



Lost Endurance



1 "The ship is breaking apart!"

The cry went up over an awful grinding — tonnes of ice crushing against the ship. In response, the hull of the *Endurance* groaned, creaking as it buckled under the immense weight. Then the worst happened. *Endurance's* timbers snapped against the pressure of the violating floe, tearing the ship open with a sound like exploding guns. Nothing could save her.

2 It was October 24th, 1915. Sir Ernest Shackleton was leading a British expedition across the frozen continent of Antarctica, travelling by dog sled from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea. However,

their ship had become trapped between gigantic floes of ice before they could reach the Antarctic continent.

This doomed the original expedition to failure. It was also the start of another, more heroic adventure.

3 Shackleton's men abandoned ship, lowering their sleds, boats and gear onto the ice floe. Despite being spring, the weather was freezing, lacing beards and eyelashes with icicles. Here, in the southern end of the world, these men were at the mercy of the Antarctic ice floes; they could not row towards land until the ice melted. They

set up camp and burned seal blubber to keep warm. Cruelly, the *Endurance* sat in its frigid tomb, slowly sinking as its crew worked hard to salvage supplies. By November 21st, the ship had sunk into the depths.

The men fed on seals and penguins and played endless games of ice hockey and football to keep occupied. Even during these lighter moments, danger was close at hand, for the tissue-thin ice could crack with little warning, leaving them to die in freezing water.

4 Finally, in April, the ice began to melt. Now it was possible to launch the boats and go in search of land. Quick action was required as the ice floes separated, causing the camp to disintegrate. Once in the water, caution was necessary as their three small boats could be smashed into splinters if they collided with an iceberg.

For seven days and nights, the boats battled through freezing waters. High waves rolled over them and killer whales threatened to attack. At last, a triumphant cry went up. "Land!"

5 It was Elephant Island — not much more than a frozen rock in the middle of the ocean.

The men ran along the narrow beach shouting and whooping as if they'd just discovered a barrel of rum. This was the first real chunk of land they had touched for sixteen months. Camp was set up on a sandy spit, while stinging winds whipped all around them. In order to protect themselves from the harsh elements, the men turned the boats upside down, creating little shelters. It was April 17th, 1916.

6 Shackleton wrote: "As we clustered round the blubber stove, with the acrid smoke blowing in our faces, we were quite a cheerful company." But despite the bravado, Shackleton was worried. If

help didn't arrive soon, they would all starve to death.

To the northeast was the whaling station of South Georgia. It would take a month's journey across icy waters to reach it, but it held their only chance of survival. Early one morning, Shackleton and five other men bravely set off in one of the small open boats. The sea was wild and the wind fierce.

7 Time and again, the small boat came close to being capsized beneath the waves, but somehow it held firm. The temperatures were near zero and sea spray coated everything with a layer of salty ice. The boat grew so heavy, the men could have sworn at times they were sailing on a log. To lighten the load, items were tossed overboard, including two sleeping bags that were frozen stiff.

8 One night, Shackleton took the first watch, scanning the horizons for any sign of land. He saw what at first appeared to be a break in the clouds, but as their boat sailed closer his heart clenched hard in his chest. It was an enormous wave, tons of life-ending water building up to smash him, the boat and his crew into nothing.

"For God's sake, hold on!" shouted Shackleton. "It's got us."

9 The next moment slowed into eternity. The boat was lifted high and flung through the air in a seething chaos of tortured water. Water rushed on board, flooding everything, as the impact of the wave shuddered the entire boat. Almost at their very end, the men heaved the water out of the boat, drawing on the very last of their energy. They were exhausted but they had survived.

10 Finally, as they drew close to land, a strong wind came roaring across the ocean. It destroyed the rudder and blew the boat onto a rocky shore. Desperation clung to Shackleton; he and his men

