

Shackleton Crew rescued by Pardo, 100 years later

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One of the most amazing survival and rescue features that keeps the Antarctic waters, is the one which happened to the failed Imperial Transantarctic Expedition which, after many failed attempts, was successfully rescued by a small Chilean vessel.

Main Characters

Luis A. Pardo Villalón was born in Chile on September 20th 1882. Since his childhood he always expressed interest on ocean related topics and in July 1900 he joined the Escuela de Pilotines, a merchant marine school, which in that time was on board of the old steam corvette “Abtao”.

In June 1906, he joined the Chilean Navy as 3. officer. On September 13th, 1910 he was promoted to 2nd officer, and was transferred to Magallanes’s Navy base.

Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton was born in Kilkee, Ireland 1874, and he took part in four polar Antarctic expeditions. The first one was between 1901 and 1904, on board of the “Discovery”, with Captain Robert Falcon Scott, RN, got 178 kilometers from the South Pole, but with the bad luck of being affected by scurvy. The second expedition took place between 1907 and 1909, as a Royal Navy Reserve Lieutenant, in charge of his own expedition, on the “Nimrod”, he reached 160 kilometers from the South pole, as close as anybody had ever been before.

The Transantarctic imperial Expedition

After December 1911, when Norwegian Ronald Amundsen arrived to the South Pole, there was only one feat to accomplish: it was to cross the Antarctic continent on foot.

Shackleton would try this on his 3rd expedition, the Transantarctic Imperial Expedition, sponsored by Sir James Caird and some other private gentlemen, the British government and the Royal Geographic Society. The expedition sailed from Plymouth, England, on August 8th 1914, on board the Brigantine “Endurance”, a wooden three mast sailing ship, with a steam engine, of 300 tons, built in Norway. And because in that moment the First World War was starting, Sir Ernest Shackleton gathered together the entire crew in the Endurance’s chamber and unanimously it was resolved to send a telegram to the British Admiralty offering the ship, its provisions and particularly, the men of the expedition, for the war effort.

The expedition sailed on December 5th, 1914 from the Norwegian whaling station Grytviken, South Georgia, towards the Weddell Sea. On the 7th day she entered the ice. After 6 weeks of sailing among the ice, the ship had advanced more than 800 miles South and it was only one journey away from its destination, the Vahsel bay.

But 1915 was an extremely cold year in the Antarctic, with its higher glacier intensity following, so by January 18th the ice had already surrounded the ship. A drastic temperature fall had frozen the

water and the ship was trapped by the ice. From that instant and carried by the ice, the ship started to move initially towards the West and later towards the North. On October 7th, the frozen ice crushed the “Endurance”, so the crew had to leave the ship, with 28 people on the ice, 60 dogs, 25 pigs and 1 cat.

Shackleton told his people that they would try to advance with the boats in the direction to Paulet Island, 350 miles North, in front of the extreme of the Antarctic Peninsula, where a shack with supplies was left by a previous Swedish expedition. However, despite their reluctance, they would have to drop the idea, because pulling the loaded boats, each of them weighing at least 1 ton, was not possible. They didn't have much choice other than camping on ice and see where the drift caused by currents and winds, took them, until the weather would allow them use the boats. Finally the “Endurance” sank on November 21st. Finally on April 9th, 1916, they were able to launch the 3 boats into the water: the “James Caird”, the “Dudeley Dockery”, and the “Stancombs Wills”, which were named after the sponsors of the expedition. The 28 men and supplies were shipped on them and faced the Elephant Island. On April 15th, the boats arrived to the oriental extreme of the South Shetland Island, and there they landed, after 497 days where they hadn't walked on land, and established their camp on the North coast of the island.

The “James Caird” Journey

But they weren't safe yet, Sir Ernest Shackleton commanded the carpenter, Henry “Chippy” McNish, to prepare one of the 3 boats, the “James Caird”, a 7 meters length lifeboat, for a voyage to South Georgia Island.

On April 24th, in the afternoon, the “James Caird” sailed from the Elephant Island to South Georgia, located about 800 miles North; it was manned by Shackleton and some 5 other men: the ex “Endurance” Commander, Frigate Captain Frank Worsley, New Zealander as seafarer; the ex second officer, the Irishman Tom Crean; the Scottish carpenter Henry Mc Nish, the sailor John Vincent and the Irish sailor Tim Mc Carthy. The rest of the crew stayed on Elephant Island under the supervision of the deputy of the expedition, the Australian Frank Wild.

The first try, with the “Southern Sky” whaler

On South Georgia Island, Sir Ernest managed to hire a little steam whaler, the “Southern Sky”, and equipped her to travel to Elephant island. This was the first vessel with which he tried the rescue his people; even though he failed when he tried to cross the Pack ice.

The second try, with the “Fish Institute N°1”

Regardless, the request was heard in Montevideo, the Uruguayan government, in a Honorious gesture, placed at the disposal of Sir Ernest a little vessel, small trawler, of only 80 tons, the “Fish Institute N°1”, commanded by the tenant Ruperto Elichim Behety. This was the second ship he obtained to try the rescue.

Under these drastic circumstances, Sir Ernest, restless and irreducible under misfortune, understood he had to find an operational base that would have more resources than Port Stanley, so he resolved to move on for a Cutter at Punta Arenas, with his entire hope turned to Chile.

The third try, with the schooner “Emma”

Once in Pta. Arenas, with the help of the British resident colony, Shackleton hired the Chilean sea lion hunter schooner “Emma”, of 170 tons, the third ship trying a new rescue, but also without good results, on the rescue journey.

The “Emma” didn’t succeed either. As it got closer to the Elephant Island, it started to find a great quantity of shifting ice among which it became harder and harder to sail.

The fourth try, with the Yelcho Tender

Sir Ernest remembered that on his way through Port Stanley he had met the Chilean Vice Admiral Mr. Joaquin Muñoz Hurtado, who was coming back from a mission in London and that at this time he was the Chilean Navy General Director. He turned to him. The Admiral Muñoz Hurtado promptly ordered that commander in chief of the Magallanes’s navy base, Real admiral Mr. Luis Victor Lopez Salamanca, to provide Sir Ernest with a vessel.

At that time, only 2 of the 4 tenders that they had were there: the “Yáñez” and the “Yelcho”. Even though both ships were absolutely inappropriate to do a journey like this, under winter conditions, one of them had to be chosen, and the “Yelcho” was preferred. This was a relatively old ship, built in Glasgow in 1906, that had been bought from the private “Yelcho and Palena Company” in 1908. It had a size of 480 tons, with a 64 Hp strong machine and 300 hp effective, which took it to 11 knots, with a cylindrical coal boiler, of 120 pounds, that hadn’t been checked since December 1913. The vessel didn’t have heating, electric lights, radio, double bottom and it also had low gunwale.

Sending it to the Antarctic was simply bold. The only attribute that could present to achieve its mission, was the quality, expertise and courage of its crew, all participating as volunteers on this expedition, under command of Luis Pardo.

The ship was prepared at Punta Arenas with urgency and with what was on available.

On Friday 25th of August, at 00:15 hrs, the “Yelcho” sailed from Pta. Arenas towards Picton Island and the certainty of the triumph could be guessed in the faces of its crew. At dawn, they took the Magdalena Channel, and then the rest of the channels and passages, until anchored at Port Burne, at 17:00 hrs. On Saturday 26th, at 06:30 hrs, they continued the journey, under good weather conditions until reaching Ushuaia, Argentina, at 17:00 hours.

There, Sir Ernest landed with two of his companions, Worsley and Crean, who received much attention on land, and then returned very satisfied onboard.

Sunday 27th, at 06:30 hours, she sailed, towards Picton island, where it was anchored without further remarks, at 11:15 hrs.

The temperature was continuously descending, at midnight it was about -9°C to -10°C; meanwhile, the current kept going in the same direction.

The shipwrecked rescue

Even though The *Yelcho* was located in a very dangerous area, because of the breakers and shoals, and also because of the ice blocks and fog, Pardo decided to take the risk to keep sailing under those difficult conditions, before the possibility of not reaching the shipwrecked camp that day.

In the meanwhile, on Elephant Island, almost five months after the departure of the boat "*James Caird*", at dawn on August 30th, the weather was clear and cold. The food supply had started to decrease in a disturbing way. The two surgeons of the expedition had operated the foot, frozen by the cold, of Perce Blackborrow, and the bone was infected, so that his condition was deplorable. Since the arrival to the island, Blackborrow had kept, without complaining, inside of his wet and soggy sleeping bag. With discretion, Frank Wild had started the arrangements to plan his own rescue.

The "*Yelcho*" continued rounding the island, sailing between many icebergs, with low fog and solar refraction, with a visible horizon of 1 to 1.5 miles, the entire crew watching the bow, looking down for the shipwrecked camp.

At 13:30 hrs, with great happiness, the shipwrecked were sighted; they were located in a hollow, having on one side a huge snow drift and, on the other side, remarkable snowed peaks, very characteristic of that island.

At less than 150 meters from the shore, the ship lowered the small boat, the one that Pardo sent to land with Shackleton, Crean and 4 Chilean crewmen.

The shipwrecked recognized, first, the strong figure of Shackleton and then, Crean. They were welcomed by them with indescribable enthusiasm and exclamations of joy, in the middle of "hurray shouts" and the waving of clothes of an undefined color.

As they were going back to the vessel the small boat brought half of the people and some packages. The shipwrecked exclaimed some cheers to Chile and its government.

The second trip, that went back to pick up the rest of the people returned at 01:25 hours. The photographer Frank Hurley carried on the little boat the plates and films that he had hidden in the snow. One hour after the "*Yelcho*" arrival, the entire crew of the "*Endurance*" that were on Elephant Island, and their little belongings, had been rescued.

Commander Pardo and his men had rescued the 22 British shipwrecked from Elephant Island, in the middle of the austral winter. With his courage and skills, he wrote a brilliant page on Chile and its marine history.

On Friday September 1st, the fog prevented the ship from entering the Beagle Canal, so Pardo resolved to continue the journey towards the North towards the Magellan Strait and on Saturday 2nd, at 18:00 hrs, they saw the Dungeness and Virgin lighthouses; they headed for the first one in order to announce their arrival by telegraph, however, once near the lighthouse they saw it was impossible to send the boat ashore, because of the strong Westerly winds and the heavy seas, so the "Yelcho" continued with her voyage. On Sunday 3rd at 16.00 hrs, the "Yelcho" anchored at Rio Seco, from where it could announce to the commander in chief of the Chilean Naval station its arrival without any problems, carrying the 22 shipwrecked safe and sound to land.

Shackleton, excited by the abnegation and bravery without comparison of its saviors that exact same day sent to the Admiral Muñoz Hurtado based in Punta Arenas the following radiogram: "it is impossible for me to express to you my deepest feeling of gratitude, for everything you have done for us. I'll write you. Shackleton." The admiral answered: "serve you to receive sincere congratulations for the happy result of the enterprise due entirely to your persistence and decided vigor. The Chilean navy has received the news of the British sailor's rescue as if it was about our own people. Muñoz Hurtado."

Sir Ernest Shackleton, meanwhile, was awarded by the Royal Geographic Society with the special gold medal, and granted similar tin models to several other members of his expedition. He was Knighted, on the occasion of the King's birthday and he was given an award in cash of 20.000 pounds that he gladly received.

In 1909 he published a work titled "the heart of the Antarctic" and in 1920 another one titled "South, the story of Shackleton's last expedition".

Deprived of money, with no job and with his dreams frustrated, Shackleton departed South again. In 1921, John Q. Rowett, an old and friendly college classmate in Dulwich, sponsored this new expedition, on the "Quest", a ship a little bit weedy. It wasn't clear what the intention of this expedition was, because the plans were going from circumnavigating the Antarctic to searching for captain Kidd's treasure. It didn't matter. What did matter to Sir Ernest was to come back to the South of the earth.

On January 4th, 1922, the "Quest" arrived at Grytviken, South Georgia Island; there, the Norwegian whalers warmly welcomed Shackleton. After a calm day on dry land, he came back to his ship to dine, gave the crew the "good nights", went to his cabin... and died;

The cause was a massive heart attack. He was 47 years old. He was followed by his inseparable Frank Wild.

When Emily Shackleton found out about her husband's death, she requested that he be buried in the South Georgia Island. His body still rests in the island's cemetery, among the whalers, that perhaps, were the only ones who appreciated the most of his achievements.