

# Tough! The Shackelton Story

Toughness is an attitude of mind and heart that causes one to push forward despite pain, opposition, and adversity. So powerful is this force of will that the physical body rises to fulfill it notwithstanding its weakness. History honors the tough.

November 2, 1902, three men under the command of Robert Falcon Scott left McMurdo Sound and set out on foot for the South Pole intending to be the first to plant their nation's flag on the bottom of the earth. For the first month they had good weather and covered considerable distance across the desert of ice, but soon their pace slowed to a crawl. The deep powdery snow made going difficult and the sled dogs began to die off. Worse yet, the three began to show signs of the dread disease, scurvy. Notwithstanding their pain and weakness, they pushed on until they reached latitude 82 degrees 17 minutes south—farther than any man had ever ventured on the Antarctic continent. Finally, on December 31, 1902, Commander Scott gave the order to turn around and get back to the ship as quickly as possible. It would be a race for their lives. Supplies were low and their health was failing quickly, particularly, the junior officer of the expedition, 27-year-old Ernest Shackleton.

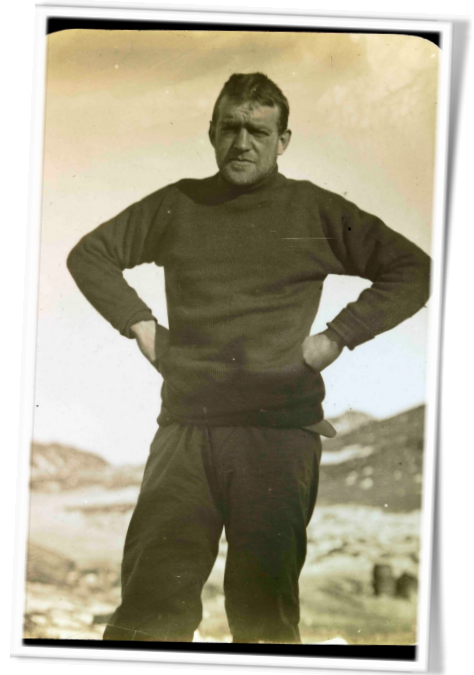
With the loss of the dogs the men were forced to pull the 500-pound sledges through sometimes knee or waist deep snow. January 10, a blizzard blew up and forced the men into their tent. "Wilson and I are very much done," Scott wrote, "but Shackleton is a good deal worse, I think." The blizzard worsened Shackleton's condition causing him to cough relentlessly and gasp for air in a desperate struggle to breathe. When the journey resumed three days later however, Shackleton crawled out of the tent and took his place in the harness. Two days later, coughing up blood, his gums dark with the scurvy and his strength so spent he could scarcely stand, Shackleton was forbidden to pull the sledges, as "the



least exertion [made] him breathless." Another blizzard struck on January 28. Shackleton lay in his sleeping bag, worse than before, coughing, gasping, and passing in and out of consciousness. In one lucid moment, Shackleton overheard Wilson tell Scott he did not expect him to make it through the night. The comment irritated Shackleton making him even more determined to live and go on. The next morning "weak and speechless," Shackleton crawled dizzily out of the tent, strapped on his skis and took the lead in the march north. Somehow, perhaps sheer force of will, he kept up and they made it to safety.

Ernest Shackleton tried twice to reach the South Pole and both times could not make it. In 1914, he set out to walk 1500 miles across the Antarctic continent but was again defeated by the vagaries of weather. Then in 1921, he set out again, this time on the ship *Quest*, to circumnavigate the South Polar continent, He never made it. January 5, 1922, he died of a weak heart at the age of 47. He was laid to rest on the island of South Georgia.

It is an irony to say that Sir Ernest Shackleton had a weak heart. Though he failed four times in his great polar quest, the man became a legend because of the indomitable power of his heart. He refused to quit or give up on himself or his men. By the power of his will, the cheer of his soul, and the strength of his leadership Ernest Shackleton remains to this day, a hero larger than life.



It is time to remind us-a coddled generation to get up, toughen up, push on, and get the job done.

Sources: Beau Riffenburgh, *Shackleton's Forgotten Expedition: The Voyage of the Nimrod*, (2004) pages 5-14.

K.M. Kostyal, *Trial by Ice: A Photobiography of Sir Ernest Shackleton* (1999) pages 20-23.

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