

Marooned in a Polar Wilderness

With a screeching and groaning that would have done justice to a dying mammoth, the *Endurance* finally began to break up. Crushed for months by massive sheets of pack ice, the ship was slowly sinking. Even her hardened hull (made from greenheart, a wood heavier than iron) could not withstand such tremendous pressure.

Watching in numb resignation were the 29 men of Ernest Shackleton's Trans-Antarctic Expedition. This hand-picked mixture of seamen, scientists and craftsmen were accompanied by 70 dogs, a cat and a stowaway – 18 year old Canadian Percy Blackboro. When discovered, Shackleton had told him, 'If anyone has to be eaten, you'll be the first.'

They had intended to spend 1914-15 attempting the first crossing of the Antarctic. Now, in November, 1915, they were stranded, 1200 miles from the nearest human beings, in one of the most hostile places on Earth.

The *Endurance* had sailed from London. When they had reached Antarctic waters, icebergs soon surrounded the ship. As they passed gingerly through, Shackleton described their unearthly environment as 'a gigantic and interminable jigsaw'. But shortly after crossing the Antarctic Circle the ice closed in and packed itself tightly around them. Soon they could move neither forward nor backward, and there they stayed for nine months, waiting for the ice to clear.

The expedition coped with the waiting, the cold and the interminable darkness of an Antarctic winter with remarkable cheerfulness. Shackleton, called 'the Boss' by the crew, kept them busy organizing dog training, soccer and hockey matches, party games and lectures. The men even carved blocks of ice into elaborate beautiful dog kennels. In anticipation of such delays, the *Endurance* had also been equipped with an ample library.

But now, the ship had sunk and the men made a camp on the ice. Surrounded by an untidy mixture of three lifeboats, salvaged equipment and supplies, they christened their new home 'Ocean Camp'. Here Shackleton gathered his companions around him. They were too far from civilization to be rescued, he told them. If they were to survive, drastic measures were called for.

Their only option he said, was to haul the lifeboats through the ice to the open sea, and then sail 800 miles back to South Georgia – the nearest inhabited island. Each man could only bring 1 kg of personal possessions, and would have to leave most of his belongings behind. To emphasize this point, Shackleton threw to the ground his watch and chain, and a pocketful of gold coins. Then, to everyone's amazement, a Bible the Queen of England had given him at the start of the voyage was also discarded. Men were allowed to keep their diaries. Leonard Hussey, the expedition meteorologist, was told to keep his banjo – a sing-along was always good for morale. A sleeping bag, metal cup, knife, spoon and the heavy clothes they stood in were the only other possessions they were allowed to take.

By the time they were ready to set off on their trek, it was almost Christmas and well into the Antarctic summer. Shackleton, impatient to depart, designated December 22, the day before their leaving, to be Christmas Day. Despite the shortages, this was

celebrated with a feast of ham, sausage, stewed hare, pickle and peaches. The men, fortified and in good spirits, loaded the boats and sleighs and began towing toward the sea.

In the first five days they managed only 9 miles and morale slumped alarmingly. Illness swept through the party. Shackleton decided that their best hope was to make another camp, and drift north on the shifting ice. This they did for three months, and food and fuel supplies dwindled alarmingly. Then, one morning, a huge leopard seal poked its head out of a crack in the ice and stared at Seaman Thomas McLeod. Both eyed the other as a potential meal, but McLeod was shrewder. He began flapping his arms like a penguin – the seal’s main prey – and, as the beast lumbered out of the ice and after him, it was briskly shot. A catch as substantial as this provided the expedition with enough seal meat to allay fears of starvation and plenty of blubber to burn on their stoves.

At last, in early April 1916, they reached open ocean and the three lifeboats were put to sea. Elephant Island was the nearest land, and it was here that they headed. The boats were small, crammed with men and supplies, and open to terrible weather. At night, if they slept in the boats, schools of killer whales would surround them. If they stopped to make camp on an ice floe, sleeping men would plunge through cracks into the freezing sea and have to scramble out before the ice closed over them.

Seven days of unrelenting misery and constant bailing passed before the snow-covered peaks of Elephant Island loomed before them. The expedition were still 700 miles away from the nearest inhabited land, but the men were deliriously happy to have survived such an appalling journey. It was their first time on solid ground for nearly one and a half years.

This narrow 23 mile long island was bare rock. There were no trees, but there were plenty of birds and elephant seals to eat. As they lacked any other shelter, the two smaller boats were turned upside down and made into huts. No one would find them on Elephant Island, it was too remote, but Shackleton was wary of putting his vulnerable fleet to sea again. He decided to take the biggest boat, the *James Caird*, and a small crew, and return to sea. The rest of his expedition would wait on the island for rescue.

The *James Caird* and its crew of six set out to travel 700 miles to South Georgia, where there were several whaling stations. Once again they had to battle through blizzards and gales. Constantly soaked and freezing, they suffered from raging thirst as salt water had contaminated their water supply. After 17 days at sea they reached South Georgia. Just off the coast a terrible gale ripped away their rudder and they were washed up on the opposite side of the island to the whaling stations.

South Georgia was long and narrow, like Elephant Island, but it was also mountainous. As the boat was no longer fit to sail, and the walk around the coast was over 150 miles, they would have to risk their lives again to cross these uncharted mountains.

On May 19 1916, taking only 15 meters of rope and a carpenter’s axe, Shackleton, *Endurance*’s captain Frank Worsley and officer Thomas Crean began their climb into the unknown. Two men too weak to go on were left behind, with a third to look after them. Shackleton and his two companions pressed on, up and down for two days, one

time tobogganing down a steep ice slope on their coiled up rope, another time climbing down a waterfall.

On May 20th at 7:00am, the men heard a factory whistle at Stromness whaling station. For the first time since December 1914, here was evidence that other human beings were close by. As they walked toward the factory, two boys, terrified by these ragged apparitions, ran away screaming. Shackleton asked to be taken to the home of factory manager Thoralf Sorlle, whom he knew well. When he opened the door, Sorlle gaped at them in astonishment and said, 'Who the hell are you?' Like everyone at Grytviken, he had assumed the *Endurance* had been lost with all aboard. When Shackleton told him, Sorlle was moved to tears.

A hot bath and hearty meal was all Shackleton's party needed before they set out to rescue their stranded companions. The men on the other side of South Georgia were picked up the following day, but Elephant Island was more difficult to reach. Shackleton sailed out on a relief ship on May 23, but ice blocked his route. A second attempt to reach the island was thwarted by fog. On the third attempt, rough weather forced them to turn back.

Shackleton and his relief ship finally reached Elephant Island on August 30th 1916. A small boat was dispatched toward the shore and Shackleton, standing on its bow, anxiously counted the 22 men he had left behind.

They were all there. The four-month wait had been a tedious ordeal, best summed up in a diary entry by one of *Endurance's* officers, Lionel Greenstreet: 'So passes another goddam rotten day.' Although the men had suffered from infections and boils, the only real casualty of the two-year adventure had been the ship's stowaway, Percy Blackboro. He had lost the toes of his left foot to frostbite. Shackleton had managed, through good judgement and great leadership, to bring his entire expedition back to civilization alive.