

# 6243

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Survivor  
ERIK SORENSON

SORENSEN

In January, 1914, the following notice was posted in various British journals:

Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold.  
Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe  
return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success.

Almost 5000 men answered the notice, of whom 56 were ultimately selected for an expedition which, as we will see, more than lived up to its billing.

The notice was a recruitment for an Antarctic expedition which was to be organized and led by Sir Ernest Shackleton, who wanted to lead the first expedition to cross the Antarctic continent and thus cap an already illustrious career as a polar explorer. Even during the so-called "Heroic Age of Exploration", this was indeed a daunting task, but Shackleton fervently believed not only that it could be done, but that he was the man to do it.

Before we begin this story of high adventure, unimaginable hardship, suffering, incredible determination and leadership, we should have some background information about Sir Ernest Shackleton and his times.

He was born in County Kildare in Ireland on February 15, 1874, and after being educated at Dulwich College from 1887 to 1890, he entered the Royal Naval Reserve in 1901. This was a period of intense interest in exploring the polar regions, both North and South, and there was very strong competition among men and nations to be the first to reach the actual poles themselves. Shackleton was soon swept into the excitement of the time, and he joined Captain Robert Falcon Scott's British National Antarctic Expedition aboard the ship *Discovery* from 1901 to 1904. He took part, with Scott and Edward Wilson, in the sledge journey, and they reached latitude 82 degrees, 16 minutes, 33 seconds S - 745 miles from the Pole - the deepest penetration of the continent at that time.

In spite of the rigors of this expedition, Shackleton was hooked on the Antarctic, and in January, 1908, he returned as the leader of the British Antarctic Expedition aboard the *Nimrod*. This was the first expedition that announced that its goal was to reach the South Pole itself, and the sledging party which he led reached 97 miles of the geographic South Pole, and another party, led by T.W. Edgeworth David, actually reached the area of the South Magnetic Pole. Shackleton's return journey was a desperate race with death, but he and his party eventually reached safety. When the story reached England, Shackleton immediately became a hero of the Empire. He was knighted by King Edward VII, lionized wherever he went, and decorated by virtually every major country in the world. He wrote a book (*The Heart of the Antarctic*) and went on a lecture tour of the British Isles, the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Nevertheless, his thoughts always returned to the Antarctic, and he definitely wanted to return to that forbidding place. His journey to the Pole had been stopped a mere 97 miles short because of a shortage of food, and he knew that it was only a matter of time before somebody attained the goal that had been cruelly denied him. Indeed, the American Robert E. Peary reached the North Pole in 1909. In 1912, in a race reminiscent of the later space race between the United States and the Soviet Union, a British expedition to the South Pole led again by Robert Scott, was beaten to the South Pole by little over a month by the Norwegian Roald Amundsen. This piece of very bad luck was made even more distressing by the deaths of Scott and his companions as they struggled

to return to their base, and the entire British nation was saddened. Their sense of loss was compounded by the fact that the British, who had an unparalleled record of global exploration, had been a humiliating second to the Norwegians.

Shackleton, in the meantime, was proceeding with his own plans to lead the first expedition to cross the Antarctic continent, and his solicitations for money for the journey played heavily on the matter of national honor and prestige. The following quote from an early fund raising prospectus clearly illustrates the point.

"From the sentimental point of view, it is the last great Polar journey that can be made. It will be a greater journey than the journey to the Pole and back, and I feel that it is up to the British nation to accomplish this, for we have been beaten at the conquest of the North Pole and beaten at the first conquest of the South Pole. There now remains the largest and most striking of all journeys - the crossing of the Continent."

His plan was simple and straightforward. He would take a ship, aptly named *Endurance*, into the Weddell Sea and land a sledging party of six men and seventy dogs near Vahsel Bay. At about the same time, a second ship (*Aurora*) would land across the continent at McMurdo Sound in the Ross Sea. This party was to set down a series of food caches from their base almost to the Pole, which the Weddell Sea party were to use to replenish their own by then exhausted supplies as they proceeded to the McMurdo Sound base.

This plan was criticized in some circles as being "audacious", and perhaps it was, but if it hadn't been, it wouldn't have been Shackleton. The plan was purposeful, bold, and neat, and he had not the slightest doubt that it would succeed. Shackleton was, above all, an explorer in the classic sense - utterly self reliant, romantic, and just a little swashbuckling.

He began planning for the expedition in mid 1913, and after he went public in January, 1914, he selected the crew for the two ships - 27 men for the *Endurance*, including Shackleton himself and 29 for the *Aurora*. In addition to the selected crew, there was also on the *Endurance* a stowaway, a man by the name of Perce Blackboro, who was eventually to become an integral member of the crew. Thus, there were actually 28 men on the *Endurance*. Although the names of the entire crew are known, and most of these men kept private journals of the expedition, it is not really important to list all of them. However, some of Shackleton's selections deserve attention because of the roles they were to play. As second in command of the expedition, he selected Frank Wild, a tested Antarctic veteran who had accompanied Shackleton on his previous polar journeys. Wild was an excellent choice - he was fiercely loyal to Shackleton, and Shackleton had complete confidence in his abilities - a confidence that later events showed to be well deserved. As captain of the *Endurance*, and therefore the man in charge of the physical running of the ship, he chose Frank Worsley, a 42 year old New Zealander who had been at sea since he was 16. Worsley's navigational skills were to be sorely tested, and he met every challenge that was thrown at him. There was of course a full crew for the ship, as well as two physicians, a cook, several scientists, and the official photographer, a man named Frank Hurley. Posterity can be very grateful to him for the spectacular photographs which he took. Even more remarkable, he was able to save and store all the negatives for later developing. This was Shackleton's crew, and these men showed what a great judge of character he was.

Along with the crew selection, he went about the task of raising sufficient funds to properly finance the adventure. This proved to be a very difficult task, in spite of Sir Ernest's considerable personal charm and powers of persuasion. He ultimately received the bulk of his financing from three people whose names will become prominent later in this story - Sir James Caird, Dudley Docker, and Miss Janet Stancomb-Wills. Finally, by the end of July, 1914, all was ready for departure, which was scheduled for August 1. June 28 of that year had seen the assassination of the heir to the Hapsburg throne, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and as final preparations for departure proceeded, war clouds gathered over Europe. As the ships set sail from London on August 1, England declared war on Germany. Shackleton immediately offered his ships and men to the Admiralty, asking only that the expedition members be considered a single unit, in order to, in Shackleton's words "preserve its homogeneity". Within an hour, he received a terse one word telegram: "Proceed." Two hours later he received a longer wire from the First Lord of the Admiralty, a rising young politician by the name of Winston Churchill explaining that the British government wished the expedition to go forth as planned because it had the full sanction and support of the Scientific and Geographical Societies.

From London the *Endurance* sailed to Plymouth, where Shackleton had an audience with the king, who gave him a Union Jack to carry on the expedition. They left Plymouth on August 8, and had an uneventful voyage south to Buenos Aires. They left Buenos Aires on October 26 and had their last contact with the outside world when they landed at the whaling station at Grytviken on South Georgia Island. They arrived at Grytviken on November 5, 1914. The original plan, which was so far on schedule, had been to attempt the trans-Antarctic journey that year in order to take advantage of the Antarctic summer months of December, January, and February. However, they received the depressing news that ice conditions in the Weddell Sea, while never good, were the worst they had ever been in the memory of the Norwegian whaling captains operating in the area. Conditions were so bad that some of the Norwegians tried to persuade Shackleton to wait till the following season.. However, he was nothing if not determined, so the *Endurance* set sail for the Weddell Sea on December 5, 1914.

As they had been forewarned, the men of the expedition encountered severe pack ice. and the *Endurance* twisted and squirmed her way through it as best she could. They had hoped to be ashore at Vahsel Bay by the end of December, but the ship was only able to average 30 miles a day, and by the end of December, even though summer had begun, and the days were 24 hours long, they had not even crossed the Antarctic Circle. They pressed ahead through ever thicker pack ice, making progressively less progress. They finally decided to wait through what proved to be a six day gale to see if the pack would loosen, but conditions only became worse, and by January 24, the ice was packed snugly around the *Endurance* as far as the eye could see. That morning they spotted a crack in the ice, and with all sails set and engines running full speed ahead, the *Endurance* made an attempt to break through the ice to the crack. For three hours, the ship leaned against the ice and moved not a foot. The *Endurance* was trapped, as Thomas Orde-Lees, the ship's storekeeper, put it "frozen, like an almond in the middle of a chocolate bar".

Several desperate and heroic attempts were made during February to somehow free the ship by cutting a path through the ice to the open water, but all failed. At last on February 24, 1915, Sir Ernest admitted that they could no longer seriously consider the possibility of getting free, thus making official what the whole crew had come to accept -

namely that they would have to spend the winter on board the ship, trapped in the ice and not knowing if they would be able to free themselves the following spring.

For the men, this news was almost welcome, because the end of sea watches meant that they could sleep all night. For Shackleton, however, it was an entirely different matter. He was tormented by thoughts of what had happened and by what might happen. He also realized that his goal of successfully crossing the continent was almost certainly doomed to fail. He was bitterly disappointed, but he realized that his duty lay in caring for his men, regardless of his own personal feelings. He was therefore careful not to betray his disappointment to his men, who still had implicit faith in the man they called "The Boss". The Boss he was, and he cheerfully supervised the routine of preparing the ship for the long winter's night that loomed ahead.

The dogs were removed from the ship and housed in ice houses constructed by the crew and dubbed "dogloos". Otherwise, the only really vital task was to lay in a large supply of meat and blubber - the meat to feed the men and dogs and the blubber to be used as fuel. During February, it was easy, as the ice floes teemed with seals. They were easy to approach and shoot, because they were devoid of fear while on the ice. As March began, the number of seals dramatically declined, but with the aid of the sharp eyes of Captain Worsley, enough were spotted and killed to keep the men supplied.

As the days lengthened into months, the observations of the crew indicated that, although the ice pack remained generally quiet, it was drifting slowly as a unit, and by May 2, their position indicated that they had drifted northwest 130 miles since February.

As if their predicament was not already bad enough, early in May, the sun appeared over the horizon for the last time, and although they did have a hazy half light of dusk for a few days, they were soon in total darkness. The long Antarctic winter night had begun.

In all the world, there is no desolation more complete than the polar night. It is a return to the Ice Age - no warmth, no life, no movement. Being without the sun day after day and week after week has strong psychological effects, and many a man has been driven mad by the experience. But, in another indication of Shackleton's superb leadership, the crew of the *Endurance* did not break, and there was very little depression. The crew had become very close, in no small part due to the fact that there was total sharing of the workload by all of the crew (including Shackleton himself) with no attention being paid to one's previous status or social standing. At the same time, the chain of command was kept intact, and Sir Ernest remained "The Boss".

The ship was relatively warm and comfortable, and the men had plenty of food and warm clothing. There were spontaneous as well as organized good natured competitions between the men, and also between the various dog crews. The men provided entertainment for each other, and each Saturday night, a ration of grog was issued to all hands, followed by the toast, "To our sweethearts and wives", to which was invariably added, "May they never meet!"

As the winter progressed and spring approached, the men's thoughts inevitably turned to the possibility of freeing the *Endurance* and proceeding with the mission. However, as the temperatures gradually warmed, the ice began to shift and new pressures were placed on the ship. On many occasions, it appeared that she would be crushed by the ice, only for her to somehow miraculously survive the ordeal. By October, however, the *Endurance* began to list significantly, and it began to appear that she would not

survive the ordeal. Finally, on October 24, 1915, 9 months to the day after the ship had been trapped in the ice, she began to take in water and break up. In spite of the herculean efforts of the crew to try to save her, it became obvious that the ship was doomed. Shackleton silently nodded to Wild, who then went forward to the men and said: "She's going boys. I think it's time to get off."

Lost with the *Endurance* was any hope of successfully completing the trans-Antarctic journey, and no one was more disappointed than Sir Ernest Shackleton. But he immediately recognized that his duty was to his men, and his new mission became to see to it that the party made it back to England with no loss of life, a goal which must have seemed unattainable. I quote now Shackleton's own words, which he wrote in his book about this expedition, called simply *South*. "For myself, I could not sleep. The destruction and abandonment of the ship was no sudden shock. The disaster had been looming ahead for many months, and I had studied my plans for all contingencies a hundred times. But the thoughts that came to me as I walked up and down in the darkness were not particularly cheerful. The task now was to secure the safety of the party, and to that I must bend my energies and mental power and apply every bit of knowledge that experience of the Antarctic had given me. The task was likely to be long and strenuous, and an ordered mind and a clear program were essential if we were to come through without loss of life. A man must shape himself to a new mark directly the old one goes to ground." And shape himself he did.

The first job was to create a camp on the ice for the men and what supplies could be salvaged from the ship. Initially, however, the exhausted men fell on the bare snow to sleep as best they could. They were awakened by another crack in the ice floe on which they had found temporary refuge, and they were forced to hurriedly relocate before they would have been swept into the icy sea. Finally, they established a base which they called Ocean Camp, and which was to be their home for the next two months. Conditions were much harder on Ocean Camp than they had ever been on the ship. Ultimately, their goal was to march to Paulet Island, 346 miles to the northwest, where a store of supplies left in 1902 should still be. In addition to hauling supplies, it would be necessary to drag with them three small lifeboats from the *Endurance*, since it was assumed that they would ultimately reach open water and be unable to march further over the ice.

In spite of the terrible circumstances in which they found themselves, Shackleton's men showed few signs of discouragement. They were happy to be alive, and they were more than willing to concentrate on the tasks ahead to keep them that way. There was even a sense of exhilaration. Finally, after nine months of drifting aimlessly in the ice and the consequent indecision, they had a defined goal. Now they had to simply get themselves out, no matter how appallingly difficult that might be. And, they had complete faith that "The Boss" would somehow find a way to lead them home.

One of the first important decisions made at this time by Shackleton was to inform his men that they could travel only with the bare minimum of supplies. He called them together to explain the situation. He pointed out that it was imperative that all weight be reduced to the barest minimum, and that no article was of any value when weighed against their ultimate survival. At the start of the expedition, they had been given a bible by Queen Alexandra, in which she had inscribed the words: "May the Lord help you to do your duty and guide you through all the dangers by land and sea. May you see the Works of the Lord and all His Wonders in the deep." When he finished his

speech to the crew, he reached under his parka and took out a gold cigarette case and several gold sovereigns and threw them into the snow at his feet. He then opened the bible Queen Alexandra had given them and ripped out the inscription from the Queen and the page containing the familiar and comforting 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. He also tore out the page from the Book of Job with this verse on it:

Out of whose womb came the ice?  
And the hoary frost of Heaven, who hath gendered it?  
The waters are hid as with a stone.  
And the face of the deep is frozen.

Then he laid the bible in the snow and walked away.

It was a dramatic gesture, but it made his point. He believed from his study of past expeditions that those who burdened themselves with equipment to meet every contingency had fared much worse than those that had sacrificed total preparedness for speed. Each man was allowed the clothes on his back, plus two pairs of mittens, six pairs of socks, two pairs of boots, a sleeping bag, a pound of tobacco, and two pounds of personal gear.

As the day wore on the amount of nonessential material dumped in the snow grew steadily. As one of the crew members noted, "it was an extraordinary collection of stuff" and included chronometers, axes, an ophthalmoscope, saws, telescopes, socks, lenses, jerseys, chisels, books, stationery, and a large number of pictures and personal keepsakes. For some men the two pound limit was relaxed - for example, the two surgeons kept a small amount of medical supplies and instruments, and the men with diaries were allowed to keep them. Fortunately, the photographer Frank Hurley was permitted his cameras and negatives, and one of the crew members was ordered to take his 12 pound zither banjo for the men's entertainment.

Having provided for themselves as best they could, the crew settled down on the ice pack to see where it would take them. Although they had no control of their fate, they knew that everything depended on the drift of the pack. The ice might continue to go generally northwest toward the Palmer Peninsula, possibly as far as the South Orkney Islands, about 500 miles to the north. Or the drift might be arrested for some reason and they would remain more or less in the same spot. Finally, and grimmest, was that the pack might veer northeast or even east, carrying them away from land. This prospect led to the possibility that they would have to spend yet another Antarctic winter, this time adrift on the floes.

The men endured unspeakable hardships as their ice drifted slowly northward. They had gone from the relatively pleasant, well-ordered existence on the ship to one of primitive discomfort of unending wetness and inescapable cold. Whereas before, on the ship, they had slept in their own warm bunks and eaten their meals in the cozy atmosphere around the mess table, now they were crammed together in overcrowded tents, lying in reindeer or woolen sleeping bags on bare ice. At mealtime, they sat in the snow eating out of an aluminum mug. The food was terribly monotonous, but at least it was warm, as the crew had set up a makeshift kitchen. They were castaways in a savage region, drifting helplessly they knew not where. Nobody else in the world knew where they were, and as the war raged in Europe, they were given very little, if any, thought by

the authorities back in England. They had no means of communication and virtually no hope of rescue.

As they settled into the mind numbing routine of the daily struggle for survival, remarkably they adjusted with surprisingly little trouble to their new life, demonstrating, under the most dire of circumstances, that the human race is capable of showing great adaptability. In addition to the harsh everyday routine, they also battled periodic gales and blizzards.

As they slowly drifted northward, a new danger confronted them - the breakup of the ice. Several times Shackleton was forced to awaken his men and have them move their camp to a new, more secure location. Finally, they abandoned Ocean Camp and set out to march across the ice to open water, dragging along with them the three life boats which were to be their ultimate lifeline. Being men of the sea, they could not contemplate setting sail in unnamed vessels, so they christened the small boats after three of their benefactors - *The James Caird, the Dudley Docker, and the Stancomb-Wills*.

Their march began on December 23, but after six days of effort and struggle with very little headway, Shackleton abandoned the march and set up yet another camp on the ice, which he dubbed Patience Camp. This was to be their home for the next three and one-half months.

Finally, inevitably, they drifted and were blown north of the Antarctic Circle, and on March 31, 1916, the ice floe on which they were camped split in two, separating them from their lifeboats. Miraculously, they retrieved them all, but it became obvious that they would soon have to leave the relative security of the ice for the hazards of the open sea. As bad as conditions for them had been, they were about to get much worse. As Shackleton put it: "The floe had become our home, and during the early months of the drift we had almost ceased to realize that it was but a sheet of ice floating on unfathomed seas. Now our home was being shattered under our feet, and we had a sense of loss and incompleteness hard to describe."

They had to set sail, but where were they to go, and how would they all get there? This juncture is where Shackleton's encyclopedic knowledge of geography and the sea currents, coupled with Worsley's uncanny ability to calculate their location, became critical. At first, they wanted to head for Clarence Island, which was 68 miles due north of them. But as they continued to drift, that island became less and less accessible, and finally the decision was made. They would sail their fragile little vessels across the open sea to Elephant Island.

What kind of place is Elephant Island? To this day, it is uninhabited by humans, and it is a desolate place. It is a forbidding cliffed fortress, enshrouded by mist, and surrounded by unpredictable currents. Blasted by the full fury of the Drake Passage weather and seas, Elephant Island is rarely visited. It is a measure of their desperation that this god-forsaken place looked like salvation to Shackleton and his men.

Shackleton later recorded his thoughts as this fateful decision was made: "---my thoughts flew round to the problem ahead. If the party had not numbered more than six men a solution would not have been so hard to find; but obviously the transportation of the whole party to a place of safety was going to be a matter of extreme difficulty. There were twenty-eight men on our floating cake of ice, which was steadily dwindling under the influence of wind, weather, charging floes, and heavy swell. I confess that I felt the burden of responsibility sit heavily on my shoulders; but, on the other hand, I was

stimulated and cheered by the attitude of the men. Lonliness is the penalty of leadership, but the man who has to make the decisions is assisted greatly if he feels that there is no uncertainty in the minds of those who follow him, and that his orders will be carried out confidently and in expectation of success." There is no doubt that Shackleton's crew had complete confidence in him and in, not only his ability, but his determination to lead every one of them to safety. To Shackleton, the loss of even one of his men would have been unbearable, and they knew it.

So it was that on the sunny, relatively warm fall day of April 9<sup>th</sup> the crew launched their three small boats and set sail for Elephant Island. The boats were heavily laden with food, water, small cooking stoves, and other equipment, because now they were completely on their own. Not only were the boats small, but they differed in their seaworthiness, with the *James Caird* being the strongest and the *Stancomb Wills* being the weakest. Therefore the problem of sailing was compounded by the difficulty of keeping the three boats of different capabilities together. Thus they began a harrowing, gruesome seven day voyage across the open South Atlantic Ocean to their destination - the uninviting Elephant Island. The men depended heavily on the navigational skills of Worsley, whose problems were frequently compounded by overcast skies that prevented him from taking accurate readings with his sextant. He was often reduced to navigation by dead reckoning, a skill at which he was to prove extremely adept.

After a grueling seven day voyage in which the men suffered through high winds and waves, extreme fatigue, and unquenchable thirst, Elephant Island appeared in the distance, and by nightfall they would land, or so it appeared. When he first spotted Elephant Island, Shackleton turned to Worsley and congratulated him on his superb navigation. Worsley, stiff with cold, turned away in proud embarrassment. As they rowed toward land, they became more and more fatigued, most of the men having been without sleep for 80 hours. The *Stancomb Wills* had to be towed by the *James Caird*, and the *Dudley Docker* became separated from the other two boats. They struggled all night, their travails compounded by concerns for the safety of the *Dudley Docker*. The next morning, almost miraculously, the lost boat reappeared, and they finally landed. For the first time in 497 days, they were on land - solid, unsinkable, immovable, blessed land! They struggled to secure the boats and set up a makeshift camp, before they all fell into a blissful sleep. Again I quote Shackleton: "The fairy princess who would not rest on her seven downy mattresses because a pea lay underneath the pile might not have understood the pleasure we all derived from the irregularities of the stones, which could not possibly break beneath us or drift away; the very searching lumps were sweet reminders of our safety."

Unfortunately, their landfall was on a narrow beach, 100 feet wide and 50 feet deep, and when they awoke the next morning and the tides began to come in, it became obvious to Shackleton that the men could not remain where they were. Soon an ugly rumor circulated among the men, and after they had finished breakfast, Shackleton revealed the almost shocking truth of it. They would have to move.

There could hardly have been a more demoralizing prospect. Having barely escaped the sea's hungry grasp a mere 24 hours before, now they would have to return to it. But, they all realized that the need to move was indisputable. The cliffs at the head of the beach bore the marks of high tides and the scars of storm damage, indicating that the

entire area was frequently swept by the sea. The place was obviously tenable only in good weather, and it would never do as any kind of permanent camp site.

Shackleton ordered Frank Wild to take a crew of five seamen in the *Stancomb Wills* and sail west along the coast to find a more secure camp site. It was not until after nightfall and the men had again fallen asleep that Wild and his crew returned. They immediately confirmed that Elephant Island was indeed an inhospitable place, but they did find one seemingly secure place to camp - a fairly sheltered spit of beach, about 150 yards long and 30 yards wide. There was a good sized penguin rookery there, which would be a source of food supply, and there was also a good sized glacier nearby which would keep the men supplied with ice for melting into water. It was seven miles along the coast to the west. Fittingly, the place is now known as Cape Wild.

Shackleton was satisfied with Wild's report, so he announced that they would make the move the next day- April 17, 1916. After a harrowing all day voyage, they all successfully made the journey and landed. The place was suitable, but just barely. They laid out their tents to dry before setting them up and establishing some order to the place, which would be home for the bulk of the crew for the next four months.

They now had a relatively secure camp site, with access to food and water, but it was still obvious to all of the men that they were stranded, isolated, and alone. Still, nobody else knew of their predicament or whereabouts, and they all knew that the chance of rescue by a passing ship was virtually zero. Somehow, they had to get help. This realization was emphasized by the appearance of a severe storm which lasted for the better part of two days.

Although all the men knew that one of the boats would have to be sent for help, it was not until April 20<sup>th</sup> that Shackleton announced his decision. He would take a party of five other men and set sail in the most seaworthy of their small boats- the *James Caird*- and go to South Georgia for relief.

There had been three possible objectives. The closest of these was Cape Horn, which lay about 500 miles to the northwest. Next was Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands, some 550 miles very nearly due north. Finally, there was South Georgia, slightly more than 800 miles to the northeast. Although South Georgia was the farthest, it was the most logical choice because of weather and current conditions. Once again, Shackleton's knowledge of geography and weather proved invaluable.

An easterly current, said to travel 60 miles a day, prevails in the Drake Passage, and almost incessant gales blow in the same direction. To reach either Cape Horn or the Falkland Islands would mean sailing against both those colossal forces, a truly daunting task for a 22 foot boat. En route to South Georgia, on the other hand, the prevailing winds would be generally astern - at least in theory.

The men were genuinely excited at the prospect of launching a rescue mission, and even though they realized that the *James Caird's* chances of actually reaching South Georgia were remote at best, most of them wanted to go. But Shackleton chose his crew, the most indispensable of whom was Frank Worsley, whose navigational skills had already been proven invaluable. Now they would be indispensable. They would travel perhaps 1000 miles across the stormiest ocean in the world, and the goal was a tiny island no more than 25 miles at its widest point. To guide an open boat that distance, under such frightening conditions and with primitive navigational instruments, and then to find a pinpoint on the map were tasks that would sorely tax even Worsley's considerable

skills. But once again, the men had complete confidence in the man they called "The Boss", and they knew that if anybody could pull this off, it would be Shackleton and Worsley.

Once the decision was made and the crew was selected, work immediately began on the *James Caird* to make it as seaworthy and comfortable as possible. This was now the only boat that was needed, so planks were removed from the *Dudley Docker* and added to the *James Caird* to make a sort of decking that would provide some sort of shelter from the inevitable winds and high waves. The remainder of the *Dudley Docker* and *Stancomb Wills* were overturned to create a makeshift shelter for the men who would remain behind. They spent four days preparing and provisioning the small boat, and on April 24, Shackleton and his crew of five men left Elephant Island for the epic journey to South Georgia. Frank Wild was named by Shackleton to be in command of those left behind, and they had no doubt that he was the man in charge on Elephant Island.

Shackleton left behind two notes - one for the photographer Frank Hurley, and the other for Wild. To Hurley he wrote the following which was dated April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1916:

"To whom this may concern viz. my executors assigns etc. Under is my signature to the following instructions.

In the event of my not surviving the boat journey to South Georgia I here instruct Frank Hurley to take complete charge & responsibility for exploitation of all films & photographic reproductions of all films & negatives taken on this Expedition the aforesaid films & negative to become the property of Frank Hurley after due exploitation, in which, the moneys to be paid to my executors will be according to the contract made at the start of the expedition. The exploitation expires after a lapse of eighteen months from date of first public display.

I bequeath the big binoculars to Frank Hurley."

It was signed by E.H. Shackleton and witnessed by John Vincent.

To Wild, he wrote this note which was dated April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1916.

"Dear Sir

In the event of my not surviving the boat journey to South Georgia you will do your best for the rescue of the party. You are in full command from the time the boat leaves this island, and all hands are under your orders. On your return to England you are to communicate with the Committee. I wish you, Lees & Hurley to write the book. You watch my interests. In another letter you will find the terms as agreed for lecturing you to do England Great Britain & Continent. Hurley the U.S.A. I have every confidence in you and always have had. May God prosper your work and your life. You can convey my love to my people and say I tried my best.

Yours sincerely

E.H. Shackleton"

These letters leave little doubt that Shackleton understood the dangers of the journey he was about to undertake. But, these were his men, and he was dedicated to rescuing all of them or die trying.

There had been a blizzard raging all night, but on the morning of April 24<sup>th</sup>, there was a break in the weather, and the men launched the little boat on its journey. Those left behind waved good-bye from the beach at Cape Wild as the *James Caird* slowly drifted out of sight, and they soon settled into what was both the monotony and danger of camp

life on the island. They didn't know if they would ever see Shackleton and his men again, nor did they know if they would ever be rescued. In any event, they were prepared for another harsh winter, which lay before them.

As for the crew of the *James Caird*, they endured unimaginable hardships through choppy seas, south Atlantic gale force winds, and days on end of cloud cover that frequently made navigation a matter of dead reckoning as well as educated guess work. They were constantly wet and cold, as the makeshift decking that they had constructed back on Elephant Island proved to be significantly less than water tight. They took turns trying to sleep, but sleep would only come fitfully because of the horrible conditions. But by far the worst deprivation was thirst. Some of what fresh water that they had loaded onto the boat became contaminated with salt water and thus was undrinkable. As a result, what drinking water they had had to be strictly rationed. Again I quote Shackleton: "Thirst took possession of us. --- Lack of water is always the most severe privation that men can be condemned to endure, and we found, as during our earlier boat voyage, that the salt water in our clothing and the salt spray that lashed our faces made our thirst grow quickly to a burning pain."

On May 6, Worsley's admittedly crude calculations indicated that they were only 50 miles away from South Georgia, but they had seen no sign to indicate that land was near. Although they feared crashing into the largely uncharted west coast of the island, they also began to fear that they had somehow missed it. Anticipation of landing soon turned into a tense foreboding that they would never land. Finally, on the morning of May 8 they spotted land and determined that they would land wherever they could, and on May 10, after fifteen incredible days in the stormy south Atlantic, they arrived on the west coast of South Georgia. Shackleton said simply: "We've done it." The entire journey was a tribute to the superior navigational skills of Frank Worsley, a man who proved more than worthy of the trust that had been placed in him.

The navigation had in fact been nearly flawless. They were only about 16 miles from the western tip of the island, the point for which they had been originally aiming. Ideally, they would have liked to sail directly into the whaling station at Grytviken, but as they approached the island and tried to maneuver their fragile, small craft to that spot, suddenly, cruelly, high winds and waves appeared, and it soon became apparent to Shackleton and Worsley that they would have to go wherever the elements would allow. And, even worse they would have to spend another night on the *James Caird*. The next morning, May 9, did not improve conditions, and they spent the whole of that day and night desperately trying to navigate their boat to any safe landing spot. Compounding their difficulties was the fact that the ship was taking in large amounts of water, so that, as exhausted as they were, they had to frantically bail water even as they were fighting the elements. The struggle continued into May 10, and finally, at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, they spotted a small opening which led to a steep, bouldered beach. They headed straight for this opening, and at 5 o'clock in the evening, as nightfall descended, they landed. They had been at sea for seventeen harrowing days, and they were exhausted, hungry, wet, cold, and dirty. But most of all, they were thirsty, and immediately after they struck land, they heard a trickling sound. Only a few yards away a little stream of fresh water was running down from the glaciers high above. A moment later, all six men were on their knees, drinking. In Shackleton's words, "It was a splendid moment."

They had accomplished the seemingly impossible, but they were on the western side of the island, and their goal was on the eastern side. After they landed, the waves buffeted the *James Caird*, and she lost her rudder. Furthermore, the men were not strong enough to pull the boat to safety without removing the ballast and decking. After that, even if they had a rudder, the boat would scarcely be sea-worthy. Furthermore, the journey to the whaling station would be 130 miles by sea, while by land, it was a scant 29 miles. Therefore, the choice seemed obvious - they would cross South Georgia by land. There was only one problem. In the 75 years since men had been coming to South Georgia, not one man had ever crossed the island - for the simple reason that it could not be done.

The interior of the island had never been charted, so no details of its interior geography were known. It was known, however, that it was very mountainous and that there were multiple glaciers. South Georgia seemed impassable, and Shackleton knew it. And yet, he had no choice. Once again, he would strike out on a seemingly impossible mission. He had never lost sight of his goal of saving every man in his party, and now that he was so close, he was not about to quit. Therefore, he announced his decision to his men - he would lead a party of three of them across the island, while the other three remained behind, waiting for rescue.

They made their plans, and spent the next several days resting and gaining strength, dining on the unimaginably delicious albatross chicks that happened to be there. Finally, on May 18<sup>th</sup>, Shackleton decided that they would leave in the morning. They had decided to travel light, even without sleeping bags. Once again, Shackleton realized that speed was essential, so each man was allowed only the bare essentials and enough food for three days. They had about 50 feet of rope knotted together to keep the men from separating and a carpenter's adz, normally used to cut timber, for use as an ice axe. In short, their equipment was, at least by mountain climbing standards even of that time, primitive.

Shackleton knew that their chances of successfully completing the trek were slim, and he appointed a man named McNeish to lead the remaining three men. He wrote this letter in McNeish's diary:

"May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1916  
South Georgia  
Sir

I am about to try to reach Husvik on the East Coast of this island for relief of our party. I am leaving you in charge of the party consisting of Vincent, McCarthy, and yourself. You will remain here until relief arrives. You have ample seal food which you can supplement with birds and fish according to your skill. You are left with a double barreled gun, 50 cartridges (and other rations) ... You also have all the necessary equipment to support life for an indefinite period in the event of my non-return. You had better after winter is over try and sail around to the East Coast. The course I am making towards Husvik is *East Magnetic*.

I trust to have you relieved in a few days.

Yours faithfully,  
E.H.Shackleton".

Shackleton's unspoken words, understood by the entire party, were that he doubted that the 22 men left behind on Elephant Island would survive another winter.

There is really not enough time to recount the details of this cross island mountain climbing expedition, but a few points should be made. In the first place, their chart of the island had no information about the interior of South Georgia, because no man had been there. Therefore, they could be guided only by what they could see. Their initial climb had seemed easy enough, but after traveling seven miles, they reached an area on the north coast which was impassible, so they had to backtrack and set off again to the east. Their route was marked by fits and starts as they probed the interior of the island, and as they reached the summit of one of the mountains, fog and cold began rolling in, and they knew they had to reach lower ground or they would freeze to death. As speed was essential, and choices were limited, they roped themselves together and slid down a 2000 feet high glacier to low ground. To their own amazement, they made it safely to the bottom.

After a short meal break, they resumed their journey which consisted of climbing and then descending many ice and snow covered mountains without a break for sleep, but with periodic short stops for food and rest. Finally, weary and exhausted as they were, they gained the final ridge and stood looking down. Spread out beneath them, 2,500 feet below, was Stromness Whaling Station. They could see ships and tiny figures of men moving around the docks and sheds. The men stared at each other, speechless. Finally, Shackleton spoke: "Let's go down."

The descent was difficult and hazardous, but they finally maneuvered down to the bottom, where they had only a one mile hike on level ground to reach the whaling station. After 36 hours of non-stop climbing and hiking, they walked into the whaling station on May 20, slightly more than a year and a half after they had sailed out of there with such high hopes. Suddenly, they worried about their appearance. Their hair hung down almost to their shoulders, and their beards were matted with salt and blubber oil. Their clothes were filthy, threadbare and worn. But, they were alive!

One can only imagine the astonishment the residents of the Stromness Whaling Station must have felt as they observed these men approach them from the west. They were first spotted by two eleven year old boys, who ran to the station foreman in terror to report their discovery. When he saw the men, Shackleton asked to be taken to the leader of the whaling station, a Norwegian named Thoralf Sorlle, a man whom Shackleton knew personally.

The door opened to Sorlle's office, and when he saw the three men, he stepped back in disbelief. Finally, he spoke: "Who the hell are you?" "My name is Shackleton," came the reply. Again there was silence, as Sorlle turned away and wept.

The three man crew that Shackleton had left behind on the west coast of South Georgia was quickly rescued, but the recovery of the men on Elephant Island proved to be much more difficult. The harsh southern winter was setting in, and multiple rescue attempts were thwarted by ice, wind and weather. Don't forget that these rescue efforts were made by full sized ships, making even more impressive what Shackleton and his men had accomplished in their small boats.

For three and a half months, rescue efforts were thwarted. Finally, there was a break in the weather, and on August 30, 1916, the Chilean vessel *Yelcho* steamed into the waters off Cape Wild. For the twenty-two men who had been left behind, times had been

difficult, and the hardships were compounded by their anxiety that they would not be rescued, either before winter was over, or at all. The prospect of their having to once again set sail in their tiny life boats was daunting indeed, particularly since they would essentially have to reconstruct the boats, which had been used in sheltering them. Under Wild's superb leadership, the men persevered, and they never really lost hope. They still had unwavering faith in Shackleton, but by the middle of August, in the dead of winter, they had become profoundly discouraged. When at last they spotted the *Yelcho* in the bay, they lit a fire to attract attention. The men watched as a small boat left the ship and they soon recognized the figure of Shackleton. "Are you all right?", he shouted. "All well", they replied. The rescue was completed. Not one man had been lost.

South Georgia was not crossed on foot again until 1955, almost 40 years after Shackleton accomplished the feat. This time the crossing was made by a British survey team under the leadership of a man named Duncan Carse. That party was composed of expert climbers, and they were well equipped with the best of everything that could be provided at that time. Writing from the scene in October, 1955, and with the benefit of a knowledge of the interior geography of the island that Shackleton did not have, Carse explained that to make the crossing, two routes were available - the so-called "high road" and the "low road". I now quote Carse extensively.

"In distance, they are no more than 10 miles apart; in difficulty, they are hardly comparable.

We today are traveling easily and unhurriedly. We are fit men, with our sledges and tents and ample food and time. We break new ground but with the leisure and opportunity to probe ahead. We pick and choose our hazards, accepting only the calculated risk. No lives depend upon our success, except our own. We take the high road.

They - Shackleton, Worsley and Crean ... took the low road.

I do not know how they did it, except that they had to - three men of the heroic age of Antarctic exploration with 50 feet of rope between them - and a carpenter's adze."

In April, 2000, three professional mountain climbers, Reinhold Messner, Stephen Venables, and Conrad Anker undertook to retrace Shackleton's foot journey across South Georgia. They began the journey with the thought that it cannot be but so difficult, if three exhausted men, who had only rudimentary equipment, could complete the crossing in only 36 hours. After all, they were seasoned professionals, and they had the very latest in equipment and technology on their side. Nevertheless, the same trek that Shackleton and his men accomplished in 36 hours took them 3 whole days - twice as long as Shackleton had taken. That story, coupled with Carse's tribute gives us some idea of the magnitude of their accomplishment. And, they had done it after a year and a half of terrible struggle and privation. It is truly an amazing story - one that would be deemed unbelievable and implausible if it were not true.

So - what kind of man was Earnest Shackleton? He was a man of enormous ego - one who needed Antarctic exploration as something so demanding that it provided a touchstone for his implacable drive. In ordinary situations, Shackleton's tremendous capacity for boldness and daring found almost nothing worthy of the Antarctic's seductive lure. Here was a burden which challenged every fiber of his being.

Thus, while he was clearly out of place and even inept in many everyday situations, he had a talent that only a few men in history have had - genuine leadership.

And while leadership, like beauty is hard to define, like beauty, we all know it when we see it. Shackleton definitely had leadership, and he undeniably merited this anonymous tribute:

"For scientific leadership give me Scott; for swift and efficient travel, Amundsen; but when you are in a hopeless situation, when there seems no way out, get down on your knees and pray for Shackleton."