

TOM CREAN (1877-1938)

When eighteen-year-old Tom Crean told his mother that he was going to join the Royal British Navy, she gave him a scapula with its blessing that its wearer would not suffer eternal fire. Tom wore the scapula for the rest of his adventurous life, a life which placed this Irish lad in the top echelon of Arctic explorers.

Tom Crean's early life was the life of an Irish farm lad born in 1877 on the Dingle Peninsula. He was one of nine children, one brother dying in Ireland's War of Independence in 1920. Tom's enlistment in the Royal Navy in 1893 was motivated by a young man's desire for adventure and excitement. Neither he nor the Navy at the time knew that what awaited them was Britain's Heroic Age of Arctic Exploration which began after Queen Victoria's death in 1901 after sixty-three years on the throne. Tom's enlistment, in time, brought him into the orbit of the great Arctic explorers, Robert Scott and Ernest Shackleton and into Buckingham Palace for awards ceremonies.

Tom's Navy experience was standard Navy training: Boy second class; Boy first class; Ordinary Seaman; Able Seaman. By 1899, Tom was Petty Officer second class and assigned to the *Ringarooma*, a torpedo boat that patrolled Australian and New Zealand waters. This Irish lad was now close to the mysterious and formidable South Pole and at the beginning of his adventures on the Antarctic Continent.

Many intrepid sailors took chances on Antarctica. They named places on the continent like the Ross Sea and the Weddell Sea, the volcano Mt. Erebus and other geographic places. But Antarctica was a dangerously unknown land. The coldest temperature on Earth (-129.3 F) was recorded on Antarctica. Winds of 200mph are known there; full sun and full night for months at a time demand that visitors be indefatigable, strong, dependable, team oriented, and self-motivated. In other words, visitors to Antarctica had to be like the Kerryman, Tom Crean.

Crean's assignment to Australian-New Zealand waters led to a chance encounter that began his career as one of the greatest characters in the history of polar exploration. The crew of his vessel *Ringarooma* was assigned to assist in preparing polar explorer Robert Scott's *Discovery* for the British National Expedition of 1901-04. Scott had been assigned to lead the expedition to the Earth's coldest and most inhospitable environment, a place visited only by penguins, seals and whales. In his book *The Voyage of the Discovery*, Scott told the world about the *Discovery's* epic adventure to Antarctica and cemented Scott's place in the history of Arctic exploration along with Roald Amundsen and Robert Peary. Tom Crean contributed greatly to this legend in the making.

On December 10, 1901, Crean was transferred from *Ringarooma* to *Discovery* to replace a discharged sailor. The unsung hero's place in Arctic exploration was set to begin. Refueling in Lyttleton, NZ, *Discovery* was the subject of festivities including a Bishop's blessing and crowds of well-wishers but, sadly, a crew member died from a fall, reminding the crew and well-wishers of the dangers that lie ahead.

On Christmas Day 1901, *Discovery* moved slowly south from New Zealand, more than sixty years after the last British expedition to the Antarctic. The overladen *Discovery*, with a deck unbalanced by heaps of coal, provisions, sheep and dogs, safely crossed the stormy Southern Ocean, the most ferocious stretch of water on Earth, to sight its first ice berg on January 2, 1902, before it crossed the Arctic Circle and sailed to its first sighting of Antarctica on January 8, 1902.

Scott's officers were daily on the lookout for a suitable mooring for winter quarters. Always a willing adventurer, Tom Crean was in the first party to search inland for a promising site for wintering quarters. Scott's original plan was to return to New Zealand for the winter, leaving a landing party to prepare for expeditions to start in Antarctic spring. In a change of plan, Scott decided to allow the *Discovery* to be iced in for the winter, expecting the vessel to be freed by spring and summer. He was wrong. It was two years before the *Discovery* was free from the ice, leaving Antarctica on February 19, 1904.

The crew lived on the *Discovery* during those two years rather than in a hut on the ice. Crean was popular among his crew mates as a man of wit and as an adaptable, eager and quick learning worker. Crean was chosen to be a part of the first group to explore the ice in which the ship was frozen. He became good at man-hauling the sledges used to carry men and material. "Man-hauling" was the use of men to physically pull the sledges across the ice. Dog sleds were a later innovation. Crean logged more days in the sledging harness than seven of the forty-eight-man team. Tom Crean was early on earning his reputation as one of the greatest characters in the history of polar exploration. Scurvy was one of the many obstacles Crean and the crew had to confront. Sailors on long voyages with limited diets suffered from a lack of vitamin C. The Arctic sources of fresh meat were seals, whales and penguins, unappealing to the men and not a good source of vitamin C. Enduring a limited diet, Tom and his crew man-hauled sledges weighing 700-800



pounds in intense cold, facing frost bite, blizzards, hurricane winds, snow blindness and unseen crevasses. Amundsen, the Norwegian explorer, proved that dog sleds covered more territory in a quicker time and saved the strength of the crew. Crean's crew, unfortunately, used the outmoded man-hauling technique to help create depots on the Ice Barrier as relief locations for future expeditions. Crean's sledges always flew an Irish flag.

Crean's service in Antarctica was, in Scott's words, "specially commended for continuous conduct and meritorious service throughout the period of the Antarctic Expedition 1901 – 1904. He and his crew mates received the Antarctic Medal and the Royal Geographic Society Medal." Crean was promoted to Petty Officer 1st Class. Scott sought out Crean to be on the crew of the vessel he commanded in England's Atlantic Fleet. Clearly, Scott was preparing for another expedition to the Arctic and Crean was a part of his plan. Scott's competitiveness included a desire to be the first to reach the South Pole. When former crewmate and rival Ernest Shackleton, of County Kildare, came close to the South Pole in 1909, Scott accelerated his plans for an Antarctic expedition, sadly an expedition from which he would not return.

In April 1910, after Scott secured the funding to buy the *Terra Nova*, the vessel for the expedition, and took on the indispensable Tom Crean as a Petty Officer along with veterans E.R.G. Evans and William Lashly, whose lives ultimately would be saved by Crean, Scott made final preparations for his next journey to the forbidden continent. Having learned lessons from the *Discovery*, Scott brought along Siberian ponies, dogs, motor driven tractors, and a ski instructor. *Terra Nova* set sail from its mooring on the Thames on June 1, 1910. Reaching Melbourne, Scott learned that the greatest Arctic explorer, Roald Amundsen, was also sailing to Antarctica. Thwarted by Admiral Peary and Captain James Cook who both claimed to be the first to the North Pole, the competitive Amundsen set out to be the first to the South Pole. Let the race begin!

Scott settled *Terra Nova* for the winter on January 4, 1910 in McMurdo Sound near where *Discovery* was iced-in for two years. Crean, as usual, had a major role in establishing the winter quarters, his pony ferrying 1100 lbs of supplies to the supply depot. One of the tractors plunged through the ice, further proof of the dangers of Arctic expeditions. Oddly, one of the English scientific expeditions met Amundsen's vessel *Fram* on the ice, and shared lunch together in the middle of nowhere! Scott's people established their depots to be available to the parties returning from the Pole in 1912. Crean led his pony Blossom in January 1911 to establish the One Ton Depot, performing at that time one of his many rescue missions aiding one of the scientists with an injured leg to return him to the base. Another of Crean's heroic rescue missions required him to jump from ice floe to ice floe to reach solid ice to alert Scott to the plight of two crew members less able than Crean to deal with the hazards of moving ice and killer whales. Unknown to Scott, Amundsen's expedition had placed the Norwegian closer to the South Pole. Scott sent *Terra Nova* out to sea to avoid being iced in while his crew would winter on land to accommodate Scott's desire to reach the South Pole before Amundsen. The assault on the Pole would mean an almost 1800-mile round trip, walking every mile and man-hauling the supplies. Scott chose three stalwarts to be the sledge party leaders, Crean being one of them. The South Pole party started on November 1, 1911.

Scott announced on January 3, 1912 the names of the men who would accompany him on the final one hundred fifty miles of the trip to the true Pole. Tom Crean was not selected. Sadly, Scott and those he selected would never return from their journey. Crean and his three-man team's seven hundred fifty-mile journey to home base required man-hauling four-hundred-pound sledges in featureless Arctic terrain in temperatures of -20 degrees or less. While Crean and team struggled to base, Scott reached the South Pole on January 17, 1912 only to find that Amundsen had

beaten him by a month. The three men with Crean were praised by E.G.R. Evans in his book *South with Scott* as men with "Hearts of Lions" and Crean as "imperturbable."

Unknown to the three, one of Scott's crew, Taff Evans, died on the journey from the Pole. Crean's team thought they would lose their crew mate, E.R.G. Evans, as they were within thirty-five miles of their base, Hut Point. Crean volunteered to go alone to Hut Point to bring back help for Evans. Crean walked the thirty-five miles in eighteen hours, greeted at Hut Point with a hot toddy and a bowl of porridge. In his book *South with Scott*, Evans wrote, "Without Tom Crean's heroic rescue, Lashly and I would not have survived." Dr. Atkinson took two dog teams the thirty-five miles to bring Evans and Lashly to safety at Hut Point.

The tragedy of Scott's Polar team was written on the faces of Crean and the survivors in the effects of scurvy, hunger and exhaustion. Scott's team reached the South Pole only to plant the Union Jack next to the Norwegian flag. One by one, Scott's men succumbed to Antarctica, Scott leaving his last message on March 29, 1912: "For God's sake look after our people." At the end of March 1912, Dr. Atkinson was chosen to replace Scott. He sent a team on a futile search for a missing six-man team, Crean almost losing his life twice when he broke through the ice into the freezing water. Other heroes rescued Crean and he and twenty-one survivors left Antarctica on the *Terra Nova* for New Zealand on January 1913.

The Polar explorers were honored at Buckingham Palace in 1913 with the Polar Medal from King George V with Tom Crean also being awarded the Albert Medal, the highest recognition for gallantry for saving the life of Teddy Evans.

Looking to retire from his twenty-year career in the Royal Navy and to open a pub back home in Kerry, Tom Crean's Polar experience had made him a man Ernest Shackleton had to have on the crew he was assembling for another voyage to Antarctica. Shackleton's plan was to walk 1800 miles across the Antarctic continent, coast to coast! Shackleton placed this advertisement:

**MEN WANTED FOR HAZARDOUS JOURNEY.
SMALL WAGES, BITTER COLD,
LONG MONTHS OF COMPLETE DARKNESS,
CONSTANT DANGER, SAFE RETURN DOUBTFUL.
HONOUR AND RECOGNITION IN CASE OF SUCCESS.**

Crean, of course, had to sign on, one of 5000 applicants including three women! The plan was to drop off a selected group of men that would advance nine hundred miles to the South Pole, Crean being one of the six men chosen. Another team would walk nine hundred miles to lay down a supply line of fuel and food for the last leg of the journey. Having learned a lesson from Amundsen, Shackleton brought sled dogs and skis.

Scapula still around his neck, Crean and the crew left on their dangerous journey when the European continent was about to start its WW I, August 1914. By January, their ship the *Endurance* was encased in ice, reminding the veteran sailors of the *Discovery's* being icebound for two years. Shackleton wisely ordered "abandon ship," choosing life on an ice floe three hundred miles from terra firma.

Endurance, crushed by the ice, sank. The twenty-eight men from *Endurance* planned to survive by discarding anything they regarded as inessential. On the ice were thrown gold watches, gold coins, a Bible signed by Queen Victoria, but Tom's scapula remained around his neck. Even three puppies and a cat were shot. Open water was to be their escape to safety. Nature sent the men a northerly wind that moved the ice floe in a favorable direction to bring the men to land. Was the scapula's power a factor?

The crew, having drifted two thousand miles during their journey from the *Endurance*, now sought a safe place to dock their three lifeboats which they had saved from *Endurance*. Elephant Island was their island of hope, one hundred miles away. Tom Crean was the skipper of the smallest of the three crafts. Shackleton appointed Crean to find an entry to firm ground on Elephant Island. He did find an entry to land and twenty-eight crewmates were saved. The Kerryman Tom Crean was gaining a reputation as the "can do" guy.

Knowing that Elephant Island was only a stop on the journey to safety, Shackleton at once organized a rescue mission to South Georgia Island, 800 miles away. Twenty-two men would wait for rescue on Elephant Island while Shackleton and five sailors, Crean, of course among them, would attempt to cross the world's most dangerous sea to South Georgia Island. They set out on Monday, April 14, 1916, the day of Ireland's most audacious attempt to achieve independence, Easter Monday!

After seventeen days of battling gigantic waves, hurricane force winds and a brackish water supply contaminated by sea salt, the six survivors walked on solid ground on South Georgia Island, and celebrated with a meal of warm albatross meat. Such was life in Antarctica! Shackleton immediately set out to plan a rescue mission to Elephant Island to rescue the twenty-two. Shackleton chose, of course, Crean along with Frank Worsley, a navigator, to trek with him across the mountainous South Georgia Island to reach a whaling station, thirty miles distant, to secure a vessel for the rescue mission. Shackleton arranged for the whaler Southern Sky to sail to Elephant Island to bring the crewmen back to base. Unsurprisingly, the ice pack thwarted the rescue attempt and the ice pack stopped other efforts to bring the men to safety. In fact, it was four and a half months' worth of effort until the men were rescued from Elephant Island. Crean was part of the successful rescue. Was the scapula's power a factor?

Finally, the Chilean whaler Yelcho was able to reach the twenty-two men. Only upon rescue did they find that they had a war to fight, their country engaged in the war on the European continent! The Heroic Age of Polar Exploration was over. Tom, too, remained in the Royal Navy until war's end, never seeing any of the worst of it.

Tom Crean was medically discharged from the Navy (eye injury) in March 1920. Now Tom had time for a family, marrying a local woman, Eileen Herlihy, in 1917. Ireland's turbulence, sadly, touched the Creans, Tom losing a brother in the War of Independence, and Tom and Eileen always believing that an encounter with Black and Tans damaged one of their three daughters, leaving her permanently disabled. Tom bought the pub in Anascaul that he hoped for, naming it, appropriately, the South Pole Inn, and happily giving his wife Eileen, daughter of a publican, free rein with the management of the pub.

Tom's name is immortalized on Crean Glacier on South Georgia Island and on Mount Crean on Antarctica. The Marine Institute recently named its research vessel the *RV Tom Crean*. "Home is the Sailor. Home from the Sea" is engraved on Tom Crean's tombstone, below which he rests, scapula still around his neck.



(Written by John Walsh)

WE MOURN

**We have lost seven faithful members.
They had retained their connection to Ireland
Through their membership in our society.
We are the less owing to their loss.**

May they rest in peace.

**JACK O'CONNOR EILEEN DE BANY ED KILKELLY
JOHN SEARING BILL HAYDEN JACK DURKIN JUDITH REGAN**