

When I first started to take an interest in Shackleton's 1914 Endurance expedition I knew a little (not much) of the extraordinary journey across a frozen sea after his ship became trapped and was eventually crushed by the pack ice, and the struggle to bring each of the twenty eight man expedition back alive ironically in the same year that hundreds of thousands of their countrymen were being slaughtered on the battlefields of France. However as I began to look beyond the august biographies and the newspaper records into the diaries, letters and family papers a more complex picture began to emerge and it was one which in part I felt I recognised.

The multi element DVD has given us a surfeit of directors, actors and writers explaining how moved they were by their material, the struggle of the shooting and the privilege of working with their fellow artists, however they seldom refer to the mix of panic, luck, mendacity and desperation that precedes the act of spending large sums of someone else's money on something that exists only in your imagination. The panic and desperation to which I refer is part of the process of persuading that 'someone', or more often several 'someone's', to put up finance for the project. Struggling to convey the images in your head, being rebuffed, trying again somewhere else, listening politely to suggestions, simultaneously keeping your eye at the on rival projects, the weather, the stock market and so on. The reason that this part of the journey is seldom referred to is that it is eventually forgotten on the battlefield of the actual production process. However the moment of ignition, the actual start of filming, when finally the script is agreed and the budget signed, the actors cast and the sets at least half built, is often almost an anti climax after the events that have gone before – like reaching the top of a helter skelter exhausted and out of breath. This feeling, it is true lasts for a few moments before new terrors arise but I think Shackleton must have felt something similar as his ship, the Endurance slipped anchor from Buenos Aires at the end of October 1914, heading finally for the South Pole. The journey behind him was in some ways as exhausting as the one that lay ahead.

A few weeks earlier the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria had made a European War inevitable. In Germany, Russia and England military forces prepared for mobilization. Shackleton had been fighting for nearly a year to secure finance for what he felt was inevitably his final Antarctic expedition, he was forty years old and was unlikely to get the chance to mount another. He had little backing from official sources, a government grant if he could find matching funds and £1000 from the Royal Geographical Society who stipulated that he should only actually receive half that amount. The remainder of the seventy thousand pound budget had to be raised from private sponsors but until late June this money amounted to barely half what he was required and as the prospect of War came closer his chances of leaving in time to reach the Pole during the Antarctic summer

months seemed to be getting increasingly remote. His financial reputation was not enhanced by the fact that his younger brother Frank, declared bankrupt in 1911 with debts of over £80,000, was accused of embezzlement and sentenced in 1913 to eighteen months hard labor. One of Frank's particular skills that emerged in court was his ability to charm large sums of money out of elderly ladies for use in his business speculation, it was an ability uncomfortably close to Ernest's own fundraising skills and although he was not connected with Frank's trial one of his brother's creditors was to pursue him through the courts in an effort to get her money back.

Alongside the money raising efforts he was also trying to 'cast' the expedition. He wanted to sell the photographic and film rights to a newspaper, The Daily Chronicle but he needed to attract a 'star' photographer. The most promising candidate was a young Australian photographer Frank Hurley whose Antarctic film 'Home of The Blizzard' had been a great success both in London and Sydney. According to his biography Hurley claims he was deep in the Australian bush making a documentary about tribal life when an Aboriginal messenger following his tire tracks for a hundred miles produced a letter from a forked message stick carrying Shackleton's summons. At the same time news of the expedition had prompted an astonishing five thousand applications which were duly sorted into three piles labeled, 'Mad', 'Hopeless' and 'Possible'. Finally the members of the expedition were selected and a last minute donation of £24,000 from Scottish Jute millionaire Sir James Caird at the end of June allowed the expedition ship, the Endurance to leave England on August 1st, the week the First World War was declared, bound for Buenos Aires.

There had been a last minute panic when three members of the expedition left to join their regiments and had to be replaced and Shackleton placed the remainder of the expedition at the disposal of the war effort but was instructed by Winston Churchill, then the First Lord of the Admiralty in a one word telegram to: 'Proceed'. So the ship and its crew did but Shackleton remained behind to make final arrangements intending to depart five weeks later with sixty nine expedition dogs and his second in command Frank Wild, on the cruise ship La Negra and meet up with the expedition in South America.

The papers announced this actual departure on September 19th and indeed Wild and the dogs left that day, Shackleton however did not. At the last minute he learned that his younger brother was being unexpectedly released from prison. Shackleton went to see him and organized a job for him with a business associate although he suggested that his brother work under an assumed name. In the same week, as became clear from subsequent letters, his marriage was under considerable strain, not least because in addition to leaving his wife Emily and three young children behind in England he was also leaving his American mistress the self styled Lady Rosalind Chetwynd.

Rosalind, the beautiful daughter of a rich New York Lawyer had divorced her English husband when she was twenty four and become the mistress of diamond tycoon Jack Barnato Joel. Joel bought her a house in Park Lane that happened to be next door but one to Frank Shackleton's apartment and she was thus introduced to his explorer brother and their relationship began. Despite her wealth and comfortable position Rosalind now aged thirty was studying for a career on the stage encouraged in this ambition by Shackleton. She was to make her debut at the Empire Theatre in Penge in 1915 by which time Shackleton was firmly locked in the pack ice of the Weddel Sea. Thus it was seven days later on September 26th that Shackleton actually left England, travelling alone to Buenos Aires to meet up with the expedition knowing that he would have to leave South America before the end of October if he was to stand any chance of reaching the Pole that year.

Nor was his arrival in Buenos Aires as peaceful as he might have anticipated, the Endurance had had a difficult voyage and to reach South America on time had been forced to burn the expedition dog kennels when she ran out of fuel. Three members of the sailing crew were dismissed when Shackleton arrived, including a vital member of the team, the cook. New men had to be found and the ship provisioned, it became clear that despite all his fundraising efforts money was still very tight. With reports of German battleships not far away Shackleton was eager to leave and after writing a long and apologetic letter to his wife Emily he finally set sail with an expedition of twenty seven men. In fact there were twenty eight men on the ship but he was not aware at the time of departure that a nineteen year old welsh boy, Perce Blackborow had smuggled himself aboard. His discovery, by a furious Shackleton, completed the crew of who on the seventh of December 1914 reached the edge of the South Polar pack ice.

On May the 27th of this year I found myself staring at pack ice, I was in the North rather than the South and I was on a 7,000 ton Norwegian icebreaker with ninety four actors and technicians ready to recreate Shackleton's expedition. We found that we were doing this rather more accurately than we had intended when our ship became stuck in the ice within hours of arrival. Shackleton at least managed to make his way through eight hundred miles before getting trapped. Our journey to the ice had not been quite as hectic as Shackleton's, there were no imprisoned brothers or titled American mistresses, however I did keep a diary and looking back through some of the melodramas now forgotten there is a shiver of recognition.

I am not a diarist and never kept one even as a schoolboy but so much of my understanding of the expedition and therefore the script was based on reading the diaries that Shackleton insisted that the men keep (it was part of their contract and they belonged to "The Boss") that it seemed somehow right that I should try and keep one and indeed that I should persuade other

members of the cast and crew to do the same. Flicking through the pages some of the crisis return. There was the Russian Icebreaker that for a while seemed to be our only affordable transport and accommodation. We were prepared for Spartan accommodation but if you can envisage a blackened hulk whose metal interior resembled a 1950's borstal that had been ritually trashed by English football fans you will get the idea. Producer Selwyn Roberts visited it in Archangel where it was frozen into the harbor. We tried to add music and commentary to the video he brought back in an effort to make it something we could present to the crew as a viable way of living but to no avail. The video did come in use later on when it could be used to nip fluttering of complaints on the ice with a vivid picture of the circumstances we might have had to endure had we not finally chosen the Norwegian Ship Polar Bird.

Much of the diary is filled with the problems of recreating Shackleton's ship the 'Endurance' which was to prove one of the great challenges of the film. The 'Endurance' was a barquentine and we had worked on 'Longitude' with a 'barquentine' called the Kaskalot in Cornwall. Coincidentally the Kaskalot was ice strengthened and had done time as a Greenland supply ship. She seemed ideal but in fact her deck looked nothing like the Endurance. Production Designer Michael Howells went down to Cornwall and examined her in detail and came up with a masterly construction solution which involved creating a scaffolding substructure carrying a whole new deck and cabin area. This transformed the Kaskalot into the Endurance but the problem was how to get the ship to the ice. It was feared that it would not be possible to make the 18 day journey to Iceland with the 'set' on. Thus the ship would have to travel up in advance with the set pack stored. Construction men would have to fly in build the set and then come back to England. All of this meant that the scenes where Endurance was supposed to be leaving England could not be shot as the Kaskalot would have to set sail before filming began to be ready in time for the ice.

This problem was to run and run throughout the shoot but was eclipsed by the American Actor's strike in the diary. SAG the US actor's union was planning a strike starting in June this year, two of our leading cast members were both Equity and SAG members and it seemed likely that they would be asked to cease working on that date. We started an urgent dialogue with both the English and the US unions, and while Equity was very helpful, SAG not surprisingly had other issue on their mind. Our insurers were starting to mutter and the production appeared to be in serious jeopardy until at the last minute we secured a letter from the American Union stating that not only could our cast work despite the strike but wishing them good luck as well. In the event of course the strike was averted and the problem would not have arise but that was little comfort at the time.

And on an on the dance went until we too were finally staring at the ice in

May and like Shackleton had to get on with it. We managed to free our ship and in one way or another make the film we had intended. We learned as the 1914 expedition also learned that nothing with ice is quite as you expect and yet we also began to get a glimpse of the powerful magic the drew men like Shackleton back to the Pole again and again. Usually when you make a film you are in some way necessarily pantomiming the real event. One does not expect to find the enemy in a battle scene firing back with real bullets. Out on the ice however in a very real way the cast and crew had a taste of some, although thankfully not all, of the real dangers that the expedition faced and it gave us an opportunity to respect in a more powerful way the achievements of those twenty eight men in 1914.

AND IF YOUR NOT TOO EXHAUSTED....

It is Saturday May 27th 2001, and I am stuck in a frozen sea twenty three miles from the east coast of Greenland on a Norwegian Icebreaker, the Polar Bird. Ice breaking is apparently not currently possible the Captain informs me because the ice is too thick, we can move neither forwards or backwards. On board are a company of a hundred actors, and technicians preparing to make an epic film of Ernest Shackleton's Endurance expedition. This is our first scheduled day to shoot on the Polar ice and barely forty eight hours out of Reykjavik in Iceland we have literally ground to a halt.

The plan had been to break through the ice and drop a small group of the cast and crew on mainland Greenland to film a mountain climbing sequence while the Polar Bird returned to meet the 'Kaskalot' (the sailing ship playing the Endurance in the film) and escort her through the ice to start filming this epic story about a ship trapped in the ice. However as we stood on deck staring out at the vast frozen jigsaw in which we were marooned there was little time to enjoy the irony of our situation, the Kaskalot was on her way and it was clear that if a 7,000 ton steel ship could not negotiate the pack ice there was little chance that a 150ft wooden one would be able to.

By it's nature Arctic ice is a temporary phenomenon forming during the darkness of the winter months and disappearing again with the approach of summer. When I had made my first trip to Greenland with Producer Selwyn Roberts the previous November, there had been no ice. The landing strip at Kulusuk airport has resembled a barren Scottish hillside with only a few stranded icebergs in a nearby fjord to indicate the difference. However even on this first trip we learned what was to be a repeated lesson on the unpredictability of life in the Arctic, as first snow of winter began to fall and the airport was closed down for three days, leaving us stranded. We also realised that it would be impossible for us to house a film crew in the local hotel, not only because it was not big enough but also because it would be impossible to transport crew and equipment from the mainland to the ice as

the higher temperatures contained in the land mass created a ring of unstable melted ice separating it from the sea ice. Hence the decision that we would have to live and work on a ship operating inside the pack ice rather than the more dangerous edges.

Four months later in March of this year we returned with key members of the crew and also with the actor who was to play Shackleton, Kenneth Branagh. I believed it was important that he should have some idea of the conditions we were going to work in, and he was eager to see the ice for himself. We did not however have a ship at this stage and were confined to the small hotel in the neighboring village of Angmasslik (pop 1200). The mainland was now covered in deep snow and where we had stood and looked out at the sea, there was now hundreds of miles of frozen ice. It was however as predicted not that easy to get onto it. There were only two small helicopters available but they also comprised the only mode of transport and supply for the various small communities on this side of the vast island and they were not easily available despite protracted negotiations.

In the event the crew and Ken got to stand for only a few minutes on the pack ice. We stepped gingerly out of the helicopter and stood on a piece of ice about the size of a school football pitch. Already this far South the ice was starting to break up and we were four months away from our actual shooting period. The day before I had, as a favor, been flown 100 mile north of Angmasslik on a fuel run. Landing in a deserted weather station I was handed a pump action shot gun by my Danish pilot and told to stand guard against Polar bears while he refueled a second machine which was due to fly on further North. The Polar Bears did not have much to fear with me on guard but fortunately they did not put this to the test. The temperature was minus eighteen degrees and the sea ice was literally as solid as rock under my feet stretching out as far as the eye could see in every direction. It seemed that I had at last found a safe surface to work on, and not suspecting that I was never to see ice like it again we left the country with these two brief experiences to prepare us for the shoot that was to come.

Our initial intention had originally been to shoot in early April when we felt there would be enough daylight but the ice would still be solid, however the 'Kaskalot' (our Endurance) wanted to arrive as late as possible in the Spring fearing that it might come closer than necessary to replicating the fate of Shackleton's ship. We settled on late April but in the event our mothership the 'Polar Bird' was delayed in the South Pole where it worked for the Australian Government delivering supplies and scientists to South Polar research stations. This delay meant that in England where we had already started to shoot the opening sequences of the film we were forced to scrape together extra scenes to shoot in order to fill up our time. Thus it was finally in late May that we returned with the full crew and cast to start work on the ice. Then stranded on the first day we faced the conundrum that the ice was

too solid for us to move through and at the same time was very fragmented because this late in the season it had started to break up on its journey South.

Normally on any film location there is someone who has been there before you, someone to point towards the best path up the mountain to warn where the waterfall is and what weather to expect. This is not the case on pack ice, no one lives on it and it is constantly reconstructing itself on an hourly basis, freezing and thawing and refreezing. Our researches and reces had left us with three absolute pieces of information gleaned after meeting with everyone we could find from Inuit Fishermen to Satellite photography analysts. Rule one was to stay away from the Sea edge of the ice, as the interface between ocean and ice pack was the most dangerous place and the one where a ship was most likely to be driven and potentially smashed against the ice. Rule Two drummed into us by endless experts was not to get in or indeed near the water, any one falling in would have about eighty seconds before they lost consciousness, a heavy rubber survival suit might add a minute or two more to this equation, but a capsized boat for example would lead almost instantly to a lethal situation. The final rule, was one that we had learnt on the reces, and this was that it was impossible to rely on helicopter transport. The rapidly changing weather conditions particularly snow and mist would quickly render them helpless and would risk leaving men and equipment stranded.

As we looked out that Saturday at the end of May however these precepts seemed of little use. We were unable to get anywhere near the mainland mountain which we had planned to start filming on and with our 'Endurance' still two days sailing away we were stuck in the very place that we had been told to avoid. The outer edge where the ice met the ocean. A hurried council was called with our team of safety experts, a short helicopter trip made by myself and the ship's Captain confirmed that the ice conditions around us were pretty uniform, it was packed tight but broken into relatively small pieces, mostly around forty or fifty foot square. Because we were close to the sea edge these would rise up and down in the swell, grating and clunking against each other.

This was a working day and I was very conscious that our budget would not allow us to extend our planned shooting days on the ice and that the normal pressures of money and time had created a schedule in which we had to complete three or four scenes every day to achieve our film. That afternoon the safety team went out onto a medium sized ice floe, sixty feet by forty. Using poles they paced out the ice marking with tape any area or edge that appeared unsafe. When they and the ship's captain were happy that the area was workable on, albeit far from ideal, we started the process of winching the actors and crew three at a time down onto the ice so that they could all get a feel for the surface. Inevitably we were all both nervous and at the

same time excited.

The crew were mostly wearing garish Orange weather gear which the company had provided and looked like a demented Tango commercial. Ken was in the first party of actors to step onto the surface, he was wearing Shackleton's pale Green Burberry and for the first time we saw one of the pictures that we had traveled so far to create and everyone was quietly thrilled to see the rightness of it. By three in the afternoon everyone had tried the surface and it was time to work.

I had selected a small scene to start with, early in the journey when a group of expedition members are playing the banjo to the mild amazement of a group of watching penguins. We had no ship to put in the background (it had not arrived), nor did we have any penguins (there are none in the Arctic) so these would have to be added later. However we did have a banjo and despite the computer trickery that was used in the final images of the scene to add those missing elements I don't think any of us had experienced a moment in our professional lives where the situation we were depicting was so close to the one we were actually in as we stared at our stricken ship and wondered what was going to happen next.

The days that followed were to prove hardly less surprising than this our first on the ice. We seldom knew more than a few hours in advance what scene it would be practical to do next, and inevitably our three 'rules' did not survive. On the next day lacking a stable ice surface and a sailing ship we resorted to shooting scenes from the open boat journey to Elephant Island, scenes that had been intended for the warmer waters of Yorkshire or Cornwall were suddenly set against an epic background of moving ice. As the sun set that evening the helicopter was skimming over the ice shooting all twenty eight of the cast in the three small wooden boats rowing for their lives, as brilliant streaks of orange light shot out across the water.

By the time we finally made it to the mountains to shoot the final sequences of the film the carefully chosen locations, all accessible by skidoo and snow tractor, were bereft of snow. There was no alternative but to trust to the helicopters and move up towards the glaciers and mountain tops. The circumstances were hazardous and unpredictable, it took six helicopter journeys top get us all up and the same to get us down in the few short hours between morning mist and evening snow, but we got to places we would not have dared to consider on those early recesses.

If you look carefully at the final shot of the trip, a close up of Ken leaning forward to catch his breath at the top of a mountain, you may notice his hair is fluttering in what one might assume was a mountain breeze. In fact the helicopter blades are spinning feet from the camera and both Producer and Assistant director are yelling over the screaming engines that we have to get

off the mountain now and that filming must stop. All but the camera crew and last of the actors have already been flown down and seconds later Ken too is being lifted up into the air. It will take another three trips to get the last of us and the camera equipment off the mountain and in the silence that follows we have a few moments to consider the extraordinary privilege of the way we earn our living.

I have never been anywhere more unexpectedly beautiful and more incredibly unpredictable. The sun set at midnight every night and rose again some twenty minutes later on a landscape that reinvented itself almost hourly as iceberg jostled floe in an endlessly reconfigured jigsaw. Every film is in some way an adventure but few offer such extraordinary opportunities as this particular one and we learnt on a daily basis to understand and respect the extraordinary achievement of the men whose story we were telling.