

Triumph and Tragedy at the Bottom of the World:  
The Story of Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure

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Shackleton's Antarctic adventure is one of the extraordinary true chronicles of heroic exploration in the twentieth century. It is the story of polar explorer Ernest Shackleton and his legendary 1914 Antarctic Expedition. While attempted to cross Antarctica, Shackleton and his men became stranded. Just one day's sail from the continent, the ship *Endurance* became trapped in sea ice. Frozen fast for ten months, the ship was crushed and destroyed by ice pressure, and the crew was forced to abandon ship. After camping on the ice for five months, Shackleton made two open boat journeys, one of which--a treacherous 800-mile ocean crossing to South Georgia Island--is now considered one of the greatest boat journeys in history. Trekking across the mountains of South Georgia, Shackleton reached the island's remote whaling station, organized a rescue team, and saved all of the men he had left behind. As a consequence of Shackleton's cool headed and carefully mapped strategy of escape, this expedition's successful journey to safety has become a testament to high quality management, leadership, and endurance. Shackleton's Antarctic journey is a true story of epic proportions – possibly the greatest survival story of all time.

During the "Heroic Age of Exploration," the period in which Shackleton's 1914-1916 British Antarctic Expedition took place, Antarctic expeditions were famous as men tried to reach the highest mountains, the deepest jungles, the longest rivers and the most extreme poles of the earth. Shackleton was a part of this age of exploration. Ernest Shackleton became determined to

mount his own assault on the unclaimed South Pole (Gerson 87).

On 3rd August 1907, Shackleton set sail for Antarctica. After enduring the fiercest winter on Earth, Shackleton and his team set off due south across the Ross Ice Shelf, determined to reach the South Pole. By December 1908 the party had passed the farthest point south ever reached by human explorers, and were now pioneering new ground. Their route through the Antarctic Mountains took them up a 140 mile long Glacier and onto the high south polar ice desert. This was to be the most dangerous and risky part of the route. The smooth glacier surface concealed treacherous crevasses which claimed the lives of their pack animals. But they trekked forward. On the 27th December 1908, the party reached the windswept polar plateau, some ten thousand feet higher than their starting point. Exhausted, low on food and pulling the sledges themselves, they continued on through bitter winds towards their goal. But they lacked the provisions to make it. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 1909, "The Boss" as his men called him, was to make one of the greatest and boldest decisions of his life. Barely a hundred miles short of the Pole, he performed calculations showing that the men did not have enough food to make it to the South Pole and back to his base camp safely. Shackleton then made the decision to turn back without reaching the goal. Had he been prepared to risk the lives of his team, Shackleton would have claimed the Pole. But Shackleton's highest goal was the safety of his men; he accepted defeat. On his return to England, Ernest Shackleton was greeted at the docks by crowds and subsequently knighted in recognition of what he had achieved: the furthest South. But not the Pole (Alexander 124).

As it happened, he was beaten to the ultimate prize - the South Pole - by a Norwegian explorer. By the time Shackleton reached home from Antarctica, the explorer Roald Amundsen

had already reached the South Pole (Gerson 117).

What remained for an ambitious explorer? It occurred to Shackleton that there existed a challenge in *crossing* the Antarctic continent. With the support of financial backers, he coordinated the British Antarctic Expedition with the goal of accomplishing the first crossing of the Antarctic continent, a feat many considered to be the last great polar journey of the Age of Exploration (“Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage”).

In August of 1914, Sir Ernest Shackleton and his crew sailed from England in an attempt to become the first humans to cross the Antarctic continent. The group was not to be successful in their quest, but what happened turned out to be an incredible story of human spirit, endurance, and the will to survive (Alexander 227).

The expedition began in high spirits, but troubles began as they sailed towards the Antarctic through the Weddell Sea, where Shackleton and his crew were overcome by so many icebergs that their ship became stuck in the ice. The crew worked for weeks trying to free the ship from the frozen grip, but nothing worked. They had no choice but to wait for warmer weather in hopes that the ice would melt and the ship could be released, allowing them to continue on their journey or go back home. But the ship was destroyed by the ice (278).

The crew abandoned the *Endurance* as it was crushed by the ice, and the men began pulling three lifeboats across the ice pack towards the sea. For three and a half months they lived on this giant ice floe. Like a drifting ship, they floated slowly with the ice field toward the open water of the Weddell Sea. Food disappeared rapidly during their encampment, and if it had not been for the seals and penguins that the men hunted, they would have starved. But food was not the only problem. They were also in constant danger of seeing their ice raft break up under them

and throw them into the ice-water (“Shackleton’s Antarctic Adventure”).

The Antarctic summer was soon underway, and the ice became soft and slushy. One night, a member of the expedition felt the ice suddenly open beneath him. His shouts for help brought Shackleton. The boss knew that he had to act, and there was no doubt about what had to be done. The explorers had to take what possessions they could, and head for the nearest patch of solid land, which happened to be the lonely and barren Elephant Island (Larson 176).

They took to the tiny boats and headed north. Gale winds churned up violent waves, constantly threatening to sweep into the overloaded boats. Frostbite and thirst added to the sufferings of the explorers. On April 15, their situation temporarily improved when the explorers reached the shore of Elephant Island. More dead than alive, Shackleton and his companions could hardly move their legs to wade through the surf to reach the beach (203).

Although the explorers were relieved to be on solid land, they were not out of danger yet. Elephant Island was far off the beaten track, even for whalers, and without a radio to call for help, they might never be found. There was one remaining alternative, and Shackleton decided to risk it. He would sail north with one of the small boats in search of help (236).

After discussing several plans with his staff, he decided to make a run in a small boat - the “James Caird” - to South Georgia Island, about 800 miles to the north. A whaling station was located on this island, and the settlement was connected by radio to civilization. Although the Caird was a sturdy boat, it was pitifully small to take on the wild Antarctic seas that had to be crossed. But the gamble was necessary if the explorers were to survive (243) .

Shackleton chose five men to sail the Caird with him on the daring voyage, On April 24, 1916, a blue sky and bright sun replaced the gray, storm-torn clouds which had hung over the explorers

for weeks. The sunny day which the explorers enjoyed on their departure proved to be one of the rare few of the entire journey (258).

As Shackleton had expected, they were battered by one violent storm after another. Spray and cold combined to coat the boat with ice. Their clothing was seldom dry. This daring voyage took place in the biting cold of an Antarctic winter when temperatures rarely rose above zero. Day after day the Caird bucked like an angry horse as the explorers pushed farther and farther through the stormy Antarctic sea (“Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage”).

After a little more than two weeks of hair-raising adventures and extreme physical suffering, Shackleton and his companions finally landed on South Georgia. They were exhausted but overjoyed that they had sailed safely across 800 miles of one of the world's stormiest seas. The explorers had made an epic sea voyage. But there was no time for self-congratulations. Their job was not finished. They had to reach Stromness Whaling Station on the opposite side of the island (Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage”).

The Caird was no longer seaworthy, so any idea of using it further had to be given up. There was only one thing left to do, and that was to reach the station by foot. This meant marching overland through a region never before seen by man. Indeed, the interior of South Georgia was filled with so many jagged, high mountains and treacherous glaciers, that it was said to be impassable (Bryson).

But these were desperate men. After resting a while to recover some of their strength, Shackleton and two of the crew began the climb up and over the mountains. One mountain ridge after another blocked their path, but they crossed them slowly and painfully. When the men finally reached the last of these ridges, it dropped suddenly and steeply to a lower level. It was

impossible for them to go down the sides of the cliff. They decided to use that they would use the rope to make a crude toboggan and slide down the glacier (Bryson).

The men seated themselves upon these pads, with Shackleton in the lead. They straddled one another's waist with their legs and took a firm hold of each other's clothing. Then Shackleton shoved them on their way. For a moment they felt as though they had shot off into space. Faster and faster down the icy slope they sped. Forgetting the danger as the ride became more thrilling, the men began to shout out of sheer excitement. They ended their glacier slide in a soft snow bank, laughing and relieved that they were still in one piece (Bryson).

After that spine-tingling ride, Shackleton and his companions rested until dawn. They resumed their journey, and before long they approached a tiny cluster of dirty shacks - Stromnes Whaling Station. A deep-sounding blast of a whistle, calling whalers to work, broke the morning quiet. This was the first sound of civilization the explorers had heard since leaving England. They quickened their steps and headed for the office of the station's manager. The boss of the whaling operations stared in speechless wonder at his unannounced visitors. With their long, uncombed beards and ragged clothing the explorers looked like thugs, as Shackleton described their appearance .

"Who are you?" the astonished manager asked.

"Ernest Shackleton," he answered (Alexander 298).

Everyone – including this obscure manager at an obscure whaling station - knew who Shackleton was. Then the explorer told the tragic story of his expedition and the urgent need for help. The stunned manager called the station's crew together and quickly began preparations for the rescue of the stranded explorers. After several attempts, Shackleton and the whalers returned

to Elephant Island and saved his stranded crew (307).

Sir Ernest Shackleton's legendary 1914-1916 British Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition redefined exploration for the twentieth century. While never accomplishing its goal of the first crossing of the Antarctic continent, this expedition has become a larger-than-life testament to intelligent strategy, human endurance, and downright heroism. With all 28 men surviving nearly two years in the barren frigid Antarctic, Shackleton's leadership proved the value strong planning. The conclusion to Shackleton's valiant voyage was the healthy return of each and every man on the expedition. And that was a triumph. Although Shackleton's expedition had ended in disaster, the bravery of Shackleton and his men showed the power of the human spirit. The intelligence to escape death revealed the greatness of the human mind. Finally, this brave man and his crew proved the value of lives dedicated to exploration and discovery.

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