



The Mother *of all* Passages

The Story of Sir Ernest Shackleton's Ill-Fated Trans-Antarctic Expedition

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE C. D'ANTONIO

What do we, trawler cruisers, have in common with men like Robert Scott, Rauld Amundsen and Ernest Shackleton, famous explorers of the Heroic Age? Perhaps the Norwegian poet Henrik Ibsen put it best when he wrote: "There is always a certain risk in being alive, and if you are more alive there is more risk."

It would have been much safer for these men to stay at home—all three lost their lives while exploring. Instead, they chose to leave the relative comfort and safety of civilization, venturing forth into the unknown. To an extent, we do the same every time we cast off the lines and leave the dock. We could stay home and play



The great wandering albatross. One of the largest species of bird in the world, they can live to be over 70 years old. Superstition has it that the souls of departed sailors inhabit the bodies of these birds, and thus it is considered the harbinger of ill fortune to kill one. In spite of the taboo, Ernest Shackleton and the crew of *James Caird* feasted on several of these large birds soon after landing at South Georgia.

bridge or watch television, but we choose to cruise, to see the world, whether it's just the other side of the bay or across an ocean. Whether you know it or not, each time you do this, you take with you a small remnant of the Heroic Age of exploration, willingly forsaking the security of dry land for the adventure of the sea.

THE HEROIC AGE OF EXPLORATION

In 1914, the Heroic Age of exploration was in its twilight. The South Pole had already been claimed, first by Norway's Amundsen, then, frustratingly, a month later by Robert Scott of Great Britain. The latter did so at the cost of his life and the lives of his four comrades. In this era, many explorers placed a premium on the attainment of glory for themselves and their respective nations, while relegating scientific advancement to secondary status. The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition was no exception. While its ranks included scientists, meteorologists and biologists, the primary objective was to cross the Antarctic continent, from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea. The prize of first to cross the most inhospitable land on earth would, the expedition's

leader and financiers hoped, be claimed for mother England, assuaging the ignominy of losing the Pole to Norway.

The expedition's organizer, Ernest Shackleton, affectionately known to all of his crew as "Boss," had ventured into the frozen south on two previous occasions. First, with Scott's 1901-1904 Discovery expedition, then again as leader of the 1907-1909 Nimrod party. Interestingly, Scott sent Shackleton home from the Discovery expedition after he suffered a bout of asthma (which may have actually been scurvy), saying he was unfit for polar service. In the Nimrod expedition, Shackleton

proved the fallacy of this characterization by traveling farther south than anyone before, within 100 tantalizing miles of the Pole. With his party weakened by arduous man-hauling of sledges, plummeting temperatures (sometimes falling to 30 degrees below zero Fahrenheit), frostbite and malnutrition, Shackleton opted to turn around when victory was within his grasp.

In hindsight, many historians have marked this as one of Shackleton's greatest exhibitions of leadership—he placed the well-being of his men ahead of his own, and England's, glory. Polar experts agree that he probably would have reached the Pole, claiming his due honor, but it is unlikely that he or any of his crew would have lived to bask in the ensuing glory. He quipped, upon his return, that forfeiting the Pole was painful but that he preferred to be a live donkey rather than a dead lion. This venture ultimately earned Shackleton a knighthood. Sir Ernest Shackleton, for a few short years, held the distinction of having traveled closer to the South Pole than any other man.

THE PLAN

Shortly after his return to England, Shackleton began to grow restless once again "to go into the ice." His plan, a grand scheme that required a large logistical effort, was audacious. He, with the primary overland party, would sail south aboard *Endurance*, a newly built, 350-ton wooden steamer equipped with an auxiliary barkentine sailing rig. *Endurance*, named for Shackleton's family motto, "By endurance we



conquer,” aptly described the ship’s stalwart capabilities. Designed and built specifically for ice work, she measured 144 feet in length. Constructed of Norwegian fir over oak frames and sheathed in greenheart, a wood so hard that it cannot be cut with ordinary woodworking tools, she lived up to her name. Her hull measured 2-1/2 feet thick. It seemed that if *Endurance* couldn’t take them safely into and back out of the ice, no ship could. The objective was clear, in Shackleton’s own words: “...the first crossing of the last continent should be achieved by a British expedition.”

Endurance would sail far into the Antarctic’s ice-strewn Weddell Sea, eventually making landfall at Vahsel Bay, located at the edge of the continent’s permanent ice cap. From there, Shackleton’s trans-continental party—six men and some 50 dogs—would walk and sledge approximately 1,800 miles to the Pole and then on to the opposite side of the Antarctic continent, to the shores of the Ross Sea. It is here that the expedition’s second ship, *Aurora*, would be waiting to collect the weary but successful polar trekkers.

Aurora’s other vitally important mission would be to send her own party of six men toward the Pole. They would lay supply depots as they went, and then wait for Shackleton’s party, which would be heading north. The 12 men would cover the remaining distance together, utilizing the previously deposited supplies, to the Ross Sea and their waiting ship. It was estimated that the journey would take five months, spanning the course of the Southern Hemisphere’s spring, summer and early fall.

Shackleton placed advertisements in British newspapers in an effort to find men who were properly suited, in both body and spirit, for such an arduous expedition. Although it may be apocryphal, the ad was reputed to have read: “Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success.” In total, over 5,000 applied.

Fifty-six were selected, to be evenly divided among *Endurance* and *Aurora*. Of those selected, a portion was simple, ordinary sailors. These men would sail the ships as well as tend the engines and other shipboard equipment.

Among the sailors was a small group of particularly hardy, robust and often independent-minded souls known as trawlermen. Theirs was an occupation marked by danger and brutality. They routinely headed out into the North Atlantic, off the coasts of Scotland, Ireland and Iceland, to set fishing trawls in the most ghastly weather conditions at all times of the year. It was thought that they would be ideally suited to Antarctic shipboard life. As events would later unfold, their grit and determination would be tested to the limit of human endurance.

DEPARTURE AMID UNCERTAIN TIMES

Preparations for the expedition’s departure from England in the summer of 1914 continued as war clouds gathered over Europe. Shackleton, a man whose polar and expeditionary talents may have been rivaled only by his ability to raise money to support his ventures, continued to solicit funds from wealthy benefactors and procure equipment up until the last moment. As *Endurance* prepared to get under way, Germany declared war on Russia, and England began a general mobilization of her armed forces. It was Aug. 8, 1914, and the most horrific carnage the world had ever known, World War I, had begun. Shackleton immediately cabled the



Macaroni penguin.



Top: Weddell seals. This species of seal provided sustenance and fuel for the crew of *Endurance* while they were beset in and traveling on the ice. Above: Elephant seal. These seals, who gave their name to the island upon which Shackleton's men were stranded, grow to truly enormous proportions. Males, or bulls, may be up to 20 feet long, weighing in at as much as 4 tons.

British Admiralty and offered the entire assets of the expedition—ships, stores and crew—to the war effort. The perfunctory reply, “proceed,” was followed by a longer telegram from the first lord of the Admiralty,

Winston Churchill, wishing the expedition success and Godspeed.

It is probable that Shackleton breathed a heavy sigh of relief when he received those messages. Wealthy investors had heavily bankrolled the expedition; however, many debts remained, debts that could only be paid if the venture was successful. Photographic and story rights had been sold in advance to newspapers, and Shackleton retained the rights to all of the crewmen's diaries, so there would be no competition. Showmanship was one of the Boss' strengths, and he wanted to make sure that he, exclusively, had the ears and eyes of his audience upon his return.

Endurance, berthed at Plymouth in southern England, cast off her mooring lines on Aug. 8 and made her way south by way of Madeira, Montevideo and Buenos Aires. In that last port she picked up 69 Canadian sledging dogs; Frank Hurley, the expedition's young but resourceful Australian photographer; and Shackleton himself, who had stayed in England to clear up last-minute details. Adjustments also were made to the crew while in this port. A few rowdy crewmen were dismissed for drunkenness and brawling, while the expedition's



Medium-sized bergs (50 to 150 feet in height) such as this presented some hazard to *Endurance*. They were of particular concern to the crew once they took to the boats, from the time they left the floes until they reached Elephant Island. On the average, 4/5 of an iceberg's mass is hidden below the sea surface.

only American was signed on. Hailing from Montana, William Bakewell, hoping for colonial favoritism, posed as a Canadian when requesting a position with the ship's company.

In late October *Endurance* steamed out of Buenos Aires, headed for her final "civilized" port of call, the storm-swept island of South Georgia, located in the equally tempestuous South Atlantic Ocean. Eleven days later, *Endurance* arrived at Grytviken, one of several whaling stations on South Georgia. Although a British possession, then and now, in 1914 South Georgia was populated almost entirely by Norwegian whalers.

Their whaling fleets steadily and all too efficiently hunted the Southern Ocean's whales, bringing their carcasses back to the shoreside processing stations for rendering into oil and other products. Today, the remains of most of these stations stand in mute testimony to the devastation they inflicted on the world's whale populations. Oil storage tanks, some still containing sperm oil; beachside flensing ramps, where whale corpses were sliced into manageable

bits for boiling; and whale bones are still found at the derelict remains of these camps. When *Endurance* touched at this port, Shackleton and his men reported that the waters of Grytviken harbor were choked with whale entrails, and the tide ran red with their blood.

The inhabitants of Grytviken did, however, provide Shackleton and the crew of *Endurance* with something they would have paid dearly for: information. While Norwegians were revered as some of the best modern seamen the world had ever known, the whalers of South Georgia were considered the cream of this crop. Furthermore, they possessed considerable experience with navigating in and amongst the ice floes of Antarctic waters. Their advice to Shackleton was clear: Don't go. The ice this year, they explained, was the worst in memory, extending much farther north than usual. This presented a considerable problem for the expedition. If *Endurance* could not sail into the southernmost reaches of the Weddell Sea, the trek to the Pole would be extended and thus made impossible.

The original plan was for *Endurance* to make her way into the Antarctic icepack in November, during the Southern Hemisphere's spring season. This would provide the overland party with the best weather conditions for the longest period, during the summer and early fall, for crossing the continent. However, because of the concerns expressed by Grytviken's whalers, Shackleton opted to wait until early December, hoping for further breakup of the ice before leaving South Georgia and heading for the Weddell Sea.

Shackleton's decision to proceed into the ice against the adamant advice of the Norwegian whalers has been debated by critics for over 80 years. All logic would seem to dictate that he wait out the winter in South Georgia and make an attempt the following year. The vagaries of Antarctic weather and ice conditions necessitate flexibility in scheduling, a state of affairs that has remained true to this day, even for humble passagemakers traveling in climates more hospitable than the Antarctic.

The conditions weighing upon Ernest Shackleton in December 1914 were, however,

Top: Gentoo penguin.

Right: Adelie penguin. A pack ice species, Shackleton and his crew made specific mention of these penguins on several occasions, taking as many as 300 at a time for food and fuel. Their colonies are quite large, sometimes numbering in the hundreds of thousands. In the past, they have served as a traditional food for explorers.



considerable. In addition to the unfavorable ice reports, a substantial amount of funding and logistical effort had been arranged for the expedition. It is unlikely that this fragile financial situation could have survived a year-long delay. Additional wages would have had to been paid and provisions procured, while boredom and discontent amongst the crew, particularly the ship's company, the sailors and trawlermen, would be difficult to stave off. Unbeknownst to *Endurance's* crew at the time, England's sons were dying by the thousands in the trenches of France. Shackleton, even if he had no inkling of the scale of the carnage occurring in Europe, knew that if they remained in Grytviken ships would undoubtedly bring news of the war and many of the crew would opt to return to do their patriotic duty. In short, either the expedition went now, regardless of the conditions, or it would never go at all.

DESTINATION, ANTARCTICA

On Dec. 5, 1914, *Endurance* departed Grytviken, leaving behind the hospitality of the whalers and the last vestiges of civilization her crew would come into contact with for the next 22 months. Icebergs were encountered shortly after their departure, and *Endurance* entered loose pack ice as early as Dec. 7. Shortly after Christmas they entered the heavy pack, where the ship labored, expending a great deal of coal in order to make headway. She progressed slowly, celebrating the New Year amongst a vast, white



frozen landscape, keeping company with the local inhabitants, which included seals, penguins and the occasional whale.

For a time things improved, and *Endurance* made headway through open leads of water that had appeared in the pack. However, on Jan. 18, only 80 nautical miles and a day's sail from her destination of Vahsel Bay, *Endurance* was beset in the Antarctic pack ice. On this day, *Endurance* and her crew traveled together as far south as they ever would. From this moment on, the relentless pack ice dragged both inexorably north, farther and farther away from their proposed landing site.

Shackleton, ever the optimist, declared that *Endurance* had ceased to be a seagoing ship and was now the winter station of the expedition. The routine would change—a single night watchman supplanted ordinary at-sea watches—but the objective would remain the same, albeit delayed. The revised plan was to wait out the Antarctic winter until the pack ice broke up the following November. *Endurance* would then become a ship once again; she would steam north to the Falkland Islands or South Georgia, reprovision and turn south. This was the best that could be hoped for; at least none of the men could desert. One wonders if Shackleton really believed this plan would work, but leadership and optimism—which he once described as “true moral courage”—were truly two of the Boss’ strengths. Both of these character traits would be tested in the months to come. Most of



the crew members kept diaries, and in nary a one is there a reference to vacillation, pessimism or indecision on Shackleton’s part. If he had his doubts as to whether *Endurance*, or her crew, would survive the coming ordeal, he kept them to himself. All indications are that the remaining 27 crew were willing to accept Plan B.

Winter station life aboard *Endurance* settled down into a predictable, but not unpleasant routine. Food was plentiful and Frank Wild, Shackleton’s second in command and an experienced Antarctic hand himself, ensured that the men always had enough work to keep them occupied. The sledging dogs required constant attention, care and exercise. One of their clan—two, officially—Sally and Samson, gave birth to a litter of pups. This provided endless hours of diversion for the men as they doted over them like proud fathers. Once the ice was firm and stable, the dogs were moved off the ship and into specially built snow “dogloos.” The ship’s two pigs (destined

Top: King penguin. The second-largest penguin, weighing between 40 and 45 pounds, king penguins hold the distinction of being the most colorful of the species.

Left: Chinstrap penguin. The world’s second-most abundant penguin, chinstraps tend to nest on steep rocky slopes in large colonies called penguin suburbs. When one of the mating pair returns from a fishing expedition at sea, he or she finds the mate by making a distinctive, almost haunting, call that is recognizable to his or her significant other.



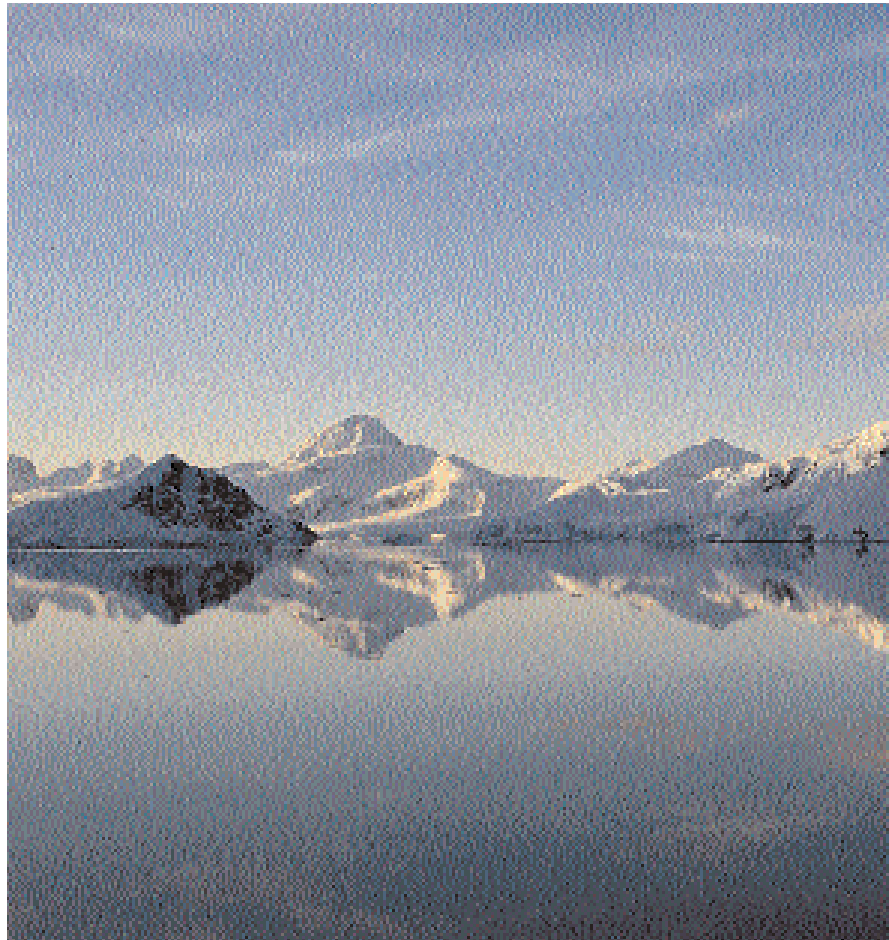
for the expedition's dinner table), a gift from the South Georgia whalers, moved onto the ice as well, now residing in spacious quarters referred to by the men as, not surprisingly, "pigloos." There was even time, and appropriate weather, for games of football—port watch vs. starboard watch—on the ice.

Once the Antarctic winter took hold, however, most activities moved back into *Endurance's* thick hull. March temperatures ranged from 11 above to 24 below zero Fahrenheit. The more exposed parts of the ship, those cabins located on deck, had to be vacated as too cold for comfortable living. The ship's cantankerous but talented Scottish carpenter, "Chippy" McNish, ("Chips" or "Chippy," the traditional nickname given to all ship's carpenters for hundreds of years, is used in boatbuilding shops to this day to describe the folks who work with wood) built temporary quarters in the ship's hold for some of the now displaced scientists and expedition members.

Chippy's ability to work with wood was characterized by some as almost miraculous; he was never seen to use a ruler or pencil, yet everything he built, from cabins to chests of drawers, came out straight and true. He possessed an acerbic wit, and some of his shipmates described his brogue as one that "rasped like a frayed wire cable." Not surprisingly, Shackleton did not move with the others, preferring to keep his cabin, which was among the coldest on the ship.

Incredibly, spirits among the 28 men stranded aboard this small island of warmth and comfort, located in a climate that may as well have been the surface of the moon, remained high. In April, the pigs met their end at the hand of Green, the ship's cook. By May 1, the sun sank below the horizon, plunging *Endurance*, her crew and the surviving 50 dogs into near total darkness for the next four months. Frank Hurley, the expedition's photographer, undaunted by the darkness, used the occasion to capture some of the most mesmerizing and memorable images of *Endurance*, illuminated by 20 flash powder "bombs" located around the ship.

The situation was changing, however. "The ship can't live in this. What the ice gets, the ice keeps" were the words Shackleton used to describe *Endurance's* predicament to Wild, his second in command, and Frank Worsley, the ship's captain, by



July 1915, in the midst of the Antarctic winter. Even the Boss' optimism was wearing thin.

The pressure of the ice was beginning to take its toll, even on a ship as unyielding as *Endurance* was thought to be. The rudder had been damaged, and constant creaking and groaning could be heard from the ship's straining hull. By October, converging ice floes had damaged not only the rudder but the sternpost as well. *Endurance's* very hull was now succumbing to the unrelenting pressure of the ice. For a short time, the pressure eased and the floes receded, allowing *Endurance* to float free for the first time in nine months. The reprieve was short-lived, however; the hull leaked almost as soon as she floated, and the floes re-exerted their unrelenting pressure once again. Chippy worked throughout the night in waist-deep 29-degree water building a cofferdam in the engine room in a vain attempt to keep the water from reaching the boilers. The men worked at the pumps continuously, but it became clear that they could not keep ahead of the rising waters.

At 4 p.m. on Oct. 27, the pressure of the ice dealt *Endurance* a fatal blow. Her stern lifted and a floe



The Antarctic landscape, while wild and inhospitable, is starkly beautiful. This fact was not lost on most of *Endurance's* crew, many of whom made repeated mention of this in their diaries.

tore away her rudder and sternpost. The floe's pressure then eased and *Endurance* settled slightly, as if a cruel joke were being played upon her. Then, another pressure convergence tore at her keel, causing massive flooding. At 5 p.m. Shackleton issued an abandon ship order. It was clear and sunny, the temperature was minus 8.5 degrees Fahrenheit and the nearest land lay 350 miles to the west. The dogs, which had been brought back aboard when the ice floes became unstable, were now sent back to the ice via canvas chutes. Vital supplies and other gear that had been prepared and stored on deck for this eventuality were now hauled to the ice as well.

ON THE ICE

"We are homeless and adrift on a sea of ice...an awful calamity..." Those words, written by Hurley, the photographer, well summarized the expedition's

perilous predicament. The site of *Endurance's* abandonment became known as "Dump Camp." Everything that could be of any value to the men while they were on the ice was salvaged from *Endurance's* hulk as the ice slowly enveloped it. Among this gear were three of *Endurance's* small boats—*James Caird*, *Dudley Docker* and *Stancomb Wills*—all named after benefactors of the expedition. Shackleton and his crew would later have reason to owe their very lives to all of these small but stout craft, particularly *Caird*, which was, at 22 feet in length, the largest and most seaworthy of the three.

The crew would now be relegated to sleeping in five tents (the material was so thin the moon could be seen through it) and sleeping bags. In a revealing and not coincidental twist, lots were drawn for the warmest reindeer bags, of which there were only 18. The remaining 10 bags, made of less adequate wool, were considered undesirable at best. The fix was in, however, and the Boss made sure the warmest bags went to the lowest ranking men, the trawlermen, carpenter and ship's company. Shackleton, the ship's officers and scientists all drew short straws, which

entitled them to the chilly wool bags.

In an additional illustration of Shackleton's astute leadership abilities, he ensured in assigning tent billets that the potential troublemakers and malcontents were berthed with him, enabling him to nip in the bud any fatalistic or seditious rumblings.

The first morning on the ice, the men were surprised to be awakened by Shackleton, Wild and Hurley delivering steaming hot mugs of milk to each one of them as they lay shivering in their bags. This characterized Shackleton's style of leadership; he was never too proud to stoop to the level of serving his men. As a former merchant marine, he was not bound by the stuffy and often debilitating separation of ranks and stations in life, which were often rigorously followed by other British polar explorers, who had emanated from the naval officer corps. Shackleton also knew that their only chance for salvation depended heavily on a positive outlook and high morale.

Initially, the plan was to drag the salvaged gear, rations and boats some 60 miles over the ice toward land, where, upon the melting of the ice, the boats



would be sailed to one of the islands visited by whalers in the summer season. In order to do this, all nonessential gear had to be discarded. Shackleton drove home this point by publicly dropping his silver brushes, a handful of gold sovereigns and his watch into the snow. The pile grew as each crewman dropped prized possessions, which included sextants, chronometers, books, tools and even the ship's Bible, which had been presented by the queen before their departure. Personal gear was limited to two pounds per person.

Hurley, the indefatigable photographer, returned to the wreck to retrieve many of his negatives, which were made of heavy glass. This necessitated hacking through the boat's half-submerged refrigerator, where he stored them. He then dove, stripped to the waist, into the slush and ice. He recovered over 500 plates. Ultimately, he would save 120 images, out of 520. The remaining 400 he and Shackleton had to smash. It was the only way he could be induced to leave them behind. Shackleton admonished the men to keep their diaries (these would be used for the officially sanctioned account). He was ever mindful of the necessity to pay off the expedition, especially in light of the loss of the ship and obvious failure of the trans-Antarctic portion of the journey. Thus, he begrudgingly allowed Hurley 60 of the aforementioned negative plates, which Hurley eventually negotiated up to 120. Shackleton also induced one of the men to keep his banjo, in the hopes that it would supply the crew with "vital mental tonic."

Unfortunately, some of the items declared unnecessary by the Boss included several of the dogs, including three of the puppies, and McNish's cat, Mrs. Chippy, who had become the ship's mascot. The difficult task of putting them to sleep fell to one of the *Endurance's* toughest and most experienced Antarctic hands, Tom Crean, a man described by some as indestructible. As the "godfather" of the pups, he wept after the deed was done. And it is said McNish never forgave Shackleton for ordering the destruction of his beloved pet.

With characteristic dispassion and confidence, Shackleton declared, "Ship and stores are gone, so now we'll go home." The surface conditions of wet (temperatures were as high as 30 degrees during the day), deep snow over contorted ice floes proved, however, an almost impenetrable barrier. After expending a considerable amount of effort to travel just a few miles from the site of the wreck,

establishing three separate camps along the way, the futility in continuing became readily apparent to all.

By January 1916, the men had been on the ice for nearly three months. Patience, endurance and morale were all at the breaking point. Because of the amount of food they required and the realization that they could never be taken in the boats, it became necessary to shoot the remaining 27 dogs. This was especially difficult, as all of the men had grown close to the animals, perceiving them in typical British fashion to be pets more than beasts of burden. Wild wrote in his diary, "I have known many



men I would rather shoot than the worst of the dogs." To make matters worse, seals, a primary source of food since abandoning ship, were growing scarce. In this harsh environment, nothing went to waste, and thus the dogs were butchered and eaten.

Anxiety increased as the ice floe upon which the men were camped shrank in size and diminished in stability. Once the swell of the ocean became evident, many of the men became seasick, which only added to their general state of misery and concern. Hunger and cold were constant companions, along with concern about their uncertain future.

AT SEA ONCE AGAIN

Finally, on April 9, after 170 days on the ice, the pack broke up enough to allow the three small boats



The mountainous interior of South Georgia presented Shackleton, Frank Worsley and Tom Crean with a formidable obstacle. So impenetrable was the interior of this land thought to be, when Shackleton and his men first related their tale to the Norwegian whalers, they were met with utter disbelief.

to be launched. While this was a welcomed event, enabling the men to look forward to the next stage of their rescue, it heralded what many would remember as the worst and most harrowing days of their lives.

The pack continually threatened to crush the small boats and, because of the amount of brash ice and growlers, rowing was nearly impossible. It was now fall and the temperature was dropping, routinely falling below zero at night. Because they were off the ice, fresh water had become a scarce commodity. On one occasion the men awoke to find the boats completely sheathed in ice, inside and out; it was hacked off with axes and distributed to the men to eat. Between this and the continual salt spray, all of the men suffered from severe thirst, swollen tongues

and cracked, bleeding lips. As if this were not enough, a pod of killer whales that had circled the camp's ice floe now followed the boats. *Stancomb Wills*, the smallest and least seaworthy of the three boats, was regularly shipping water to the depth of the occupants' knees.

For one of the trawlermen, a man who earned his living braving the unforgiving waters of the North Atlantic, it was simply too much. He buried his face in his gloved hands and sobbed from sheer fright and exhaustion.

Frank Worsley, *Endurance's* skipper and in command of *Docker*, remained at the tiller for 90 hours without relief. When he finally succumbed to exhaustion and agreed to be relieved, his body was frozen in a sitting position, requiring several hours to straighten out.

Six interminable days after taking to the boats and after 497 days on the ice and sea, the 28 members of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition set foot on Elephant Island. It is recorded in several crew members' diaries that Shackleton did not sleep for



These grounded bergs rest in a highly unusual placid sea. The weather conditions in the Antarctic, particularly in winter, are unforgiving at best.

the entire journey in the boats and he rarely left his position, standing and steering from the stern of *James Caird*.

Land was a welcome sight to all, no matter how desolate and foreboding. Hurley wrote in his diary of Elephant Island: "Such a wild and inhospitable coast I have never beheld." It presented, for the moment, salvation. Penguins and seals were plentiful, providing a source of food for the men and fuel for the blubber stove. (Penguin and seal blubber were excellent, if not sooty, sources of fuel.) The first landing place, Cape Valentine, was quickly abandoned as being too exposed. Tidemarks on the cliffs indicated that the beach would likely be submerged during one of the region's frequent storms. Frank Wild took one of the boats on a reconnoitering mission and soon returned having found a more suitable location a few miles down the island's coast. The new home was named Cape Wild, after its discoverer and Shackleton's trusted second in command. The crew almost immediately coined it "Cape Bloody Wild"—although higher ground, it was lashed by high winds and storms on

an almost daily basis.

Shortly after arriving on this barren rock that harbored not a shred of vegetation, a blizzard arose and raged for five days. Had the three small boats and their crews still been at sea, it is doubtful they would have survived. Even on land, many of the men were suffering from physical and mental exhaustion. One, shortly after stepping ashore, suffered a heart attack that was, mercilessly, not serious enough to be fatal. The misery had not ended but now entered a new, more monotonous phase. Survival was probable, but the castaway crew of *Endurance* could not live here indefinitely.

Shackleton and most of the men knew that this was but a temporary stopover. Elephant Island was in no known shipping lanes, and no whalers or sealers visited this remote outpost. If rescue would not come to them, they would have to rescue themselves. The Boss wasted little time in formulating a plan, and it was bold indeed. He, along with five others, would sail the largest, most seaworthy boat, the 22-foot *James Caird*, 800 miles to South Georgia. This would be a stupendous feat



of navigation and seamanship even in placid waters. To undertake such a journey through the notoriously tumultuous Southern Ocean in a seriously weakened vessel manned by a malnourished, exhausted crew during winter nearly defied imagination.

Shackleton called upon Chippy McNish to strengthen *Caird's* keel, raise her freeboard (it would remain perilously low, just 2 feet once she was fully loaded) and deck her over. McNish, in his usual resourceful manner, scavenged wood and nails from the other boats and crates for the freeboard portion of the refit. The keel he strengthened by lashing the mast from *Wills* to *Caird's* keelson. Caulking was improvised from lamp wick, oil paint and seal's blood. The subject of ballast and just how much *Caird* should carry was discussed extensively. Ultimately, 2,000 pounds of stones from the rocky beaches of Elephant Island were distributed within *Caird's* bilges, improving her stability but making for some very uncomfortable sleeping quarters for her crew. Finally, because there wasn't enough wood to build a proper deck, canvas was used, supported by a timber frame.

Although the odds were long, nearly every man in the party volunteered to be part of the crew. Shackleton first chose Worsley, *Endurance's* skipper. He had proven his skills many times over by safely and accurately piloting the trio of boats from the ice floe to Elephant Island, and thus Shackleton had supreme confidence in his abilities as a navigator. He also chose Tim McCarthy, one of the trawlermen, who had also proven himself capable in the first boat journey. Tellingly, he also chose two of the least reliable crewmen, McNish and John Vincent. McNish, although a master carpenter whose skills might be valuable on such a journey, had shown his disloyalty by inciting a near mutiny while on the ice. Shackleton wanted to ensure that his seditiousness would pose no threat to the morale of those left behind. He also cannily surmised that Chippy's modifications to *Caird* would be more thorough if he knew he was to be part of her crew. Vincent, physically the largest and strongest of the entire crew, was known as a bully and troublemaker, and the Boss wanted him where he could be watched as well. Finally, the indestructible Crean begged to be taken. Shackleton had originally thought he would leave him behind to be of help to Frank Wild, who would be in command of the island group. Crean was so insistent upon going, however, that Shackleton ultimately relented.

THE BOAT JOURNEY

Caird was launched on April 23, taking her leave of Elephant Island on the following day. Almost immediately, the winds and waves of the Southern Ocean conspired to make the journey unpleasant. All but Worsley and McCarthy were dreadfully seasick. The necessity of eating hot food in order to stave off the interminable cold, however, was paramount. Hot meals were prepared over the small Primus oil stove every four hours, delicately balanced by Worsley and Crean. They both suffered burns and frostbite to their hands, between preparing meals and standing watches in the frigid cockpit. Their diet consisted primarily of a sledging ration known as "hoosh," originally destined for the overland journey to the Pole. This concoction was a special high-calorie mixture of beef protein, lard, oatmeal, sugar, salt and water. Interspersed between meals were servings of hot milk with the occasional tot of blubber oil. The latter was originally intended to pour over the surface of the water to calm rough seas. Worsley wrote in his diary: "The oil would have sufficed but one gale, we had 10 during our passage."

Life was difficult at best for this small group of desperate souls. Sleeping bags would freeze between the time one occupant vacated and the next attempted to enter. Thus, it could take as long as a half-hour to kick one's way back into a bag that was as stiff as an iron sheet. To add to the general wretchedness of *Caird's* living conditions, the once sought-after reindeer sleeping bags had begun to molt. It seemed everything had become laced with the infernal reindeer hairs—the men's clothes, hoosh, milk, even their mouths.

Sleep was nearly impossible for the off-watch; every movement produced sharp jabs by crates of food, ballast stones or a neighboring body. Constant immersion produced saltwater boils on wrists, feet, legs and buttocks. Added to this pitiable condition were the regular torrents of icy water that ran through gaps and seams in the canvas deck onto the men's heads and already sodden sleeping bags. For ordinary men, the last straw would have been the discovery that one of the water casks had been damaged in loading back at Elephant Island and was now tainted with sea water. These were, however, far from ordinary men. Shackleton cut the water ration, and the subject was never mentioned again.

The third day out a break in the clouds allowed Worsley an opportunity to get a sun sight. As an experienced celestial navigator, I would classify



Worsley's achievements as nothing less than awe inspiring, particularly because celestial navigation is difficult even under the best of circumstances. Attempting to obtain a sight from a 22-foot boat while rolling through 40-foot seas and being whipped by salt spray is virtually impossible. Worsley described these sights as a four-man affair. He would, supported by the hands of Crean and McCarthy, take the sight, while Shackleton waited below, ready with chronometer, pencil and paper to record the angle and time. Once the sight had been obtained, Worsley would crawl below and gently prize open the sopping pages of the nautical almanac and logarithmic reduction tables, showing care not to tear the pulpy sheets. He then would reduce the sight by candlelight. Again, as a celestial navigator, it nearly defies belief that Frank Worsley could have obtained accurate fixes under these conditions.

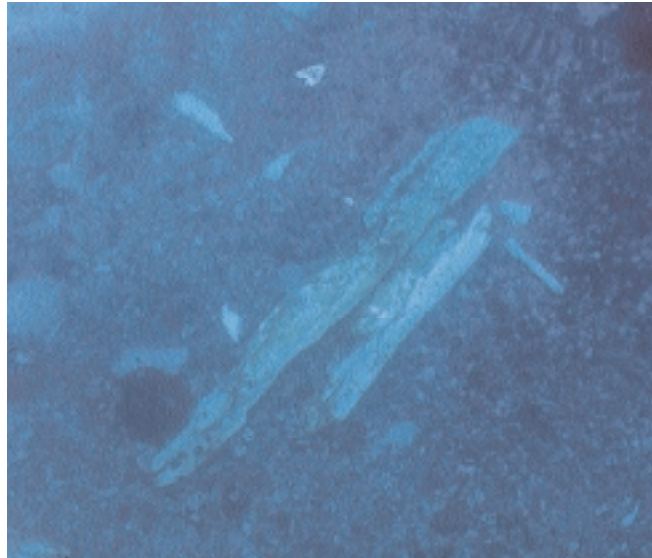
Ominously, several days into the boat journey, the wreckage of a ship, a figurehead and sections of deck, floated by as the crew of *James Caird* watched in silence. A vessel that had met its match rounding Cape Horn perhaps. No one would ever know.

The weather worsened as *Caird* headed farther north, into the swells and winds that circled the globe at this latitude, unchecked by any landmasses. Worsley wrote in his diary that this ocean produced the "highest, broadest, longest swell in the world." He commented that the tiny sails of *Caird* slackened as she sailed into the deep trough of each wave.

On the seventh day out, the men began to notice that the little boat's movement seemed sluggish; she was no longer rising with enthusiasm to each wave. To their horror, they discovered that the entire foredeck had become encased in a sheet of ice 15 inches thick. The men knew this condition would, unless corrected, only lead to capsize. In relays, they each crawled out onto the iced surface and chipped away with McNish's carpenter's adze, being careful

not to pierce the delicate canvas deck. As *Caird* lurched to a swell, Vincent, while doing his stint at chipping ice, slid across the deck and nearly went overboard. He grabbed the mast as it shot by, preventing a frigid and certainly fatal plunge into the Southern Ocean.

On May 2, shortly after taking his watch at the tiller, Shackleton called out to the rest of the crew that the weather appeared to be brightening. He could see a sliver of sunlight on the horizon. In a moment,



Whale bones litter the bottom of an isolated Antarctic bay. This not-uncommon sight is testimony to the breadth of the whaling industry in this region and its nearly successful endeavor to "harvest" every whale.

however, he realized that instead of light, this was the long, breaking white crest of a giant wave, and it was about to envelope them. "During 26 years experience of the ocean in all its moods, I had not encountered a wave so gigantic," wrote Shackleton of this event. He yelled to his shipmates below, "For God's sake, hold on! It's got us!" *Caird* was swallowed in a deluge of solid green water that half-filled the boat and soaked the men to the bone. The small boat emerged, however, waterlogged but undamaged. The men

pumped and bailed for a full hour before her bilges were emptied. The rogue wave was the portent of a gale that blew continuously for 48 hours.

The men were suffering dreadfully by now. Vincent, the strapping trawlerman, fell into a state of mental and physical collapse. McNish, the dour Scotsman, appeared to be holding up physically, but he stopped writing in his diary, the first time this had happened since leaving Plymouth nearly two years ago.

On May 8, *Caird's* 15th day at sea, land was sighted—cloud-shrouded Cape Demidon, South Georgia, was briefly visible. Worsley's calculations had proven correct. This lifted the men's spirits immeasurably, and they congratulated each other on having simply survived, rather than completed, the voyage. Unfortunately, the wind and waves conspired against the weary seamen once again. As darkness fell, *Caird* was being driven by the weather



onto a lee shore, a dreaded state of affairs for any mariner. Several of the men wrote that they thought they were done for—they had given it their best, but there was no way they could survive the impending doom.

For hours, the little boat tacked back and forth against the wind, clawing her way inch by inch off the rock-bound coast of South Georgia, while a full hurricane intensified and blew. Miraculously, she succeeded and, after 17 days at sea, Ernest Shackleton and the crew of *James Caird* sailed into King Haakon Bay, South Georgia.

I traveled the very same route, albeit in reverse, from South Georgia to Elephant Island during the summer in a 195-foot ship. Gales were frequent, winds rose to 50 knots and seas were unfriendly at best, reaching 25 feet on occasion. Fog, snow and rain were nearly continual, and the air temperature hovered around freezing. A less hospitable stretch of ocean I could not imagine. To traverse it in a 22-foot boat would require nothing less than Herculean fortitude, masterful navigation, superior seamanship and a modicum of desperation. The

accomplishment of these six men is nothing less than astonishing and has been acknowledged as one of the greatest small boat journeys in history.

Their first landing place, at the mouth of the bay, was christened Cave Cove. A small indentation in the rock face, really only overhanging cliffs fringed by stalactite-like icicles, provided the first stable, safe shelter the

men had known in over a fortnight. The less weary men built a fire using driftwood for fuel, and as they warmed themselves, sleeping the sleep of the dead, Shackleton and Crean went hunting, returning with four albatross chicks (these wandering albatross fledglings weighed 14 pounds each), which the men feasted on gleefully. Afterward, Shackleton wrote with



Top: The Norwegian whalers' chapel in Grytviken, South Georgia. It is here that members of *Endurance's* crew prayed before their departure south, and it is here that Shackleton's body lay in state before being buried in the whalers' graveyard. Left: Sir Ernest Shackleton's grave, located amongst those of fellow seamen in the whalers' cemetery.

characteristic understatement, "That was a memorable meal." Having visited Cave Cove in summer, it appears far from hospitable and inviting. However, it must have appeared Ritz-like to Shackleton and his crew.

Although the crew of *James Caird* had made it ashore, they were far from safety, and the thought of relieving their mates stranded on Elephant Island was ever present in their minds. Their next obstacle was geographic in nature. King Haakon Bay lay on the unpopulated southern side of South Georgia.



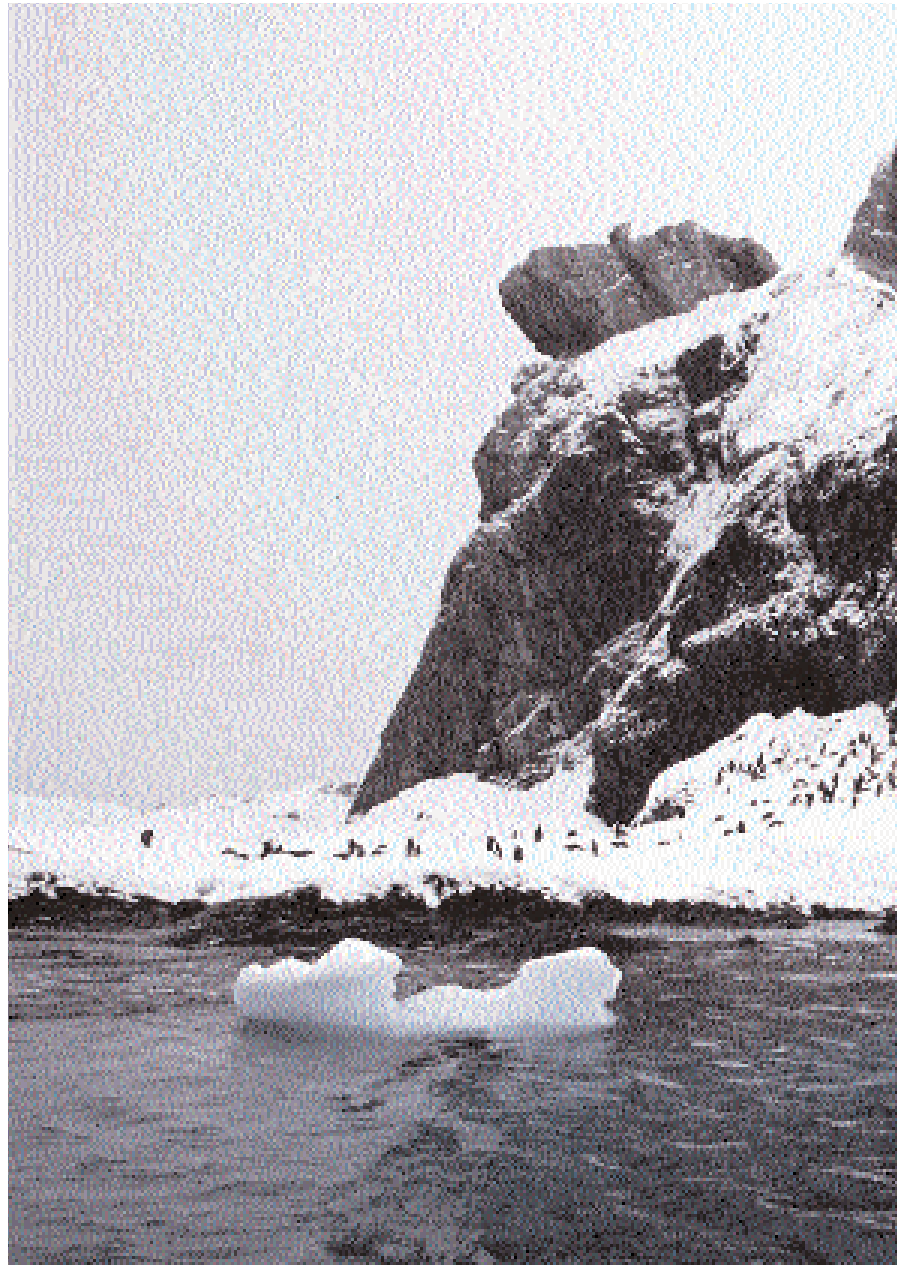
Stromness, the nearest inhabited whaling station, 150 miles by sea, lay on the north side of the island. It was clear that some of the crew would be unable to make another sea journey, even one as comparatively short as this. The only alternative was to cross over the interior of South Georgia, a feat that had never been accomplished.

In order to facilitate the overland hike, Shackleton and the men moved *James Caird* from Cave Cove to a new location at the head of the bay. Here, she was overturned and converted into a temporary shelter for McNish, McCarthy and Vincent. This location was christened Peggotty Camp. From here, the Boss, Worsley and Crean could begin their march to civilization.

The trek through the untamed wilds of South Georgia is an epic in itself. Several wrong turns, a 1,000-foot, three-minute “toboggan” ride down a snowy slope and a descent through an icy waterfall found the men staggering into Stromness whaling station 36 hours and 22 miles after they had departed Peggotty Camp. With only the rations they could carry and a few five-minute naps, this feat is the terrestrial rival of the 800-mile boat journey and has yet to be duplicated. (It has been repeated by several individuals and groups but never in so short a time, some taking as long as a week.)

I have had the opportunity to retrace the final 5 miles of this overland route, in summer rather than winter as Shackleton, Worsley and Crean did, and I can attest to the difficulty. My trek began in a whiteout of a snowstorm. The temperature was 28 degrees Fahrenheit, navigation was difficult even with the aid of a GPS receiver and the grades were steep and slippery. I was well rested, well fed, healthy and strong, carrying minimal gear and following an experienced guide. I shudder to think what would have been required had the distance been multiplied by five and all of my aforementioned advantages removed.

While hiking over the Fortuna Glacier, still high above Stromness, Shackleton heard what he thought was the steam whistle that awakened the whalers every morning at 6:30. He knew that another whistle



would sound a half-hour later, summoning the men to work. The three men sat and stared at the hands on Worsley's chronometer, willing them to move faster, toward 7 o'clock. When they heard the second whistle, at the stroke of 7, the first sound they had heard from the outside world since December 1914, they looked at each other and knew that salvation was only hours away.

SALVATION AND RESCUE

Upon their arrival at Stromness, the men were greeted with fear, derision and suspicion. They were blackened from blubber smoke, their clothes were



and he was concerned that he might encounter a woman. The others agreed and found him a pin. After all these three men had endured, their modesty was, remarkably, still intact. They finally encountered a Norwegian on the quay who spoke English. Shackleton asked that they be taken to the stationmaster's home. With some reluctance, the man agreed. Their tale of crossing the Southern Ocean and then the interior of South Georgia was too fantastic for him to believe. The whaler suspected some foul play, if not insanity, was afoot.

When Shackleton, standing on the doorstep, presented himself to the stationmaster, Thoralf Sorlle, a man he knew well and had last seen almost two years ago, the man did not recognize him. When he came to the door, Sorlle said, "Well?" Shackleton responded, almost in a whisper, "Don't you know me? My name is Shackleton." At this, the whaler who had hesitantly escorted them to the house turned away and wept. It was May 20, 1916.

The evening after they arrived, a gale blew over the island, and Shackleton and his companions knew that had they still been in the mountains they would have surely perished. The whalers told them that a 500-ton steamer had been lost in the hurricane a few days ago, the same hurricane that the diminutive *James Caird* survived while clawing her way off the headlands around King Haakon Bay.

Top: Expedition photographer Frank Hurley said this of Elephant Island: "Such a wild and inhospitable coast I have never beheld." Bleak, desolate and foreboding are all terms that are woefully inadequate in describing this harsh land.

Right: The author shares a quiet moment with the current inhabitants of Elephant Island, a colony of chinstrap penguins and the occasional leopard seal.

torn and stained from seal blood, and their hair and beards were long, filthy and matted.

Worsley solicited his companions for a safety pin—his trousers had been torn in the crossing



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The whalers heaped praise and adulation upon Shackleton, his crew and *James Caird*. It was, they proclaimed, the most incredible feat of seamanship they had ever seen. The Norwegians dispatched a steamer, with Worsley aboard to guide them, to fetch those who remained at Peggotty Camp. When Worsley came ashore, McNish and the others were insulted that one of their own had not returned for them; so devoid of filth and hair and freshly attired was Worsley that he was unrecognizable to his mates. Due to heavy pack, the rescue of the Elephant Island party was thwarted on three separate attempts, using three different vessels. Shackleton was nearly frantic to reach his men, fearing the worst. He knew every moment could mean the difference between life and death. On the fourth try, with the assistance of a small Chilean steam tugboat and her crew, a vessel that was designed for anything but Antarctic rescue work, Shackleton, Crean and Worsley succeeded in reaching the island.

Upon their arrival, Shackleton gazed intently through binoculars, straining to count the number of men standing on the beach. His heart sank when he noticed that the flag was at half-mast. Much to his relief, however, all 22 were there. They had waited four months for the Boss to return.

On Oct. 8, 1916, in Buenos Aires, the *Endurance* expedition was officially disbanded. Now the *Aurora* party required Shackleton's attention, and he raced

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to New Zealand and then on to the Ross Sea to take charge of yet another rescue. Three lives had been lost there, and the depot-laying party had been stranded ashore when the ship broke its moorings. It is yet another polar survival saga in its own right.

BITTERSWEET HOMECOMING

Within weeks of returning, many of *Endurance's* crew were in uniform fighting what was then known as the Great War. Within three weeks of his return, Tim McCarthy, survivor of an incredible shipwreck, ice journey and two boat journeys, was killed at his gun station while aboard a warship in the English Channel. Not long after, Alf Cheetham, the expedition crew member who held the distinction of having crossed the Antarctic Circle more times than any of the others, drowned when his minesweeper was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat.

Shackleton embarked on one final journey, again south toward the Antarctic, in 1921 and 1922, with many of his old mates, including Worsley and Wild. He died of a heart attack aboard the expedition's ship, *Quest*, while anchored in familiar territory, Grytviken, South Georgia, never having reached the

Antarctic. At his widow's request, he was buried there, in the whalers' cemetery, amongst the fellow seamen who admired him so much. He was 47.

In Nov./Dec. 2002, I was, while on assignment for PMM, able to follow in the footsteps of Shackleton and the members of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Thankfully, the authenticity and realism of my trek, undertaken aboard an expedition trawler (look for a future article about this former arctic fishing vessel turned extreme cruiser), ended short of being frozen into the pack ice or traversing the Southern Ocean in an open boat.

My journey was immeasurably more comfortable and secure than that of Shackleton and his men. I benefited from GPS and Gore-Tex where the Boss used sextant, woollens and reindeer skin. Our 195-foot steel expedition trawler was powered by twin diesels while Endurance used triple expansion steam and canvas to propel her wooden hull. Times have indeed changed, but the romance of traveling into the unknown, even if it was only unknown to me, remains.

(Steve D'Antonio is a PMM contributing editor and manager at Zimmerman Marine, a custom boatbuilding and repair yard in Cardinal, Virginia.)



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