

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

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Shackleton's Final Antarctic Adventure



Captain Robert Scott and his Antarctic team in 1911

While Ernest Shackleton had at least temporarily settled down to a domestic life with his family in Sheringham, a seaside town on the southeast coast of England, others were undertaking their own Antarctic expeditions.

Robert Falcon Scott and his four companions were in a race with Norwegian Roald Amundsen to be the first to reach the South Pole. Each team had taken a different route to the pole and was also using totally different strategies. Amundsen relied on his trusted sledge dogs to haul men and supplies over the ice. Scott, for some odd reason, thought horses would do better. The horses were poorly adapted to the extreme temperature, wind, and ice conditions, and died before long, leaving Scott and his men to haul their own sledges. Not a good start.

Amundsen and his team reached the South Pole on December 14, 1911. A month later, under miserable conditions, Robert Scott and his four companions were

making their final push to the pole, not realizing that Amundsen had already won the race. Scott's journal reported temperatures down to 45 degrees below zero, nearly impassable terrain, and either blinding blizzards or blinding sunshine.

They reached the pole on January 18, only to discover that the Norwegians had already arrived, left a flag and headed back to their own base. Disheartened and freezing, Scott and his men began the 800-mile trek back to their own ship and camp. This is equivalent to pulling sledges the entire length of California, from the Oregon border to San Diego, across ice, in sub-zero, mostly miserable conditions. On February 17, one of the team members died, and 30 days later, a second succumbed to the cold and suffering.

March 29, 1912, was Scott's last journal entry as he and his two remaining men died in their sleeping bags in a tent during blizzard conditions, with no more fuel and their food virtually gone. They were within 11 miles of the final cache of food, but didn't have the strength to continue. Eight months later, an Antarctic search party discovered the tent of Captain Robert Scott and his men, in their sleeping bags, as if asleep.

Before the fate of the Scott expedition was known, several other projects were attempting or planning expeditions to cross the entire Antarctic continent, but without success. Shackleton stated that this was the one remaining great Antarctic challenge and began anew to set his own sights on such an expedition.

To some brave individuals, becoming the first at accomplishing anything new is a worthy objective to risk one's life for, whether in 1912 or in 2015- rowing across the ocean alone, free diving deeper than anyone else has ever gone, or surfing the world's largest wave- these challenges continue to attract and challenge adventurous souls.

In early 1914, Ernest Shackleton announced the undertaking of the "Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition", which would involve two ships. The *Endurance* would take the main party into the Weddell Sea, where Sir Ernest would lead a team of six men to begin the trek completely across the continent, a cold, miserable and risky slog of some 1,800 miles. The second ship, the *Aurora*, would head for the Ross Sea on the opposite side of the continent. They would establish supply depots along the last third of the planned route, leaving the food and fuel needed by Shackleton's party, if they got that far.

By now Shackleton was well known and respected in England, so he used his social skills and reputation to raise the funds to support the planned expedition. Public Interest was high and he received over 5,000 applicants to join the adventure, despite the wording in the newspaper ad: “*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*”. Based on his past experience on ships and on the ice, he believed that character and temperament were as important as technical skills. Ultimately, 56 men were chosen, 28 for each of the two ships.

Although World War I had broken out on August 3, 1914, Winston Churchill, who was then the First Lord of the Admiralty, directed the *Endurance* to proceed. The ship departed for Antarctica on August 8, beginning what was to become a harrowing adventure of a lifetime for all of those onboard.