

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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The Early Adventures of Ernest Shackleton



“Men wanted for hazardous journey; Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success”.

This advertisement appeared in a London newspaper in 1914, as Ernest Shackleton was recruiting men for a voyage to the south Atlantic with the goal of being the first expedition to cross the entire Antarctic continent on foot.

As Europe became embroiled in the carnage and bloodshed of the First World War, 7000 miles away in the Antarctic, the British explorer, Ernest Shackleton, was leading an expedition that would become one of the greatest feats of survival in maritime history.

His newspaper advertisement brought many eager volunteers, perhaps the journey sounded better than joining the army and fighting in Europe. From the thousands of applicants, he carefully chose twenty-six men to accompany him on what was to become a very ill-fated expedition.

Ernest Shackleton was born in 1874, the 2nd of ten children, in County Kildare, Ireland. Although he was a voracious reader, which seems to have sparked a lifelong passion for adventure, he was somewhat bored by his classes and said later

that he never learned much geography at school. His general lack of interest in school led him to the sea at age 16, when his father was able to secure him a berth on a square-rigged sailing ship with the North Western Shipping Company.

During his first four years on the sea, he traveled widely, mastered the trade, and developed a number of diverse friendships while learning to live with all kinds of men in the confines of a ship. He worked his way up the chain of command with increasing responsibilities over the next several years. In 1898, at the age of 24 he was licensed as a Master Mariner, allowing him to command a British ship anywhere in the world, which was quite an accomplishment for the young Shackleton.

He next served on a ship transporting mail and passengers between Southampton and Capetown, where a shipmate recalled that Ernest was not the typical young officer. He was content with his own company although not aloof, and would recite poetry from Keats and Browning. Shackleton was described as a mixture of sensitivity and aggression, but overall sympathetic.

At the turn of the century, with the Boer War breaking out in South Africa, he transferred to a troopship, where he became close friends with an army officer whose father, Llewellyn Longstaff, was the major financial backer of a National Antarctic Expedition being assembled in London.

This enterprise, also known as the Discovery Expedition after the ship Discovery, had been in the planning stages for years and had both geographical and scientific objectives in Antarctica. Robert Falcon Scott, an officer in the Royal Navy was appointed as the leader of the expedition. Through his previous shipboard friendship, Shackleton obtained an interview and impressed the expedition's leaders. In 1901, at age 27, he was appointed as 3rd officer on the Discovery. Ernest Shackleton was about to embark on his first major adventure of exploration and was placed in charge of seawater analysis, stores and provisions, as well as entertainment on the ship.

After port calls in Cape Town and New Zealand, the Discovery arrived on the Antarctic coast on the 8th January 1902. Shackleton took part in an experimental balloon flight, a major sledging trip and while confined to the ship, also edited an expedition magazine, The South Polar Times. He was described as a good mixer by the crew, and generally recognized as the most popular officer.

Scott chose a scientist (Edward Wilson) and also Shackleton to accompany him on an attempt to reach as far south as had ever been attained before. While this objective was realized (they did reach 82°17' south), the overall expedition was later described as one of success and failure. All of the sledge dogs died due to contaminated food, and the men each suffered from snow blindness, frostbite and scurvy.

Shackleton was in particularly bad shape, became seriously ill and unable to fulfill his role. He ended up being put on a relief ship and sent back to England in February 1903, which was not an auspicious start for the young explorer.