The British Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition

In 1914 the explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton set out on an ambitious expedition to cross the continent of Antarctica from one side to the other. He failed. However, he achieved one of the greatest feats in polar exploration; he returned with all his 27 men – alive, despite the loss of his ship.

On 5 December 1914, the Endurance set sail from South Georgia, a British Overseas Territory in the Southern Ocean. This was Shackleton’s last contact with land for 497 days.

Endurance was a three-masted wooden vessel, built to withstand harsh polar conditions. It had 10 passenger cabins, a dining saloon and galley, a smoking room, a darkroom to develop photographs, electric lighting and a small bathroom.

The captain

In 1914, with nearly 27 years’ experience behind him, Sir Ernest Shackleton hired Frank Worsley on the spot for his Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition and made him captain of the expedition ship Endurance.

The crew

The crew of Endurance was made up of 28 men, as well as Mrs Chippy, a male ship’s cat, and sixty-nine sledge dogs. Crew positions included an engineer, a surgeon, geologists, a meteorologist, a photographer, artists, carpenters, a cook and a stoker.

What happened?

The expedition was an audacious challenge which led to Endurance being trapped in sea ice and crushed. It sank to the bottom of the Weddell Sea in November 1915. The stranded crew trekked to the edge of the sea ice, then sailed in the ship’s salvaged lifeboats to Elephant Island where there were seals and penguins to eat. Shackleton and Worsley led a small party in one of the open lifeboats, called the James Caird, to get help. Against the odds they survived an 800-mile journey and on 30 August 1916 returned to rescue the expedition party on Elephant Island. Shackleton had saved the lives of all his men.

The mission

The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition was Shackleton’s boldest adventure: he intended to cross Antarctica from coast to coast, unsupported and on foot. At the time, this transcontinental crossing was the last great polar journey.

What happened?

Against the odds they survived an 800-mile journey and on 30 August 1916 returned to rescue the expedition party on Elephant Island. Shackleton had saved the lives of all his men.

The captain

In 1914, with nearly 27 years’ experience behind him, Sir Ernest Shackleton hired Frank Worsley on the spot for his Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition and made him captain of the expedition ship Endurance.

The crew

The crew of Endurance was made up of 28 men, as well as Mrs Chippy, a male ship’s cat, and sixty-nine sledge dogs. Crew positions included an engineer, a surgeon, geologists, a meteorologist, a photographer, artists, carpenters, a cook and a stoker.

What happened?

The expedition was an audacious challenge which led to Endurance being trapped in sea ice and crushed. It sank to the bottom of the Weddell Sea in November 1915. The stranded crew trekked to the edge of the sea ice, then sailed in the ship’s salvaged lifeboats to Elephant Island where there were seals and penguins to eat. Shackleton and Worsley led a small party in one of the open lifeboats, called the James Caird, to get help. Against the odds they survived an 800-mile journey and on 30 August 1916 returned to rescue the expedition party on Elephant Island. Shackleton had saved the lives of all his men.