

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

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**A Voyage of Survival**



*A replica of the James Caird*

Ernest Shackleton and his men were happy to have survived seven days and nights in three small boats in the Antarctic and to have safely made landfall. Although it was solid ground, the desolation of Elephant Island soon became apparent. The island was small, well off of any sailing routes, and the likelihood of being rescued was next to zero. While Shackleton knew where they were, no one else on the planet did and wasn't likely to find out anytime soon.

The men pulled their boats up onto a narrow rocky beach, trying to find some shelter from the wind and snow for their tents, and far enough from the sea to as not be flooded at high tide. They suffered mishaps the first night with loss of some of their supplies as the tide came in and additional damage when one of their large tents was shredded by the strong wind.

They were fortunate, however, that this rocky island had both elephant seals and penguins, which meant food and oil for cooking, heating and light. Not the tastiest of fares, but then at this point, they didn't have a lot of choices.

Its times like this that true leaders show their stuff, despite the dire nature of the circumstances. Winston Churchill had many memorable war time quotes. One in particular seems appropriate here, “Sometimes its not enough to do your best. Sometimes you have to do what’s required”.

It was now mid-April 1916 and winter was on the way. Shackleton realized that the only chance of saving his crew was for a small group to attempt to sail to South Georgia Island, which had a whaling station. He hoped that there would be a ship there that he could persuade to come back to Elephant Island and rescue the rest of the crew.

There were several major obstacles, however. South Georgia Island was 800 miles to the east, across some of the roughest seas in the world and they had only basic navigational gear. Shackleton selected the strongest of the small lifeboats, the 20-foot *James Caird*, which was named after the expedition’s major supporter.

Harry McNish, the ship’s carpenter worked on some modifications, hoping to make this tiny open boat more seaworthy for the difficult trip ahead. He raised the sides, strengthened the keel, built a makeshift deck of wood and canvas, and sealed the cover with oil paint and seal blood.

Shackleton picked four men to accompany him: Frank Worsley, the captain of the *Endurance*, who had the unenviable job of navigating and finding South Georgia Island; McNish, the carpenter for any repairs that the boat might need in their 800 mile voyage; And two strong sailors who begged to go, John Vincent and Timothy McCarthy.

They pushed off on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1916, after carefully planning and loading the supplies, everything they felt was needed to support the five men for four weeks in the small boat. Their instruments included a sextant, binoculars, a compass, and barometer, and a chart.

In Shackleton’s words, “the tale of the next sixteen days is one of supreme strife amid heaving waters. The sub-Antarctic Ocean lived up to its evil winter reputation.” Whether crowded beneath the cover and trying to sleep in an uncomfortable and confining space, or being on deck completely exposed to the weather, there was no comfort or escape from the cold and wet conditions.

The wind tore at the sails, and the small boat took on water continuously, which required frequent bailing. On each 4-hour watch, one man tended to the tiller, another the sails, and a 3rd bailed out water for all he was worth.

This 800-mile journey remains one of the most amazing sea survival stories ever recorded. After 16 days of mostly miserable weather and nasty sea conditions, their fresh water supplies were exhausted and they were all on the edge of dehydration.

Thanks to Worsley's navigational skills, they saw the steep cliffs of South Georgia Island through the mist and felt that perhaps they might survive. Had his calculations been off by a single degree, the *Caird* would have missed the island and sailed off into 4000 miles of empty ocean.