



SKIP NOVAK

MODERN-DAY ADVENTURERS PALE INTO INSIGNIFICANCE WHEN YOU CONSIDER THE EXPLOITS OF SHACKLETON 100 YEARS AGO



On 20 May I had the privilege of attending the Shackleton Memorial Service at Westminster Abbey. One hundred years ago Ernest Shackleton, Frank Worsley and Tom Crean stumbled into the Stromness whaling station having made their desperate trek across the unsurveyed spine of the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia.

The Shackleton story is well known, but it is always worth repeating if only in brief. In the summer of 1914 they set sail from the UK just after the outbreak of World War I – Churchill telling them to “Proceed” when they offered their services to the war effort.

Their ship, the *Endurance*, was beset in the pack ice of the Weddell Sea in the southern summer of 1915 after a failed attempt to land a party for an overland traverse of the entire continent to the Ross Sea, planned for the following spring.

The *Endurance* slowly succumbed to the pressure of the pack during that winter and eventually broke up, the ship’s company now ‘safely’ camped on the pack ice by 27 October. For the next five months they drifted with the vagaries of the pack, meanwhile attempting to manhandle their three boats and equipment north to reach open water.

In the end they settled into a waiting game and by 9 April 2016 all 28 men were able to take to the boats, barely surviving the sail and row to Elephant Island during the onset of winter.

Greatest sea survival story

Shackleton’s famous open boat voyage to South Georgia on the 22ft *James Caird* and the subsequent rescue of the men left behind on Elephant Island with no loss of life is one of the greatest sea survival stories of all time, arguably all owing to the leadership of Shackleton.

His methods are now enshrined in syllabuses in many business schools – ironic when you consider all his

pre-expedition business ventures ended in failure.

I had a chuckle though when the Bishop of London, giving the address at the service, compared Shackleton and his men as true explorers with the “likes of the shallow modern-day explorers we see today in the media”. I am sure many Antarctic aficionados in the audience either laughed to themselves as I did or choked depending on how serious one takes oneself.

Re-enactments

A repeat of the 800-mile Shackleton boat journey was once considered the Holy Grail for a host of modern-day adventurers. Trevor Potts and a UK crew finally managed to pull it off in 1994, making it to the island and managing to land safely (an even greater feat) – in the days before a support vessel was required.

It has been tried three times since, including one aborted attempt in dramatic circumstances. I know, as *Pelagic* was the support vessel for the South Aris project in 1997. When halfway to the island at the height of a gale the Irish team capsized three times in succession, resulting in a flooded cabin and a banged-up crew.

With more heavy weather on the way, they wisely abandoned their splendid replica of the *James Caird* – named *Tom Crean* – and *Pelagic* hightailed it to safety. They later completed the mountain traverse.

The German adventure supremo Arved Fuchs sailed all the way to close to the island on his replica in 2000 and linked up the mountain section. This replica/re-enactment concept was taken to extremes by the most recent and publicised project under the leadership of Tim Jarvis, along with well known sailors Paul Larsen, Nick Bubb and others.

They did the boat journey and the mountain crossing, but the difference was they were dressed in traditional clothing and used equipment of the era.

Although always impressive feats of research and organisation, these re-creations at any level are fundamentally flawed. Support vessels, GPS and links to the internet are givens – and they did not eat the seals and penguins that Shackleton and his men did.

The Bishop of London had made a good point.

“SHACKLETON’S FAMOUS OPEN BOAT VOYAGE TO SOUTH GEORGIA IS ONE OF THE GREATEST SEA SURVIVAL STORIES”