

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

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Crossing South Georgia



Tom Creen, Ernest Shackleton and Frank Worsley on South Georgia after they bathed and were given fresh clothes, the first time in over a year.

“Sometimes it’s not enough to do your best; sometimes you need to do what’s required” - Winston Churchill.

Shackleton repeatedly had to do what was required to save his men: leading them in three small boats to Elephant Island after the *Endurance* sank in the Antarctic ice; crossing 800 miles of the storm-wracked South Atlantic in the tiny *James Caird*, hoping to find South Georgia, virtually a needle in a haystack.

Fortunate to have found South Georgia, they were forced by thirst, a leaking boat and a broken rudder to land at King Haakon Bay, on the uninhabited southern side of the island. Recognizing that the *James Caird* would never make it around the island through rough seas and a rocky coastline to the Stromness Whaling Station, Shackleton, developed a desperate back-up plan. He, Creen, and Worsley would attempt to hike across 26 miles of steep, uncharted, ice and snow covered mountains to reach the whaling station where he hoped to find help.

With only three days of provisions, salt-encrusted clothes they had worn for nearly a year, no sleeping bags or tent, a 50 foot piece of rope and a carpenter’s adze, and

screws in their boots for traction, the three frostbitten, malnourished and fatigued men set out to cross South Georgia at 2:00 am on May 19, 1916 by moonlight.

This was no cozy walk in the park. As they crossed the last ice ridge and could see buildings in the distance they came to a point of no return. The small stream they had been following dropped 25-30 feet down a vertical ice cliff in a waterfall. They had no choice but to descend and used their 50-foot rope to lower each other down through the icy waterfall, where they again stood on dry land.

The rope could not be recovered but they dropped and recovered the adze, the log book and their cooker wrapped in a shirt. In Shackleton's words- that was all, except our wet clothes, that we brought out of the Antarctic, which we had entered a year and a half before with a well-found ship, full equipment, and high hopes. That was all of tangible things; but in memories we were rich. We had suffered, starved, and triumphed. We had reached the naked soul of man.

Nearly a century later, three of the world's greatest mountain climbers- Reinhold Messer, Conrad Anker and Stephen Venables- landed on South Georgia as part of creating an epic film on Shackleton and the *Endurance*, to retrace the 1916 route across the island to see what they had endured. Crossing the island in three days as fit, well-fed and extremely experienced climbers, they were amazed that Shackleton, Creen and Worsley were able to make the same traverse in 36 hours, without rest, with feet still numb from their 17-day boat journey, and as sailors, not mountaineers.

After descending the waterfall, Shackleton and his two comrades heard a whistle sound in the distance. The whistle gave the men renewed hope, knowing that the whaling station was occupied. They hiked the final mile and a half where they surprised the occupants of the station, but were soon recognized, fed, washed and clothed.

Shackleton could not rest long at the whaling station, however. He was able to send a boat with Worley to pick up the three men he had left on the other side of South Georgia, while he began to find a way to rescue the rest of the crew left behind on Elephant Island.

After a night in a soft bed, and a warm breakfast the next morning, Shackleton listened with interest to the whaling station manager, Mr. Sorlle, as he described the horrors of the war that was still underway in Europe. Shackleton supposed that their experience was unique in that no other civilized men would have been as

completely ignorant of the world-shaking happenings as they were when they reached Stromness Whaling Station.

Rescuing the rest of his crew marooned on Elephant Island was going to take more time and effort, however.