

Antarctic Trek Retraces the Route of Shackleton and his “Unseen Companion”

by Paul Schurke, with PolarExplorers.com & Wintergreen Expeditions

Although the 1986 expedition that Will Steger & I led made history as the first confirmed trek to reach the North Pole without resupply, the journey was most meaningful for me as a chance to follow in the ‘footsteps of giants.’ That’s because it was similar in key aspects to the 1909 dogsled trek of legendary American explorers Robert Peary and Matthew Henson.

So imagine my delight when this past month I was granted the opportunity to co-lead a trek in the ‘footsteps of giants’ at the other end of the world. Guides Rick Sweitzer, Vern Tejas and I with our team of ten retraced the final chapter in the greatest epic of South Pole lore: Brit Ernest Shackleton’s 1914-1916 “Endurance” expedition.



He set out to complete the first traverse of Antarctica, but it ended up a very different story. Shackleton never set foot on the continent but instead, like the biblical Job, endured over two years a series of superhuman challenges, each more dangerous and death-defying than the next. In the end he snatched triumph from disaster and secured immortal fame by bringing all 27 of his men safely home. He’s been deemed “history’s greatest leader” and is the subject of countless books, films and team-building seminars.

His trials began in January 1915 when, just one day’s sail from the team’s starting point, their ship Endurance was entrapped in pack ice off Antarctica’s coast. They spent the next year adrift in a frozen sea, including 4 months in the utter darkness of the polar night. The following spring they were hopeful of release but instead their ship was crushed by pressure ice and sank. The bewildered crew was left stranded on the deteriorating floe with tents, salvaged rations and 3 lifeboats. Four more months later as the ice gave way around them, they cast adrift in their small open boats blindly hoping to find land.

After a week at sea stalked by storms and killer whales, they reached a desolate mountainous crag called Elephant Island. Realizing that their prospects for survival there were slim and that in this, the days before radio, their prospects for summoning help were impossible, Shackleton set sail with five men in their lifeboat, the “James Caird,” across the world’s most storm-tossed seas. Their one hope for rescue was to seek help from a Norwegian whaling station on Antarctica’s South Georgia Island some 800 miles away.

What followed was the most harrowing sea voyage on record: 16 near-sleepless days of being drenched with icy sea water, parched with thirst and starving, and only an occasional glimpse of the sun to plot their progress. Then, just after a 60-foot rogue wave nearly sealed their doom, they miraculously spotted South Georgia. But storm winds drove them ashore on the southwest corner of this 100-mile-long spine of soaring mountains, glaciers and snow fields. Their boat was no longer seaworthy so to reach the whaling station on the north shore they had to traverse the island’s treacherous uncharted interior. With a few days food slung in socks over their backs, threadbare clothing, and screws from their boat fastened to their boot soles to provide traction on steep ice fields, they set off from a shoreline site they called Pegotty Bluff.

This is where our story merges with theirs. Last month the Dutch ship Plancius with Oceanwide Expeditions dropped our team at Pegotty where we set off to retrace his route. Ascending a steep glacier, we reached the route's pinch point where Shackleton pushed his uncanny luck to the max. There at nearly a mile high an ominous ridge of serrated peaks called the Tridents straddles the route. Beyond is a two thousand-foot near vertical drop which was for Shackleton --as it also was for us-- rendered near indiscernible due to flat light and encroaching fog.



We could only guess at what looming threats might lay below: corniced precipices, gaping crevasses or suffocating avalanches. But we arrived at this obstacle in the morning and had time to ponder options for a safe descent. Shackleton's crew arrived at dusk and carried no gear to survive a night on a mountain top. So casting his fate to the winds he said to his companions, "Well boys, let's slide." Seated with arms locked around each other, they pushed off as a human bobsled and glissaded down into oblivion at break neck speed. "It seemed we shot off into space and our hair stood on end," they recalled. Giddy with laughter and disbelief, they harmlessly came to halt in a snow field that would lead towards their rescue.

Replicating that blind-luck glissade wasn't an option for our crew -- the mountain wall might not be so kind to us. In the century since, rock falls and glacial shifts might have radically changed its topography. So instead of saying, "Let's slide!" our ace mountain guide Vern Tejas said "Let's cut a snow wheel!" and proceeded to share with us a very clever, route-proving trick. With ice axes, we hacked a 5-foot diameter, 300-pound disc of ice-encrusted snow from the mountain top. Then with a



huge heave-ho, we launched it down the mountainside. We cheered and gamely coached it with body English as it neatly rolled down the contours of our projected descent. It blazed a trail we could follow in the flat light and ensured there were no avalanches that might be triggered by our descent or crevasses hidden by snow bridges that might swallow us whole. Roped together in climbing harnesses and probing our way with crampons and ice axes, we followed the snow wheel's track and found our way safely to the bottom where we too were giddy with laughter and well on our way to the whaling station.

The trek would take us 4 days of threading our way through ice fields and probing mountain passes in snow-driven white outs. We finally descended out of the clouds onto a sun-dappled bay where impossibly colorful but curiously clumsy penguins greeted us in song and 4-ton bilious elephant seals acknowledged our presence with muffled snorts.

Shackleton's crew had no option for camping and so went nonstop and reached refuge at the whaling station in 36 hours. South Georgia's



notoriously fickle weather had spared them its fury. But last year a team attempting the trek wasn't so lucky. Ferocious winds at the Tridents flattened their tents and sent them scrambling in retreat. And relentless storms turned a British Special Forces team attempt several decades back into a grinding two-week ordeal.

In recounting his miraculous trek, Shackleton referred to the comforting presence he and his teammates all powerfully felt of an "unseen companion." In similarly spiritual tones, he wrote in his book *South*: "We had pierced the veneer of outside things. We had seen God in His splendors, heard the text that Nature renders. We had reached the naked soul of man." This lyrical passage reflects his passion for poetry and mysticism.

Our trek to South Georgia unveiled for me a curious element of the *Endurance* story. I wondered if this "unseen presence" had from time-to-time on their trek taken the form of an unlikely object: a banjo. When their ship was crushed in the ice and they set out on lifeboats in a last-ditch effort to reach land, Shackleton ordered his men to shed virtually all their personal possessions to reduce weight lest the boats founder -- except for one precious item. He asked teammate Leonard Hussey to keep his 5-string banjo because Shackleton felt Hussey's music and verse provided a crucial "mental tonic" for the beleaguered team.

Indeed, while Shackleton sailed for South Georgia, Hussey and his banjo provided solace for those stuck on Elephant Island. Then, curiously, at Shackleton's untimely end the banjo appears again.

Having "been to the mountaintop," Shackleton never fit in to work-a-day England where he was feted as a national hero upon return to home and family. In 1921, he set sail on a return trek to Antarctica. Reaching South Georgia he excitedly pointed out the Tridents and other waymarks of his 1916 traverse. His crew wasn't quite sure of his goals for this new expedition and that day some openly wondered if this was simply his pilgrimage to the place where he'd met the 'unseen presence.' Perhaps even a permanent pilgrimage?

That evening in his berth he felt troubled and asked Leonard Hussey, who had returned to Antarctica on this new trek, to console him. Hussey played a banjo tune heard many times on the *Endurance*: Brahms's Lullaby. But it was to be the last time Shackleton ever heard this tune because that same night, at age 47, Shackleton died of heart failure onboard his ship "Quest" in the whaling station harbor on South Georgia.

The crew was shocked that “the Boss” as they affectionately called him was gone. Hussey offered to accompany his body home by ship. But halfway to England when he was able to telegraph Shackleton’s wife Emily and alert her to his death, she asked that he be returned to the harsh and beautiful land that forged his greatness. In March 1922, Shackleton was interred in the small cemetery of a South Georgia whaling station while Hussey played Brahms’s lullaby one last time on that same banjo.



To this day, that banjo and the “James Caird” lifeboat remain among the most revered museum artifacts of the Endurance story. And last month, my teammates and I were deeply honored to pay homage at his South Georgia Island grave after having retraced Shackleton’s route and that of their “unseen companion.”

