

## From *Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure* (2001)

Directed by George Butler

Produced by WGBH Boston and White Mountain Films

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For Shackleton and others who ventured south, the gateway to the Antarctic was a remote island of rock and ice called South Georgia.

Whaling stations here were the last outposts of civilizations. In November 1914, the *Endurance* sat at anchor taking on final provisions. Her crew eager to make history.

Born in Ireland, already a British national hero, Ernest Shackleton was a man of towering ambition and boundless optimism. He saw his expedition as the last great polar journey of the heroic age of exploration.

By dogsled, he would travel 1500 miles across the continent. But to reach the starting point at Vahsel Bay, he would have to navigate the uncharted waters of the Weddell Sea. The trip would be documented using both still and motion pictures cameras by Australian Frank Hurley, who would go to any extreme to get a shot.

Shackleton handpicked most of his crew in England, including trusted friend Frank Wild and the ship's captain, Frank Worsley. He is said to have posted an unusual recruitment notice:

“Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, safe return doubtful.”

Five thousand volunteered. But in all, it was a company of just 27 scientists, officers, and seamen.

But the men were not the only passengers aboard the *Endurance*. With them were nearly 70 Canadian sled dogs, uneasy at sea, and in need of constant attention.

Despite warnings from the whalers that ice conditions were worst in memory, they set out from South Georgia on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1914.

As land receded, they lost all contact with the outside world.

Only two days later, they encountered ominous signs: unexpected patches of sea ice and enormous icebergs.

Soon, an increasingly dense jigsaw puzzle of ice floes slowed the ship. But the *Endurance*, named from Shackleton's family motto “By Endurance We Conquer,” was one of the strongest wooden ships of the day, with a bow four feet thick.

Photographer Hurley wrote in his diary, “All day we have been utilizing the ship as a battering ram. We admire our sturdy little ship which seems to take a delight herself in shattering the floes in grand style.”

For 6 weeks, the *Endurance* battled the ice, dodging floes or smashing through them. There was little concern among the men: Shackleton had their unshakable confidence. To them, he was “The Boss.”

As they headed deeper into the Weddell Sea, ice compressed around the ship. To save fuel, Shackleton stopped the engines. When the temperature dropped sharply, it sealed their fate. The *Endurance* was frozen solid in a sea of ice.

The ship's carpenter, Chippy McNish: "We tried to cut away the ice, but it was no use. I would not give us much chance of ever getting away."

They were trapped, alone, with no means to contact the outside world for help.

The ship's doctor, Alexander Macklin: "Shackleton showed one of his sparks of real greatness: he did not show the slightest sign of disappointment. He told us simply and calmly we must winter in the pack."

When the ice broke up in the spring, they would sail on. As Hurley recorded, life took on an almost pleasant routine. Like schoolboys, they occupied themselves with games.

To sustain morale, Shackleton kept everyone busy and *everyone* equal. Well-supplied for their Antarctic crossing, they had sufficient food and warm clothing. He had the carpenter McNish build comfortable living quarters they called "The Ritz," where nightly amusements included sing-alongs and toasts to loved ones back home. Succumbing to winter madness, the men all shaved their heads and posed for Hurley.

The sled dogs became their companions and a source of unending entertainment. They took well to the snow and slept in ice caves and so-called "dog-loos."

Shackleton inspired a sense of camaraderie. He stressed to his men that strength lies in unity—unity that was about to be tested by catastrophe.

As spring approached, and the ice continued to move, it did not free the *Endurance*, but instead began to crush her.

Photographer Hurley: "The ship shrieks and quivers. Windows splinter. Deck timbers gape and twist."

Shackleton confided to Worsley "The ship can't live in this, Skipper. It's only a matter of time. What the ice gets, the ice keeps."

Shackleton realized that the *Endurance* was going down. He gave the order: abandon ship.

They salvaged what was vital, leaving behind their most precious belongings. (Dr. Macklin) "We had learned to love her, and it was awful to witness her torture."

The ship that had been their home and hope for 326 days was now gone. It was their darkest moment.

They were now forced to camp on the ice. "As always with him, what had happened, had happened. Now this was in the past, and he looked to the future."

His dream now dashed, Shackleton made a new goal: to save every life. Twice they made exhausting efforts to march to safety hauling the life boats, but the ice proved impassable. They could only hope that the ice floe beneath them would drift closer to land.

They called their new home “Patience Camp” because all they could do was wait. Captain Worsley: “All we seemed to think of now is food. We are ready to eat anything—especially cooked blubber.”

Days turned to months. Food was rationed. First Officer Lionel Greenstreet: “The food now is pretty well all meat: seal steaks, stewed seal, penguin steaks, penguin liver, and the latter very good indeed.”

Shackleton’s every waking hour was devoted to holding his men together. As the story goes, when Greenstreet spilled his cup of milk, nearly weeping, the others silently refilled it from their own.

To prompt much needed laughter, Shackleton and Worsley danced. Officer Thomas Orde-Lees: “That’s Ernest all over. His unfailing cheeriness means a lot to a band of disappointed explorers like ourselves. He is one of the greatest optimists living.”

But the men were growing weary, their clothes always wet, their hunger never satisfied. McNish: “I’m sitting in my bag writing this and my hands are just about frostbitten. It’s hard lying down every night cold and hungry.”

After five long months on a drifting ice floe, a curious motion was detected: the swell of the ocean beneath them. The ice was breaking up. Soon it would be possible to launch the life boats and set out for land.

Captain Worsley calculated that they had drifted 600 miles toward the Antarctic peninsula and islands at its tip. They hoped to reach supplies stored at Paulet Island. Their last possible landfall was Elephant Island.

Shackleton faced a life and death decision. If they left too soon, they could be crushed by ice. Too late, swept hopelessly out to sea. Finally, the time was right.

Seaman William Bakewell “Our first day in the water was one of the coldest and most dangerous of the expedition. The ice was running riot. It was a hard race to keep our boats in the open leads. We had many narrow escapes from being crushed when the larger masses of the pack would come together.

The men had been trapped on ice for 15 months. But their real struggle was just beginning.

Captain Worsley: “The northwest wind turned the snow to sleet and rain which froze our men and stores making us wet, cold, and miserable.”

Their clothes became icy armor; their hands froze to the oars.

In the gathering dusk of the first night at sea, Shackleton ordered his men onto a small floe. The meager comforts of this small camp would prove the last of their voyage.

Among floes too small for a camp, they were now confined to the crowded boats day and night. Shivering in icy water, the men tried to snatch minutes of sleep. The long-awaited escape had become an ordeal of hardship and suffering.

On the fourth day, under hazy sunshine, Worsley balanced against the mast and took the first navigational sight the weather had allowed. Not a single mile had been gained.

Instead, the current had carried them backwards 30 miles.

Shackleton: “Most of the men were now looking seriously worn and strained. Their lips were cracked and their eyes showed red in their salt-encrusted faces. Obviously we must make land quickly, and I decided to run for Elephant Island.” Shackleton was now racing for the very lives of his men.

On dawn on the sixth day, the sleepless men at last beheld a glorious sight: ahead, they could see the harsh glaciers and icy mountains of Elephant Island.

But as they approached the rocky coast, they encountered a tidal current so strong, they could make no headway.

There would be no landfall after all, but another night in the pitching boats.

Shackleton, who had barely slept since leaving Patience Camp, would call it “a stern night.”

When the seas finally calmed, they rode along miles of coastline searching for a safe refuge.

They sighted a narrow beach of surf-beaten rocks. (Shackleton) “Two days and nights without drink or hot food had played havoc with most of the men. I decided we must face the hazards of this unattractive landing place.”

They had spent seven fearful days on the open seas, 170 days drifting on a floe of ice, and 497 days since last setting foot on land.

But this remote island offered no hope of rescue. Shackleton decided on a desperate gamble: he ordered McNish to strengthen the largest lifeboat and to add a sheltering deck. Skillfully, the carpenter prepared the battered boat for a long voyage. Shackleton would try the impossible: an 800 mile sail, in a lifeboat, across the roughest seas on earth, back to the whaling stations of South Georgia—the only direction permitted by winds and currents. In the 22-foot lifeboat named the *James Caird*, Shackleton and five others set out, leaving his friend Frank Wild in charge with a letter:

“In the event of my not surviving the boat journey to South Georgia, you will do your best for the rescue of the party. Convey my love to my people...and say I tried my best.”