Endurance: *A glorious failure – The Imperial Transantarctic Expedition 1914 – 16*
By Alasdair McGregor

'Better a live donkey than a dead lion' was how Ernest Shackleton justified to his wife Emily the decision to turn back unrewarded from his attempt to reach the South Pole in January 1909. Shackleton and three starving, exhausted companions fell short of the greatest geographical prize of the era by just a hundred and sixty agonising kilometres, yet in defeat came a triumph of sorts. Shackleton's embrace of failure in exchange for a chance at survival has rightly been viewed as one of the greatest, and wisest, leadership decisions in the history of exploration.

Returning to England and a knighthood and fame, Shackleton was widely lauded for his achievement in almost reaching the pole, though to him such adulation only heightened his frustration. In late 1910 news broke that the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen would now vie with Shackleton's archrival Robert Falcon Scott in the race to be first at the pole. But rather than risk wearing the ill-fitting and forever constricting suit of the also-ran, Sir Ernest Shackleton then upped the ante, and in March 1911 announced in the London press that the crossing of the entire Antarctic continent *via* the South Pole would thereafter be *the* ultimate exploratory prize. The following December Amundsen triumphed, and just three months later, Robert Falcon Scott perished; his own glorious failure neatly tailored for an empire on the brink of war and searching for a propaganda hero. The field was now open for Shackleton to hatch a plan, and in December 1913 the grandiloquently titled Imperial Transantarctic Expedition was announced to the world.

Shackleton's plan was for two parties to work from opposite sides of the continent – one from the Weddell Sea, the other from the Ross Sea. The second party would lay depots of food and fuel for the other group who were to march across the entire frozen interior, via the pole – a distance of nearly 3,000 kilometres. Over the ensuing feverish months, funds were raised, two ships found, men recruited, and sledge dogs and mountains of provisions and equipment all hastily collected.

For his own ship Shackleton seized upon the Norwegian-built *Polaris*, a 350-ton brand-spanking new barquentine built for summer cruises in the Arctic. *Polaris* was undoubtedly strong, but with a V-shaped hull and steep sides she was likely to be

unsuited for the heavy pack ice of the Weddell Sea. Undeterred, Shackleton renamed her *Endurance* after the family motto *Fortitudine Vincimus* – 'By Endurance We Conquer'. Sir Douglas Mawson's old ship *Aurora* would transport the second party to the Ross Sea.

By early August 1914 the world was spiralling towards war and Shackleton placed his new ship and all her complement at the Admiralty's disposal. His offer was declined and *Endurance* eventually sailed from England on 8 August, four days after the general mobilisation.

The resilient, energetic and cocksure Australian photographer, Frank Hurley, joined the expedition in Buenos Aires. Still in his twenties, Hurley was already a polar veteran and had shown great resourcefulness and photographic skill as a member of Mawson's recent Australasian Antarctic Expedition. Over the ensuing two years, Hurley's methodically brilliant record of the fate of *Endurance* and the plight of Shackleton's party of 28 men would in time make him famous.

Endurance arrived at the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia in November 1914. There, the resident Norwegian whalers declared the pack ice further south the heaviest they had ever encountered and cautioned Shackleton against proceeding further that summer. But for Shackleton, the die had been cast. To retreat or stall was tantamount to defeat – the expedition must proceed!

When *Endurance* entered the pack ice of the Weddell Sea, the going was at first positive, but slow. Finally, in mid January 1915 a suitable landing site was found at Glacier Bay on the coast of Coats Land. But Shackleton wanted to push further south – every mile covered at sea was a mile less to travel overland. It was a decision he would forever regret.

By early February the expedition was going nowhere – at least of its own free will. With *Endurance* ensnared and helpless, Shackleton confided to his captain, Frank Worsley, that 'what the ice gets, the ice keeps'. In such a dire situation, the same qualities of leadership that had informed Shackleton's decision to pull back from the brink on his march to the South Pole now came to the fore. Never showing a hint of disappointment or the burden of defeat, his task through the perilous time ahead was to ensure the safe return to civilization of each and every one of his men.

Over the ensuing ten months *Endurance* was squeezed, pinched, twisted and tortured by the ice, crushed and summarily consigned to the depths of the Weddell Sea. From early November, Shackleton and his men then eked out an uncomfortable and tense existence camped on the floating ice. They slowly drifted north with the floes to a perilous rendezvous with open water, and amidst great jostling slabs of ice three boats were finally launched on 9 April. Their only hope now was to reach one of the outliers of the South Shetland chain of islands, tiny specks of land in a near infinity of ocean. A few miles astray in any direction and the South Atlantic would assuredly be the expedition's watery grave.

For six days the men rowed for their lives – six thirst-crazed, exhausting, freezing and frost-bitten days – until they finally reached land, unshifting land, their first solid footfall since leaving South Georgia sixteen months before.

Yet rather than salvation, glacier-shrouded Elephant Island offered only tenuous sanctuary, barely above the grab of the tide. There was no chance at all of being found in such a remote spot, and Shackleton concluded that their one hope lay in reaching South Georgia, approximately 1,500 kilometres to the north east. On Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, Shackleton and a crew of five that included skipper Frank Worsley, set sail for South Georgia in the *James Caird,* the largest of the boats. The remaining 22 men then hunkered down to a miserable existence never knowing if they would see Shackleton and the others again. Their ordeal came to a miraculous end on 30 August when Shackleton returned triumphantly with Worsley in the Chilean naval tug *Yelcho.* All were finally saved – their enduring faith in Shackleton's leadership had been vindicated.

To be able to return to Elephant Island on that fateful August day, Shackleton had had to complete modern day equivalents of the labours of Hercules. In what arguably ranks as the greatest ever feat of small boat seamanship, Shackleton and his crew firstly withstood seventeen days aboard the *James Caird* as she ploughed through gales and towering seas en route to South Georgia. But once on land the ordeal was far from over. Several Norwegian whaling stations were nestled into deep protective fjords on the north side of the island, but the *James Caird* had barely made it to the south coast. To reach help, Shackleton, together with Frank Worsley and Tom Crean, crossed the mountainous, and as yet unexplored, interior of South Georgia and after a continuous march of thirty-six

hours staggered into the whaling station at Stromness. Apart from fellow members of the expedition, they had not seen another human being in nearly eighteen months. Shackleton, Worsley and Crean were all but spent. A frustrated and increasingly desperate Shackleton then made three failed attempts before he was at last able to liberate the Elephant Islanders.

Throughout their ordeal each member of the expedition had strained every sinew to ensure his own survival and that of his fellows. They emerged from their ice-bound chrysalis to a world gone mad, where life was cheap and the battlefield fashioned dutifully dead heroes by the thousand. Tales of suffering were bitter daily fare. News of Shackleton's brilliant success in leading his men out of the wilderness served the propaganda mill for a while; but in the wake of the tsunami of total war the stirring tale of *Endurance* was – with perhaps the exception of Hurley's own retelling in 1919 – largely overwhelmed and at times almost forgotten. That is, until Shackleton himself was rediscovered and rebranded. Charismatic, handsome, impulsive, brave, and a survivor to boot, Sir Ernest Shackleton was a hero made for our own age and its adulation of celebrity.

In contrast to the drama of *Endurance*, with its cast of larger-than-life characters such as Shackleton and Hurley, the expedition's Ross Sea party (where three members died) is often afforded comparatively scant recognition. Lacking a stirring visual record even remotely equivalent to Hurley's, the fame of the Ross Sea saga remains muted, and the suffering of those willing foot soldiers on the other side of the continent is muffled. In comparison, there lies a perhaps unfortunate testament to Hurley's formidable documentary powers.

Today, Shackleton's fame is inextricably bound to Hurley's photographic legacy – an ironic touch considering the mistrust that existed between the two. Such is the strength of the visual image that the glorious failure that was the Imperial Transantarctic Expedition cannot now be imagined without reference to Hurley's heroic photographs. In its retelling the expedition simply could not exist without Hurley. His images are a profound essay in courage and forbearance and say much about the human spirit and our insatiable urge to explore. Therein lies their universal, and enduring, appeal.

In 2015 Aurora Expeditions continue centenary celebrations in recognition of the stirring deeds of Shackleton and his men. A number of our expeditions will retrace aspects of Shackleton's journey from South Georgia to Antarctica and return. We will regale you with stories, and bring the events of a hundred years ago to life through visits to key sites and through our specially curated floating exhibition of Frank Hurley's photographs. Visit www.auroraexpeditions.com.au or call 02 9252 1033.