look after them, and took Worsley and Crean with him to climb the mountain range.

Their rotting boots were too light to climb over mountains and glaciers, so they took screws out of the James Caird and put them into their soles.

To travel light they did not take tents or even sleeping bags. They had three days food ration, a Primus lamp filled with oil, a small cooker, a few matches, an adze for use as an ice -axe, a coil of rope and the chronometer.

That was all. They didn't of course even have a map, so navigation had to be done by guesswork.

After a few hours of climbing, they found their way blocked by the mountain range with huge forbidding ridges. Three times they climbed to the tops of 4000 foot ridges only to find they were blocked by crevasses and precipices.

By dusk they were getting desperate. A thick fog started to roll in and was beginning to obscure their view. There was no way they could survive a night stranded on a mountain.

Shackleton knew he had to act quickly.

They could see a huge snow slope below, and although they couldn't see the bottom or whether it ended in a precipice, they took a risk. They coiled the rope, sat on it, one behind the other, Shackleton in front, Worsley's arms around him, and Crean behind.

They shot down the slope into the darkness at terrifying speed, crashing into a bank of soft snow. They estimated that they had made over a mile and nearly 1000 feet of altitude in about three minutes.

They all shook hands.

The course ahead lay between two mountains. Under the fog it was still dark but a full moon came up and they could see the crevasses.

By now they had been on the march for 20 hours. They had a quick food stop, plodded on, only to find the way blocked by a great ice mass.

So they had to turn back.

By 5am they were at the foot of a rocky spur in the range.

They decided to rest. They had no tent or sleeping bags so huddled together to stay warm.

Worsley and Crean fell asleep at once, but Shackleton realised that if they all slept they would freeze to death.

After about five minutes he shook them both and told them they had slept for half an hour.

They came to a gap in the ridge where at last they could see the coast below.

It was 6.30 am.

They knew that if they were near the whaling station they would hear the steam whistle blowing to summon the men to work.

Right on 7am they heard the whistle. It was the first outside sound created by human agency they had heard since December 1914, over 18 months ago.

What does that say about the accuracy of their chronometer?

Once again they shook hands.

They still had to get down to the coastal plain.

They came to another precipice. To turn back would mean extra miles and hours of wasted time. They used the adze as an ice axe and cut steps down the cliff. They'd come down about 1000 feet and then came to a waterfall.

The only way down was through it.

They wrapped one end of the rope around a rock and somehow got down, jumping the last few feet.

At last they were on the coastal plain. They staggered towards the whaling station. They encountered two young boys who screamed and ran away.

They realised that they were so filthy, with rotted clothes and matted hair and beards. They hadn't bathed since they left the Endurance.

They found their way to the manager's house.

“He said who are you?”

“Don't you know me, Mr Sorle? I'm Ernest Shackleton. We lost the ship and have come over the mountain range”

Immediately of course they were taken inside, even though protested that maybe they smelled!

When the tough Norwegian whalers who knew the ice and those waters so well, heard of their experience, some of them wept.

The next morning the Norwegians took a boat around to the other side of the island to pick up McNeish, McCarthy and Vincent. Worsley went with them to show the site. The men didn't recognise him at first.

They also towed back the James Caird. It can be seen today in the cloisters at Dulwich College, Shackleton's old school.

It was out here about four years ago at the Maritime Museum.

There were still twenty two men left on Elephant Island.

The British Government virtually gave little assistance for rescue. Shackleton had three attempts with borrowed ships, having to turn back because of the ice around the island.

Finally the Chilean Government sent a small steamer called the Yelcho. She was quite unsuitable for work in the pack, and Shackleton promised not to touch the ice.

Finally on 30th August 1916 they got to the island and could see the camp almost invisible beneath snow. They managed to get a boat in close.

Shackleton called out: "Are you all well?"

Frank Wild shouted "All well Boss"

Then there three cheers all round.

Within an hour they got all the men off, taking only essential equipment, including the last of Hurley's precious photographic plates, some of which we have seen today.

Not a life was lost.

THE MEN ON ELEPHANT ISLAND

Frank Wild was left in charge.

Wild was his right-hand man, calm, trustworthy and intensely loyal to Shackleton.

Shackleton knew that only he could keep the others together and keep their spirits up.

Some of them were in bad shape.

Soon after arriving on the beach, Rickenson, the Chief Engineer, had a heart attack, the steward Blackborow had frostbitten toes, Hudson, the navigator could't move. Others had mental depression.

Wild helped them all.

At first they made a snow cave, but it leaked terribly.

They collected rocks on the beach and built a couple of walls about 4 feet high and about 20 feet apart, and placed the upturned lifeboats over them, and covered them with material from the tents.

They then dragged their sodden sleeping bags in.

They set up the blubber stove, and despite rigging up a chimney from old biscuit tins, the smoke covered them in soot.

The same blizzard that hit the James Caird lasted for a fortnight. Water poured under the boats; one day they baled out over 160 gallons of water. Frozen ice like sheets of glass blew over them.

They lived on penguins and old seal bones boiled with seaweed in sea water.

The two surgeons amputated all the toes on one Blackborow's feet with bolt cutters by the light of the blubber stove.

Every day Wild kept their spirits up by expecting rescue.

Finally, on 30th August, the relief ship, the Yelcho arrived.

On 3rd September the ship entered the Straits of Magellan and reached Punta Arenas to a tremendous welcome, from all around the world.

Back in England they nearly all joined up.

The War had been raging for over two years.

Alf Cheetham, the Third Officer of Endurance died when his minesweeper was sunk a few weeks before Armistice.

Tim McCarthy, Able Seaman, who survived the voyage in the James Caird, was killed at his gun in France.

In 1922, Sir Ernest Shackleton died at sea in the South Atlantic on another voyage to the South.

His grave is near the whaling station at Grytviken on South Georgia.

The James Caird can be seen today in the Cloister at Dulwich College, Shackleton's old school.

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