

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

#184 May 16, 2015

Shackleton Arrives on South Georgia

Unfortunately, after the 800-mile voyage from Elephant Island in their tiny boat, Shackleton and his small wet, cold and thirsty group, arrived on the southern coast of South Georgia Island. Unfortunate, because the whaling station they were trying to find was on the opposite side of the island. The leaky condition of the boat, however, as well as the exhaustion and thirst of the men, led the Boss to make the decision to land as soon as they could find a suitable location.

The steep cliffs facing them, as well as gale force winds and huge waves, made an immediate landing impossible. After two miserable days sailing along the coastline, under increasingly difficult conditions, their chart showed a bay with a very narrow opening. They attempted to enter, and with a short break in the weather, the *James Caird* with its worn out crew barely squeezed between the rocks into the protection of King Haakon Bay.

While landing on the beach was difficult, they managed to all get safely ashore late in the afternoon. Shackleton heard a gurgling sound and realized that a stream of fresh water was flowing nearby at their feet. They all got on their knees to drink in the fluid that helped to resuscitate them.

A small cave provided some shelter from the weather, but the men were way too weak to drag the boat up onto the beach. They had to take turns standing watch through the night to make sure their only means of survival didn't get broken up on the rocks.

The next day provided some opportunity to explore their surroundings and assess their situation. They discovered some albatross nests with fat young birds that provided their first food in several days. With a fire they attempted somewhat unsuccessfully to dry their salt encrusted wet clothes.

They also discovered that they had lost the boat's rudder during their landing or on the first night, which meant going further by sea was going to be nearly

impossible. Late that day, however, as they contemplated what to do next, their precious rudder washed in with the tide- another stroke of good luck.

Shackleton realized, however, that sailing the 150 miles to the Stromness whaling station on the opposite side of South Georgia with the boat in its condition was not likely to be successful. They had to somehow find a way to hike across the steep mountainous island.

On May 15, 1916, after several days of recuperation, they all boarded the boat and sailed towards the head of the bay where possibilities seemed more promising. They managed to land on the beach in rough seas, but a beach that fortunately was also occupied by hundreds of elephant seals. This meant both food and fuel for the rough days ahead.

They found a flat place on the shore, well above high tide and turned the boat over to make a protected shelter. Compared to what they had been through over the past three weeks, they now had food, heat and a roof over their heads and were more-or-less happy campers.

Shackleton realized they had but one hope, an overland crossing of South Georgia Island to reach the whaling station. There he believed help for the remaining crew left behind on Elephant Island could be found. He took Worsley and Tom Crean, the 6th man to make the voyage to South Georgia Island, and who served as the cook, but a man I had forgotten to mention in my earlier column.

After a difficult 36-hour, 32-mile hike across a steep, cold and snowy mountain range, with no tent or sleeping bags, they reached the whaling station on May 20, 1916. This was their first encounter with civilization in 531 days.

The next successful crossing of South Georgia took place 39 years later, by a British explorer who traversed nearly the same route as Shackleton's team. In tribute to their achievement, he wrote: "I do not know how they did it, except that they had to- three men of the heroic age of Antarctic exploration with 50 feet of rope between them and a carpenter's adze".