

Ernest Shackleton's Heroic Rescue

BY PAUL WARD

"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."

- SIR ERNEST SHACKLETON

So runs the fictional advertisement for what became Ernest Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctica expedition of 1914 - 1917. The intentional goal was ambitious—audacious, to cross the Antarctic continent from coast to coast via the South Pole. Only 10 men had ever stood at the South Pole at that time, and five of those had died on the return journey.

Shackleton (the "boss" to his men) and a mixed crew of scientists, officers and sailors left South Georgia Island on December 5, 1914. They entered the Antarctic pack ice in the notoriously ice-scoured Weddell Sea on December 7, 1914 aboard the strengthened 300-ton steam- and sail-powered ship *Endurance*. There were 28 men, seasoned Antarctic veterans, experienced sea-farers, some simply the only man available to fill a particular post—one was a stowaway! Shackleton knew that it was a particularly bad ice year, but he was surprised to hit the pack ice two days after they started the journey. Five weeks later, the *Endurance* was stuck—frozen in the ice hundreds of miles from land for the long, dark Antarctic winter. The ice played with the *Endurance* until some nine months later. It crushed the ship to matchwood. Shackleton's reaction was calm. In his soft Irish tones, he informed the men, "Now we go home."

With the ship gone and the crew's situation unknown to a world before telecommunications, rescue was not going to come to them. The *Endurance* crew had to save themselves. For Shackleton, failure was not an option. Along with Frank Wild, second in command, he formulated a plan of action to escape the grip of the Antarctic ice and bring the men to safety. Conditions were against them, and plans had to be changed several times. Sometimes they had to stay put, as movement over broken and layered ice was so diffi-



cult and slow as to be ineffective; the ice was drifting anyhow and taking them in the right direction.

Eventually, the day (April 9, 1916) came when the ice had broken sufficiently to launch the three lifeboats the crew had salvaged from the *Endurance*. This was an irreversible decision as once the boats were in the water, going back to drifting ice was not possible. So followed the worst part of the adventure for many of the crew, awash in freezing seas and unable to lay down to sleep in soaked clothing. Frostbites were common, sea-water boils affected almost all of them. Shackleton, Wild and another unsung hero, Tom Crean, led by example, staying at the tiller for upwards of 30 hours at a stretch.

Despite difficulties, the crew reached Elephant Island on April 12, 1916. This was a temporary respite as the next winter was approaching and help had to be summoned. Another boat journey was necessary, across 800 miles of the wildest seas in the world to reach South Georgia Island and its whaling stations. Shackleton chose five men to accompany him for this journey, some were the best to take, and others were selected so as not to ferment discontent on



(left) The *Endurance* reached the head of the Weddell Sea, but impenetrable barriers of ice prevented further progress. (above) For two days and nights every effort was made to cut the ship free, but the temperature continued to fall. (right) Snow dogs watched the icepacks of the Weddell Sea crush the sinking *Endurance* on November 1, 1915. (bottom) The crew continues the journey from Elephant Island.

Elephant Island. The *James Caird*, the most sea-worthy lifeboat, was improved and readied for the journey. Two weeks later, the *James Caird* was at sea again.

This boat journey is widely regarded as one of the most arduous ever. Against incredible odds, this group landed on South Georgia two weeks later. Two of the men were almost spent and were virtual invalids. They were now on the wrong side of South Georgia, however. They could have set off by sea, 130 miles, but this was thought too difficult and dangerous. Ten days after arrival, three men, Shackleton, Crean and Frank Worsley, set off on foot wearing improvised crampons—brass screws stuck into their boots—along with a short length of rope and a carpenter's adze (pick),

but no tent or sleeping bags. No one had ever crossed South Georgia before.

Another extraordinary journey followed as Shackleton and his two companions, fighting fatigue and terrain, reached Stromness whaling station on May 20, 1916. Almost immediately a rescue attempt was made, but the ship was turned back 60 miles away by pack ice. It wasn't until the fourth try that the Chilean trawler *Yelcho* reached Elephant Island on May 30, 1916. Shackleton, who was standing on the bow, shouted ashore to Wild, "Are you all well?" "All safe, all well!" the boss replied, "Thank God!" All 28 men had survived over two years in the Antarctic. Shackleton was the force that held it all together.

For more information on Shackleton and Antarctica, visit www.coolantarctica.com.



**1916 was the same year
Dixon Valve & Coupling
Company started business.
See our next issue for
more about this company.**