

Freeze Frame

historic polar images

Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition 1914-16

Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition 1914-16

Summary

- The expedition's aim was to be the first to traverse the Antarctic continent from one side to the other.
- **Shackleton** the expedition's leader would sail on the **Endurance** to the Weddell Sea while the **Aurora** would sail to the Ross Sea.
- The expedition's aims were never attempted as the **Endurance** became stuck in the ice and the **ship** was crushed. Shackleton launched a rescue mission to get his men safely home.
- Crossing the Weddell Sea in the modified lifeboat the **James Caird**, Shackleton, Crean, Vincent, McNeish, Worsley and McCarthy sailed dangerous waters to get to South Georgia where they would be able to raise the alarm at the island's whaling station.
- Unfortunately the men landed on the opposite side of the island to the whaling station and were forced to trek across the interior (which had never been crossed previously) to raise the alarm.
- They succeed and were able to go and rescue the men they had left behind on Elephant Island.
- When the men made it back to Britain many went on to fight in the First World War.

Please note the photographs for this expedition are forthcoming.

By 1914 both the North and South Pole had been attained, Shackleton chose a new goal for his next expedition, to be the first to traverse across Antarctica. The expedition was going to use two ships, landing parties at either side of the Antarctic, Shackleton would sail to the Weddell sea in **Endurance** and from there lead the crossing party, the second ship the **Aurora** was to head for the Ross Sea. **Sledge** parties would set out from both ships, the Weddell Sea party would cross via the South Pole and meet the Ross Sea party at the Beardmore Glacier who would have laid food depots for the final phase to the Ross Sea.

Shortly before departure Britain was getting ready for what was to be the First World War, Shackleton contacted the Admiralty offering them his ships, men and supplies for the war effort. However, the Admiralty declined in a one-word wire stating he should 'proceed.' They left Britain on 8 August 1914, sailing towards the Weddell Sea via South Georgia. They found much greater amounts of heavy pack ice than they were expecting. They steamed along the barrier for a few days, discovering and naming the Caird Coast. They made very slow progress through the pack ice and on 19 January 1915 at 76°34'S the **Endurance** was frozen into the ice which had closed in around the ship during the night. As far as the eye could see there was ice, nothing they tried would free the ship from the ice.

Whilst stuck in the ice the men lived comfortably on the ship but eventually they would need to leave their ship as the pressure from the ice was slowly crushing it. **Hurley** the ship's **photographer** took a series of photographs that depict the damage by the ice on the **Endurance**. By the 30 September lateral cracks were opening up along the ship. Nearly one month later on 27 October the ship was damaged beyond all hope when her stern was crushed. On the previous day Shackleton had given the orders for the men to abandon ship, they had taken three boats, sledges and approximately a months supply of food, they could not get to the rest as it was inaccessible amongst broken timbers in the hull. A camp was established on the ice flow, but this was to be temporary due to its instability. All ambitions of crossing Antarctica

vanished as Shackleton now worked to get his men home safely.

On 28 October the men were instructed to get together no more than two pounds of essential personal gear and pack this onto the sledges. Hurley returned to the ship and rescued 400 of his negatives, as he could carry no more than 150 he was forced to select the best ones. To make sure he could not be tempted back to collect anymore, Hurley smashed the rest of his glass plate negatives. Ocean Camp was established on 1 November 1915; here a camp routine was established with each man having a job to do so that no one could get bored or despondent. The **Endurance** finally sank on 21 November. They had taken three whaling boats with them from **Endurance** the **James Caird**, the **Dudley Docker** and the **Stancomb Wills**, these were put on sledges and dragged northwards in relays. There was a fear the boats would be damaged and so they moved to the strongest flow they could find and here they set up Patience Camp. The ice flow on which they were camped broke off and proceeded to get smaller and smaller. Shackleton ordered that the boats be packed and ready to go at a moments notice should the ice crack. On the 10 April 1915 the 28 men piled into the three boats and into the Weddell Sea, heading towards Elephant Island.

After a difficult journey the men reached Elephant Island on 15 April 1915. Here the men were overjoyed to be on firm land, rather than the precarious ice flow. Whilst this was a more comfortable camp they still had no means of communicating with the outside world and their chance of discovery on the island was remote. Shackleton also felt that many of the men were too ill to continue on such an arduous journey. Their best chance of raising the alarm was on the island of South Georgia which had a whaling station, however, this was 800 miles away. Shackleton decided that he and a small crew would take one of the boats and sail to South Georgia. As they rested for a while, recovering from their journey to the island the **James Caird** was modified to make the 800 mile trip, sledge runners, crate lids and the cooks canvas windscreen were used to build a cover for the boat.

Shackleton, Worsley, McNeish, Vincent, Crean and McCarthy set sail on 24 April 1916. They spent the journey divided into two watches, of four hours on, four hours off. The men suffered terribly from seasickness, and were wet for the entire journey. On the rare occasions they saw the sun Worsley had to be held steady by two men so he could read the sextant to position them. At one point the boat was almost overwhelmed by a huge wave and all hands had to set to bailing water, for ten minutes they did not know if it would be possible to save the vessel.

They reached South Georgia but unfortunately they landed on the opposite side to the whaling station. Their best bet for reaching the other side was to walk across the interior rather than putting their boat to sea again. However, the interior of the island had never been traversed and was assumed to be impassable. The men rested in a cave and ate the island's albatrosses, and seals. When they were a little recovered Shackleton, Worsley and Crean set off to get help at the other side of the island. The distance was approximately 17 miles but the terrain was very heavy going. They set off at 3am on 19 May and walked without stopping across the Allardyce mountain range, arriving after a 36-hour trek at the whaling station on the 20 of May. In their shaggy, worn appearance they were hardly recognisable as human, however, the Norwegian whaling manager was hospitable and gave the men food and beds and arranged for the rescue of the men on the other side of the island. Worsley accompanied the rescue ship; in his clean, shaven state he was unrecognisable to Vincent, McNeish and McCarthy with whom he had spent the last eighteen months!

Shackleton discovered not only that the war imminent on their departure was still going on but that his other party - the Ross Sea Party had also run into trouble. The **Aurora** had broken away from its winter quarters before all the stores could be unloaded, after a long period adrift the ship safely reached New Zealand, however, the fate of the shore party was unknown. Shackleton needed to arrange two rescue trips, one for the Weddell Sea party still on Elephant Island and another for the party by the Ross Sea.

Shackleton went about arranging a rescue of his men trapped on Elephant Island, currently under the charge of Frank Wild. They had managed to construct an **improvised hut**, using two upturned boats, some stones and a canvas resulting in a reasonably comfortable shelter where they lived for 138 days living off penguin and seal meat. Each morning Wild would order 'Lash up and stow boys, the Boss [Shackleton] may come today'. After a couple of failed attempts Shackleton did reach his men on 30 August 1916 in the Chilean steamer the **Yelcho**. When the ship was spotted a fire was lit to attract the attention of the ship and allow them to pinpoint exactly where the men were. All the men were well

and all had survived their wait and were on board the **Yelcho** within the hour.

Shackleton then turned his attentions to rescuing the other party of the expedition, stranded at the Ross Sea. The **Aurora** had been blown out to sea and was imprisoned in the ice for a year before being towed to New Zealand. Despite many hardships the men of the Ross Sea party had managed to carry out their role in the expedition and had laid the sledging depots for the expected crossing party. The **Aurora** left New Zealand with Shackleton on board to rescue the men, reaching McMurdo Sound on 10 January 1917. Out of the ten members who had been stranded, three had died including the leader Captain Aeneas Mackintosh. The ship arrived in New Zealand 9 February 1917, bringing all the remaining members of the expedition to safety.

Many of these men would serve in the **First World War** including Shackleton who was sent to South America, and North Russia in charge of Arctic Equipment and Transport.

Further Information

Alexander, C. (1998) *The Endurance Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition*. Butler and Tanner.

Huntford, R. 1985 *Shackleton*. Hodder and Stoughton.

Lansing, A. (1959) *Endurance, The Greatest Adventure Story Ever Told*. Weidenfield and Nicolson.

Mill, H.R. 1923 *The Life of Sir Ernest Shackleton*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.

Shackleton, E. (1919) *South*. London: William Heinemann. Reprinted, London: Pimlico, 1999.

Worsley, F.A. (1931) *An Epic Polar Adventure, Endurance*. Norton.

Headland, R.K (2009) *A Chronology of Antarctic Exploration, A synopsis of events and activities from the earliest times until the International Polar Year, 2002-2009*. Bernard Quaritch Ltd.