

Ernest Shackleton

Who was Ernest Shackleton?

Ernest Shackleton was an experienced explorer who had travelled to the Antarctic region twice before setting his sights on a new goal: an expedition across Antarctica via the South Pole.

On 8th August 1914, Shackleton's team sailed from Plymouth, England on *Endurance* to begin their 'Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition'.



Ernest Shackleton

The expedition starts

On 5th November, *Endurance* reached the whaling station of Grytviken on South Georgia island. This was their last stop on land before reaching Antarctica. Whalers warned Shackleton that the Weddell Sea was jammed with ice and encouraged him to wait until next year. Hoping the conditions would improve, Shackleton kept his team at the whaling station. A month passed and they decided to set off for Antarctica despite the risks.



Whaling station of Grytviken, South Georgia island

Trapped

On 18th January 1915, *Endurance* became trapped in ice on the Weddell Sea. The crew spent hours trying to cut the ice to free the ship but they were unsuccessful. Shackleton decided they should wait for spring, hoping that warmer temperatures would melt the ice. They waited for 10 months, with the cold and dwindling food supplies becoming growing concerns.



Endurance trapped in ice

Keeping morale high

Shackleton was worried that his team would become demoralised so he encouraged them to sing and play games to keep morale high. He also thought routines were important to keep the men from panicking. They had meals at regular times and socialised after dinner under Shackleton's orders. He also ordered the men to continue training and to hunt seals and penguins for meat.



Shackleton and photographer Frank Hurley



Shifting ice

On 27th October 1915, the ice shifted and started to crush the ship. Shackleton ordered his men to keep only essential possessions and move onto the ice. He allowed one member of the party, Frank Hurley, to keep his photographs and Leonard Hussey was allowed to keep his banjo. They had only three lifeboats and a small pile of possessions and equipment. They made several attempts to cross the sea ice and reach land but were unsuccessful.



Image from: Wikimedia Commons/Public domain

Second-in-command Frank Wild and Shackleton

Sinking

On 21st November 1915, they watched *Endurance* sink. Shackleton wrote in his diary about the importance of being flexible when events do not go to plan:

'A man must shape himself to a new mark directly the old one goes to ground... I pray God, I can manage to get the whole party to civilisation.'

His focus had shifted from succeeding on their expedition to making sure everyone survived.



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Endurance finally sinking

Floating ice

For two months, Shackleton and his team camped on a large ice floe (sea ice), hoping they would drift towards Paulet Island where they knew supplies had been stored. After a failed attempt to walk to the island, they set up a more permanent camp on another ice floe. The party drifted to within 100km of Paulet Island. Despite being so near, the impassable ice on the floe made it impossible to reach the island and supplies.



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Dog sledge on the ice with a team member

Cracking ice

The team faced danger again when the ice floe on which they were camping broke in two. Shackleton ordered his men to board the lifeboats and they travelled north. After a gruelling journey, the lifeboats arrived at Elephant Island. The team were exhausted, seasick and dehydrated but relieved to be back on land after almost 500 days at sea.



Finding help

Shackleton and his team were running out of food and surviving on meagre daily rations. Elephant Island was inhospitable and there was no chance of being rescued by a passing ship. Taking these factors into account, Shackleton decided on 24th April 1916 to take the best lifeboat and a small group of men across the Weddell Sea to the South Georgia whaling station where they started their journey. The aim was to find help and then return to rescue the other men. After a demanding journey, with freezing temperatures and rough seas, they arrived at South Georgia on 10th May.



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Shackleton setting off for South Georgia Island with five team members

Rescue mission

It took Shackleton and his team several months to rescue his remaining crew members. They made three attempts during that time but each one failed due to the packed ice around Elephant Island.

On 30th August 1916, his small team reached Elephant Island and the 22 men Shackleton left behind. Although it was common at the time for explorers to die on expeditions, every member of Shackleton's crew survived.

However, not a single member of the team set foot on Antarctica.



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Elephant Island

Discussion questions

Read each question carefully and use evidence from the text to support your opinions.

1. Was Shackleton's expedition a success or failure?
2. Did Shackleton make wise decisions?
3. What were Shackleton's personality traits?
4. What qualities did Shackleton have as a leader?
5. Which factors caused challenges during the expedition?



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Endurance surrounded by ice

