

The Anatomy of Leadership

ERNEST SHACKLETON'S QUEST FOR THE SOUTH POLE



BY BRUCE SCHNEIDER, D.C.

So read Sir Ernest Shackleton's 1914 posting seeking a crew of men to join him in a quest for his life-long dream: an expedition in which he would walk across the Antarctic continent to traverse the South Pole. It would seem that few would answer the call. Instead 5000 men applied. From these applications Shackleton hand picked a 27 member crew for a journey that would ultimately prove to be a great testament to the strength of the human spirit and to the leadership abilities of a man faced with near impossible odds for survival.

The South Pole had already been discovered three years earlier by Norwegian Roald Amundsen and his party on December 14, 1911. Shackleton had a more dazzling exploit in mind. He and his crew would sail the isolated waters of the Weddell Sea, land on Antarctica's northwest shore and travel with a sledging party 1500 miles through unknown tundra, trekking

over the South Pole to the Ross Sea. It was a dangerous mission that held out the possibility of rich scientific rewards and guaranteed high adventure. It was the kind of quest that gives rise to the lifeblood of one who would sign up for such a journey and makes apparent the restless spirit of the adventurer who put out the call. "Sometimes I think I'm no good at anything," Shackleton confessed, "but being away in the wilds."

The journey began in August 1914. Ernest Shackleton and his men embarked from Plymouth, England aboard *The Endurance* and landed at the Grytviken whaling station in South Georgia, their last port of call. Local seamen warned of unusually thick pack ice that could trap the ship if the wind and temperatures shifted suddenly. Shackleton patiently waited the month of November to see if conditions would change. They did not. Shackleton was 40 years old and this was his last



chance to achieve fame and fortune. On December 5, 1914 he commanded his crew to set sail on the uncharted waters of the Weddell Sea. Planning to take advantage of the Antarctic summer, they headed south.

On the third day they saw what they were up against. Huge chunks of compacted pack ice stretched 1,000 miles to the Antarctic continent. They would attempt to sail through shifting gaps of open water called leads. Captain Frank Worsley took on the ice by “ramming” the floes with the ship’s bow splitting apart the pack ice to create a path. *The Endurance* was designed to withstand this type of stress. Sometimes the ship’s progress was completely stopped by thick fields of ice. At other times the crew would sail through open waters.

After six weeks, when *The Endurance* was only 80 miles from the continent a field of heavy ice closed around the ship. Using picks, axes, shovels and saws the crew tried to free the ship from the ice. On February 14, 1915 temperatures dropped from 20 degrees above zero to twenty below. *The Endurance* became trapped. For days the men tried to liberate the ship from the mounds of ice that held their ship prisoner. The frozen tundra did not budge and *The Endurance* was confined beyond redemption, too far at sea for radio contact. A month later after surveying the situation Shackleton determined that they were “confined for the winter.” According to the ship’s surgeon Alexander Macklin, “Shackleton did not rage at all or show the slightest sign of disappointment. He told us simply and calmly that we must winter in the pack. Never lost his optimism and prepared for the winter.”

Optimism was at the core of Shackleton’s personality. It was a quality he drew on often and it was an indispensable tool during the dark winter months ahead when the men would succumb to restlessness, tedium, infighting and despair. Thomas Orde-Lees, a member of the crew noted Shackleton’s “unfailing cheerfulness... He never appears to be anything but the acme of good humor and hopefulness.” Shackleton maintained his positive

attitude even as his quest for the South Pole was in jeopardy. *The Endurance* was locked in the pack ice and drifting north, inching further each day from the Antarctic continent. Spring was seven months away.

While Shackleton’s optimism was steady he would act quickly and forcefully when necessary. He would not tolerate bullying or dissent and he would stand up to anyone who would challenge his authority. He would stop at nothing to reassert his command

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when necessary. Shackleton was a multidimensional man sometimes taking the helm to lead his men to safety, sometimes showing great compassion and kindness as a mother would nurture her child, sometimes taking the role of a coach pushing and inspiring men to do their best. The men did not always agree with Shackleton, but the great respect they had for him was a key element in their ultimate survival.

Shackleton recognized that idleness could easily lead to bickering, depression and physical decay during the long months they would spend living on the arctic ice. He established daily routines in which everyone was

expected to participate. Shackleton worked side by side with the crew. According to Peter Wordie, the son of one of the crewmembers, “Shackleton, with his ability to join in made everybody feel that they were one. It was a team and not a ‘them-and-us’ situation. He also communicated to his men that he put them above the object of the expedition. The object was great, but they were more important.” As the weeks unfolded and the days became enveloped in perpetual darkness these daily activities became indispensable for the crew’s survival.

The men were trapped on a rotating island of ice for the months of dark polar winter. The expedition had brought 69 sled dogs aboard *The Endurance* intended to carry men and supplies across the Antarctic continent. The dogs now played a different role. They became companions for the men, lifting their spirits. Four puppies were born and were a source of constant entertainment. Soccer matches, theatrical evenings, gramophone and haircut sessions became an important distraction. At the same time supplies were dwindling and huge blocks of ice encroached on *The Endurance* threatening to crush the ship.

Blizzards pelted *The Endurance* and in time Shackleton saw that the ship’s days were numbered. He told Captain Worsley: “It’s only a matter of time... what the ice gets, the ice keeps.” In October, despite the men’s attempts to save the ship, it was clear that *The Endurance* was going down. Shackleton gave the order to abandon ship. Supplies, including sleeping bags were limited. Temperatures reached minus 27 degrees below zero (Celsius). Shackleton secretly arranged it so that the inferior wool bags were given to him and his officers while the men below them in rank received the warm fur bags. It would be the first time of many that Shackleton would make these kinds of sacrifices for his men. At times he would give up his own food and water for a man in need. On November 21, 1915 the polar ice claimed *The Endurance* and finally the ship sank deep into the cold waters of





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the Weddell Sea. The sailors had lost their home.

The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition as it was called was quashed by frozen blocks of ice. Along with it went Shackleton's dream and this could have crushed him as well. Instead his mission changed to one in which he would apply his knowledge and experience "to secure the safety of the party." The polar historian Roland Huntford observed that "polar exploration was littered with dead bodies... Bringing his men back alive became the only thing he cared about. That change from aiming to attain what you had set out, to extricating yourself from defeat is a strain that had broken many a man. It did not break Shackleton."

Nancy F. Koehn is a historian at the Harvard Business School. After writing a case study on Ernest Shackleton she commented in 2011, "I was struck by Shackleton's ability to respond to constantly changing circumstances. When his expedition encountered serious trouble, he had to reinvent the team's goals... This capacity is vital in our own time, when leaders must often change course midstream – jettisoning earlier standards of success and redefining their purposes and plans."

The ship's photographer Frank Hurley clearly defined the crew's situation: "We are dwelling on a colossal ice raft with but five feet of frozen water separating us from two thousand fathoms of ocean and drifting along under the caprices of wind and tide to who knows where." The men set up Ocean Camp from materials scavenged from the sunken ship. Part of the ship's boiler was used to build a stove, heated by penguin skin and seal blubber. The men spent their days hunting for food and fuel. As difficult as the conditions were, Shackleton faced a greater challenge than physical survival. Roland Huntford: "At every turn Shackleton's enemy was not the ice, but it was his own people. It was their morale. That was the foe. He had to prevent their morale from crumbling."

Shackleton determined that marching ahead was preferable to stagnation. The men harnessed



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themselves to lifeboats loaded with supplies weighing more than a ton each and spent three days pressing forward. They were stopped by mountains of ice and finally set up a new camp. The conditions now were worse than before. The men were edgy and Shackleton narrowly averted a mutiny. In the face of flaring tempers he radiated a force of will that commanded the loyalty of the men. At times he would spend sleepless nights pacing the polar ice yet he never lost his confidence and optimism. It was a flame that burned within Shackleton, his innate nature. It was the essence of his leadership.

Food was scarce. During the course of several weeks all the dogs were put to death in order to provide rations for the men. The ice began to disintegrate beneath them. The crew of the sunken *Endurance* was forced to leave the floating frozen platforms

that had become their home, this time negotiating open leads on three small lifeboats and camping on fields of ice to sleep. At one point the ice split under a man's tent and he plunged into the icy waters in his sleeping bag. Shackleton pulled him out and saved his life. The men suffered storms and squalls and temperatures so cold that a rower's hands had to be pried from the oars after a day's journey. They were now in the open sea with no place to camp. The men endured hunger, thirst and sometimes dysentery.

After seven tormenting days at sea they approached land. Many of the men were stricken with frostbite and worn down by exhaustion, fatigue and exposure. Some were overcome by misery and fear bordering on insanity. The landing on Elephant Island came at a time when the men were teetering on the brink of survival. It had been 497 days since they last stood on solid ground. As they ate their first hot meal in three days, the men were grateful to be off the ice floes. At the same time Elephant Island was uninhabitable. Gales and blizzards blew, forcing men to crawl under the lifeboats for shelter. The island was not on any shipping route and even the whalers and sealers did not pass by there.

Shackleton came up with a daring plan. He would travel 800 miles in a small boat across a dangerous sea to seek help in South Georgia, the port from which he set sail towards

Antarctica almost a year and a half earlier. The craft was constructed from the hull of one of the three lifeboats, using parts from the other two. It was sealed with the expedition artist's oil paints and seal's blood. Harry "Chippy" McNish was the carpenter who fashioned the boat, *The James Caird*. He was paradoxically the crew member who attempted a mutiny against Shackleton two months earlier. He now was skillfully building a ship designed to insure the leader's safety.

Shackleton chose a small crew of men to accompany him, some of whom he realized would cause trouble if left behind and others who were chosen for their strength and skill. He set sail with five men on the South Atlantic Ocean on April 22, 1916 equipped with food for four weeks and kegs filled with water from ice melted over a blubber flame. It was a treacherous and freezing journey on a small boat. The men lacked the proper clothing to ward off hypothermia. It was perhaps Shackleton's unwavering cheerful attitude that truly kept the men afloat. Jonathan Shackleton, Ernest Shackleton's cousin later described the sea, saying, "They were in a twenty-two foot six little rowboat and it is absolutely staggering the height of the waves. Some were non negotiable waves – you would head up to the top and slide back down. It was an extraordinary journey of survival."

Navigation was almost impossible. The navigator, Captain Frank Worsley relied almost exclusively on experience, intuition and guesswork. Two of the men were close to death halfway through the journey. The exhausted crew of six finally approached South Georgia only to encounter a hurricane that raged for nine hours, pushing back their landing. After seventeen days the boat landed at King Haakon Bay ending what is said to be "one of the greatest boat journeys ever accomplished."

Home and rescue seemed possible. There was just one barrier, and it was a big one. *The James Caird* had landed on the south shore of the island and the whaling station was on the other side. It would require a twenty two mile march on foot over frozen mountainous

terrain. Chippy McNish scavenged screws from the small boat outfitting boots with crampons to provide better traction in the ice and snow. Shackleton took two men along on the trek. The other three were too weak to go. It would be a race to save the lives of the men, twenty two of whom had been left behind on Elephant Island. They left at three in the morning taking advantage of relatively calm weather and a full moon. The men walked day and night across ice fields rutted with crevasses fifty feet deep. Even Shackleton felt the strain of the ordeal.

After thirty six hours they reached the Stromness whaling station, tired, emaciated and covered in dirt and soot from months of crouching over blubber stoves. They arrived just in time to be ahead of a blizzard that surely would have killed them on the bare mountain peaks. Shackleton later recalled his feeling of being accompanied by a protective presence during the journey: "I know that during that long and racking march of thirty six hours...it seemed to me often that we were four, not three. I said nothing to my companions, but afterwards Worsley said to me 'Boss, I had a curious feeling that there was another person with us.'" It was a mystical impression that stayed with Shackleton for years to come.

The night after Shackleton arrived at the whaling camp he returned to pick up the two men at King Haakon Bay. An expedition days later to rescue the other men on Elephant Island failed. The borrowed boat they sailed on was stopped by impenetrable mounds of pack ice. He endured three months of frustrated attempts to secure another boat for the rescue. In late August the Chilean government lent Shackleton a small tug boat. He was deeply distressed over the fate of the twenty two men left behind. Finally on August 30, 1916 Shackleton and the two men who had accompanied him on the thirty six hour march to the Stromness whaling station arrived on the shores of Elephant Island. For the first time Ernest

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Like D.D. Palmer and B.J. Palmer, Ernest Shackleton relied largely on his innate spirit and intelligence in charting the course of his life.

Shackleton showed great emotion as he escorted his men onto the ship. After almost a year and nine months at sea the crew was on its way home.

The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition represented a true hero's journey. Joseph Campbell writes: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." Shackleton and his crew arrived on the tug boat in Valparaiso, Chile where crowds warmly welcomed them back to civilization.

The reception was quite different in England however. In 1916 World

War I was raging. Polar Historian Roland Huntford gave this analysis: "Because of the dreadful carnage on the battlefields in Europe, Shackleton rather disappeared. He was the wrong kind of hero for the British at the time. The British wanted dead heroes. And they had lots and lots of dead heroes." Shackleton suffered from a heart condition most likely made worse as a result of his arduous journeys. Some say that he may have been suffering from a broken heart. He died of a heart attack on January 5, 1922 and was buried at Grytviken cemetery in South Georgia. He was 47 years old.

In the world of the twenty first century we can learn a lot from the Shackleton story. Like D.D. Palmer and B.J. Palmer, Ernest Shackleton relied largely on his innate spirit and intelligence in charting the course of his life. He lived in harmony with nature and in doing so embraced the universal intelligence that is the organizing and evolutionary principle in the web of all of life. In our modern era we rely heavily on outer technology. The inner technology Shackleton and his men relied on helped them rise above one of the greatest challenges to human survival in history.

In his diary Shackleton summed up his experience of the expedition:

*We have grown bigger in the big-ness of the whole.
 We have seen God in his splendors
 Heard the text that Nature renders
 We have reached the naked soul of man.*

Bruce Schneider, D.C. is a writer and chiropractor living and practicing in New Paltz, N.Y. He loves to write the stories of exemplary men and women who reflect back to us our own challenges, courage and passion for life. He is the father of a talented and wonderful teenage son, Benjamin. Bruce travels often Ottawa, Canada to visit Susan, his sweetheart and muse. ■