

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

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**Abandon Ship**

The *Endurance* drifted for months frozen into the ice of the Weddell Sea. The changing conditions of the Antarctic spring brought increased movement of the surrounding ice that put extreme pressures on the hull of *Endurance*, tilting her back and forth.

The initial groaning and buckling of timbers they experienced in late August worsened, and from the 24<sup>th</sup> of October through the 26<sup>th</sup>, seawater began to flood the ship's interior. While the crew did everything possible to stem the flow of water and salvage the ship, they were caught in a vice with ice pressing in on three sides.

Shackleton had the crew ready the dogs, sledges, supplies and equipment to be moved from the ship to the ice on a moment's notice. At 5:00 on the evening of 27 October, after being trapped in the ice for 281 days, drifting over 1000 miles, and with water pouring into the engine room and the decks breaking up under his feet, Ernest Shackleton gave the word to abandon ship. The crew and dogs moved onto the ice.

While no longer on the sinking ship, the ice floe they had relocated to soon began to split beneath their feet. Shackleton had the camp and all of their supplies moved to a larger floe where tents were erected. During their first night on the ice, when the temperature dropped to 16 degrees below zero, cracking and rumbling could be heard and another crack started to split the camp in half again. This required a second relocation onto a larger floe.

At this point, I have to believe that Ernest had some very serious concerns about the fate of the expedition. The entire crew and their supplies were sitting on a big raft of ice that could be broken into pieces at any time, day or night. They didn't have a cell phone and there was no one coming to rescue them.

Shackleton explained to the men his plan to march across the ice, pulling all of their equipment on sledges, towards Paulet Island, where he knew supplies had

been stored. Several days were spent arranging the ten sledges, which needed to carry three small boats from the *Endurance*, and all the supplies and food.

Each sledge weighed over a ton, and with men and dogs pulling and pushing, digging paths through the ice ridges, they could see that this was going to be an extremely difficult 250-mile trek to Paulet Island. There were also thick fresh snowfalls and freezing temperatures that made matters more difficult. Somehow Shackleton kept his men focused on the job ahead, survival under brutal conditions and with poor odds of success, just as he had described in the recruitment advertisement in the London newspaper some months before.

Progress was very slow, however, leading them to set up a more permanent camp with the hope that the ice would drift them towards the island they wanted to reach. This also allowed them the opportunity to return to the *Endurance* and salvage as many supplies and as much food as possible, before she finally sank on 21 November 1915.

Most of their meals by now consisted of seal or penguin, either boiled or fried. There was not enough food for the dogs, which, sadly, were gradually killed to provide meat for the crew, who didn't know how long they would be stranded on the ice.

Although they had moved to within 60 miles of the island they were seeking, they were separated by impassable ice ridges. Finally, on 9 April, 1916, after 164 days of drifting with the ice, the floe they had been camped on began to break up. Shackleton ordered the 27 men into the three small lifeboats and they headed towards the nearest land across some of the most treacherous ocean on the planet.

With little food or water, the constant threat of being swamped by waves or slamming into an iceberg in the dark, and after seven harrowing days and nights at sea, the exhausted group of men managed to land their three boats on Elephant Island, a small desolate pile of rocks. They were 346 miles from where they *Endurance* had sunk and they were on solid ground, as isolated as it was, for the first time in 497 days.