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Reading Article G2

Article #5: Shackleton's Epic Voyage

By Michael Brown

Marooned on desolate Elephant Island, the British explorer Shackleton and five other men make a grim voyage across the icy seas to reach a whaling settlement after their ship has foundered.

"Stand by to abandon ship!"

The command rang out over the Antarctic seas, and it meant the end of all Ernest Shackleton's plans. He was the leader of an expedition which had set out to cross the unknown continent of Antarctica. It was a journey no one before him had ever attempted.

For months his ship, the *Endurance*, had been trapped in ice. It drifted helplessly in the Weddell Sea, over 400 miles east of the Antarctic mainland and 1,200 miles south of the southernmost tip of South America. The pressure on the hull of the *Endurance* was extreme, and the ship's timbers groaned under the strain. Now Shackleton's first goal was to lead his men to safety. They would try to cross the polar sea on foot, head for the nearest tiny island, 250 miles to the west.

Slowly the men climbed overboard with the ship's stores. Shackleton, a gaunt bearded figure, gave the order "Hoist out the boats!" There were three, and they would be needed if the ice thawed.

Two days later, on October 30th, 1915, the *Endurance* broke up and sank beneath the ice. In the bitter cold, the chances of survival seemed small. But spurred on by Shackleton the 27 men set off, dragging their stores and the ship's boats on sledges across the uneven ice.

For five months the crew of the *Endurance* pushed their way slowly northwest across the frozen seas. Sometimes they dragged the sledges painfully behind them. Sometimes they drifted on large ice floes that slowly split into smaller and smaller pieces until they had to be abandoned. At times they took to the boats and sailed or rowed through melting ice. At last,

in April 1916, they reached Elephant Island—a tiny, barren, rocky outcrop 540 miles from the nearest inhabited land, Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands.

By now the situation was grim. Food and other supplies were low. Still worse, five months of constant cold and hardship had weakened all of the men. They were in poor condition to face the coming winter.

Seeing this, Shackleton knew that he and his crew could not last much longer. He decided on a desperate attempt to find help before winter set in. He turned to the men. "We will make our camp here. Six of us will take the *James Caird* and try to reach Stromness. It's our only chance." Stromness was a whaling base on the island of South Georgia, 800 miles N.E. of Elephant Island. To reach it they must cross some of the stormiest seas in the world.

The *James Caird* was the biggest of the ship's boats. Even so she looked pitifully small to face the great grey seas of the southern ocean. Shackleton had the keel strengthened and added make-shift decking to give more shelter. By April 24th all was ready, and the *James Caird* was launched from the beach. Some of the crew were soaked to the skin as they worked; this could be deadly in the bitter cold and wind so they changed clothes with those who were to stay behind. Shackleton shook hands with the men he was leaving, and then amidst cheers the *James Caird* set sail. The little knot of men left behind was dwarfed by the high peaks of Elephant Island, and was soon lost from sight.

The *James Caird* was alone on the vast heaving seas. With one arm gripping the mast, Shackleton guided the boat through the ice floes that threatened to hole the sides. At last they were in clear water and, with a fair wind, set their course for South Georgia.

Now began a fierce ordeal for the crew of the *James Caird*. The boat was small and crowded. It was almost impossible for the men to find space among the stores and the rocks carried for ballast. All cooking must be done over a single primus stove that needed three men to handle it. One held a lamp, the other two lifted the cooking pot off whenever the violent pitching of the boat threatened to upset it. A fine spray of water constantly soaked its way through the flimsy decking.

There were storms and seas so big that in the trough of a wave the boat seemed surrounded by mountains of water. The waves towering above cut off the wind so that the sails flapped uselessly.

Four days passed. A gale sprang up that threatened to swamp the *James Caird* and hurl her crew into the icy seas. "Lower the sails," shouted Shackleton, above the roar of the wind. "We'll heave-to under bare poles and lie to the sea anchor." The sea anchor was a triangular canvas bag at the end of a long line which held the bows of the boat into the wind. If the seas hit them sideways on, they would capsize.

No man aboard had faced such waves before. Sometimes looking out abeam they could see a great tunnel formed as the crest of a towering wave hung toppling over its base, then broke. Time after time it seemed they *must* be overwhelmed, but they survived.

The spray shot at them like burning arrows. It froze thick on the canvas decks and the bare masts, and would soon make the boat top-heavy. Shackleton saw the danger. "We must get the ice off, or we'll capsize," he warned.

Some of the men struggled on to the heaving deck and chipped ice away with axes to free the boat of the deadly weight. Others hurled things overboard—spare oars and sleeping bags—anything they could do without that would lighten the load.

At last on the morning of the seventh day, the wind dropped. The sea calmed, the skies cleared, and for the first time the sun shone. Thankfully, the men dragged out sleeping bags and sodden clothes and hung them in the rigging to dry. Cape pigeons flew overhead and porpoises played in the sea alongside. Shackleton and his men lay on deck soaking up the warmth. Hope surged in them; life was not so miserable after all.