

A New Challenge

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When I read this apocryphal¹ advert my hair stood on end.

‘Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success.’

I responded at once. I have often wondered why, but for some reason I was one of the few selected from thousands of applicants. War broke out as we were about to leave and by rights I should have enlisted, but the Boss said we had instructions to ‘proceed’, and so we did. Our mission was to cross the continent of Antarctica by sledge. By any standards this was a pointless undertaking, but we were adventurers to the core and up for the challenge. Looking back, it is hard to imagine the privations we suffered, or how our ambitions changed as events unfolded.

The Boss was exceptionally good at managing the media and his carefully curated version of the story covers us in glory. In truth we stumbled from one catastrophic mistake to the next: not heroes, but an unfortunate band of misfits who had a very lucky escape.

As we learned to our cost, we were on the wrong boat. I know they say the Endurance was made for tough conditions with twice as many frames as usual and each one twice as thick as normal – but what is normal? Ok, so the planks were 30 inches thick, sheathed in greenheart, and OK, the timbers of the bow were made of huge oak trees chosen for their natural shape, but at the end of the day the ship was built for genteel tourism in the Arctic. No wonder she could not withstand the Antarctic pack ice that crushed her to bits.

The Boss knew the risk he was taking, but he didn’t let on. He had debts to settle and promises to keep. The fact that we had a photographer and an artist on board should have alerted us to what was really going on: at the end of the day, we were cogs in a scheme that existed beyond us, and from which there was no way back.

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To be fair, things *were* tricky. Sometime during January our ship got stuck – everyone knows the iconic images that we saved for you to see.



We were contracted to keep our diaries up to date and this is my entry from 12th February 1916.

Food and cold were constant preoccupations. At dark, about 5 p.m., we all turned in, after a supper consisting of a pannikin of hot milk, one of our precious biscuits and a cold penguin leg each.

Survival is a demanding business and at a rough estimate we must have killed 14 penguins to get a leg each. No wonder we fantasised about a better diet.

To cut a long story short we hung on, going with the flow and living on board until we abandoned ship in October that same year. There was nothing for it but to camp in freezing temperatures for the next five months, waiting for a chance to escape. When our beloved dogs were shot, it was clear that the sledging trip was off.

Eventually the ice cracked beneath us, and we had no option but to brave the sea in the three lifeboats we'd saved for the purpose. The chances of finding dry land in miles of open ocean were slim, but after five days of hell, covered in sores and frostbite and with little or no sleep, we saw Elephant Island ahead.

We unloaded our gear, including 150 glass photographic plates, the nitrate film of the Endurance, artists' materials, hand-written records, guns and ammunition. But this was not the end of our troubles. Once we'd got over the joy of being alive, we confronted the unpalatable truth that we

were on an uninhabited island and that unless we got help, no one would know of our exploits or of the challenges we had overcome.

Three days later, I was part of a small crew that set off again, this time with the aim of reaching a tiny whaling station some 800 miles away. Having crossed what are probably the worst seas in the world, our navigator hit the jackpot: after two weeks of tumultuous waves and terrible weather we landed on South Georgia, but to everyone's dismay, Stromness was on the other side.

More desperate than undaunted, the fittest of us pressed on. We were in uncharted territory: we made wrong turns, we slid down glaciers and we retraced our steps, time and again. In the retelling of the story, the fact that we were so close to death fuelled the myth of our 'success'. The Boss's ghost-written book of 1919 and his lectures in South America, the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Britain helped pay off some of his loans but when I read these sentences my stomach turns.

Half a pot of steaming Bovril ration warmed us up, and when we marched again ice-inclines at angles of 45 degrees did not look quite as formidable as before.

It sounds like we were a bunch of determined, some might say demented, boy scouts. Reality is always a bit of a fiction, but the theme of 'endurance' resonated with the public and the Boss milked it for all it was worth. This is another cloying extract:

Just when things looked their worst, they changed for the best. I have marvelled often at the thin line that divides success from failure and the sudden turn that leads from apparently certain disaster to comparative safety.

What rot. The Boss was so ruthless in turning the misery of our journey into the greatest survival story ever told that he did not allow us to wash or shave until we'd faced the press.

After the first failed attempt to find the wreck of the Endeavour in 2019, the S. A. Agulhas II set off again in 2022. This was quite a different challenge. The hundred plus people on board were warm and fed, and equipped with the latest technology, including Saab sabretooth underwater 'drones' (costing 2.85 million dollars apiece) capable of sending data back to the surface in real time. The ship's media expert handled the twitter and tik tok accounts, and there was a dedicated camera and film crew as well.

As the tweets demonstrate, not everything went to plan:

The hunt for Endurance continues. The team still has a significant portion of the target area to cover over the remaining circa six days of search operations, 3 march 2022

Two days later, the sub-sea crew found an 'acoustic anomaly' and sent the sabretooth down again. The pictures that came back were astonishingly clear and the underwater robot went on to take 25,000 high-resolution photographs, stitched together to make images like the one you see below.



The press release, beamed around the world just a few days later, reads as follows:

This is by far the finest wooden shipwreck I have ever seen. It is upright, well proud of the seabed, intact, and in a brilliant state of preservation. You can even see "Endurance" arced across the stern. This is a milestone in polar history... We hope our discovery will engage young people and inspire them with the pioneering spirit, courage and fortitude of those who sailed Endurance to Antarctica. ." - Mensun Bound, 9 March 2022.

Accounts of losing the Endeavour and of finding her again, were told to global audiences, using the media of the day. It seems there is an insatiable appetite for stories in which natural hazards are overcome despite the odds and it seems that new challenges are invented to fuel this demand.

¹ Although widely repeated there is no evidence that this advertisement ever existed. It is nonetheless part of the legend.