

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

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Rescuing the Crew on Elephant Island



*The crew that was rescued after spending almost five months on Elephant Island.
Photo by Frank Hurley*

Ernest Shackleton and his five comrades were now safe on South Georgia, but he had left the remaining 22 crewmembers 800 miles away on a desolate rock of an island with little to eat but penguins, seals, limpets and seaweed. Although he was able to borrow a large English whaling ship, the *Southern Sky*, and convinced a handful of idle whalers to accompany him, conditions in the South Atlantic in May, 2016, didn't cooperate with his first rescue attempt.

They had gotten to within 70 miles of Elephant Island when the sea ice grew too thick for the ship to penetrate. With a sad heart, Shackleton retreated to the Falkland Islands, 500 miles north, hoping to locate a more capable ship. On arriving at Port Stanley, he cabled London and King George to inform him of the loss of the *Endurance*. Although he tried to get a relief ship sent from England, he knew it would be months before it could reach them and attempt another rescue.

Shackleton reached out to several South American governments and received an offer through the British Minister in Uruguay that they could send a stout trawler, the *Instituto de Pesca No. 1*, fully equipped. Thus began the second rescue attempt.

While they were able to get within 20 miles of the stranded men, and could see the peaks in the distance, sea ice again stopped their progress. Attempts to push into the ice used up much of their fuel supply and were also abusing the engines. The trawler had to return to Port Stanley, with their coal nearly gone and the engines almost destroyed.

Shackleton was able to catch a ride on a British mail boat to Punta Arenas, Chile, where, with considerable local help, he was able to get a small oak schooner with an auxiliary engine, the *Emma*, equipped and ready to go. The Chilean government generously lent a small steamer, the *Yelcho*, to tow them part way.

The weather was the worst they had encountered on any of the three attempts, and the engine soon broke down, leaving them only with sail power trying to break through the ice. Back and forth they went, trying to find an opening to the island, but never got closer than 108 miles. Meanwhile, the men on Elephant Island assumed the worst and what they believed was most likely outcome—that Shackleton and the others had been lost at sea.

The rescue crew had to make another heartbreaking journey back to the Falkland Islands. The weather was showing signs of improvement, however, and Shackleton again appealed again to the Chilean government, which offered the use of the steel-hulled *Yelcho*.

Winds had moved the ice away from the island, which offered Shackleton the chance to approach. On August 13, 1916, they succeeded in reaching Elephant Island and located the snow-covered camp where they could barely make out figures in the distance. As they approached the shoreline, Shackleton recognized Wild, who he had left in charge, and yelled out, "Are you all well? Wild answered, "We are all well, boss."

Amazingly, after almost 143 days on the island, 10 months since abandoning the *Endurance*, and almost two years after the beginning of the expedition, not a single person in the expedition perished. As he neared land, he anxiously counted the figures on the beach, exclaiming to Worsley, "They're all there, Skipper. They are all safe...Not a life lost."

Shackleton quickly evacuated all 22 men and the *Yelcho* took the crew to Punta Arenas and then Valparaiso, where crowds warmly welcomed them back to civilization.

The other half of this polar expedition, the *Aurora*, had sailed to the opposite side of Antarctica to lay out supplies for Shackleton's planned trek across the continent. Strong winds had blown the ship out to sea from its anchorage and stranded a number of the members of the expedition. After drifting for several months, the *Aurora* returned to New Zealand. Shackleton headed there to join the ship and then sailed on the *Aurora* back to rescue the Ross Sea party.

This group, despite extreme hardships and miserable conditions, had carried out its mission of laying supply depots for the planned Shackleton expedition across the Antarctic continent. But three members of the expedition, including the commander, had unwisely ventured onto unstable sea ice. A blizzard appeared, and they were never heard from again.