

Maurice Cutler

Antarctica's Forgotten Heroes



Following a warm introduction by Geoff McWilliam, Maurice Cutler proceeded to give us an informative and memorable talk highlighting examples of:

- Extraordinary personal endurance
- Brave, exemplary leadership
- Important Australian participation, some not widely recognised

Maurice's talk focused on exploration of the Ross Sea (south of New Zealand), the Victoria Land coast, The Ross Ice Shelf and the South Pole. He had worked as a Journalist in these areas on two Antarctic expeditions in the 1950's.

To give us a sense of the extreme conditions prevailing on the Ross Ice Shelf which is a floating body of ice about the size of France with ice cliffs as high as 75 metres. Maurice spoke of the final expedition of Captain Robert Scott, a renowned Antarctic explorer who, with his two companions, expired in their tent on the Ross Ice Shelf and are now preserved, frozen within the ice.

Maurice subsequently commented that:

James Cook, surprisingly, was the first Antarctic explorer in 1773 in the small ships Resolution and Adventure. He crossed the Antarctic Circle twice and, unknowingly, circumnavigated the Antarctic continent which was covered in pack ice. A more definitive view of the Antarctic continent was obtained in 1840 through the voyages of Captain James Clark Ross who had previously discovered the magnetic North Pole and calculated that he got to within 1300 kms of the magnetic South Pole. (Both Poles move over time). In exploring by ship in hazardous, ice-laden waters Captain Ross displayed exemplary seamanship and is one of Maurice's Forgotten Heroes.

The first person to put a foot on the continental shore of Antarctica (in 1895) was Norwegian-Australian, Carstens Borchgrevink, discovering insects and plant life unexpectedly. He subsequently convinced a UK media magnate to finance a major expedition in 1898 with 31 men and 75 huskies. Of the 4 qualified scientists on board, two were Australian. As with Ross, the expedition was thwarted by the high mountains, winters that involved 24 hours/day of darkness and temperatures of 30 – 40 degrees below zero. They reached 78 degrees south but did not reach the magnetic south pole.

Maurice then proceeded to describe examples of perseverance, endurance, survival, self-sacrifice and tragedy:

Mawson and two colleagues dragged a sledge 2000 kms in a successful search for the magnetic south pole and carrying out some very useful mapping of the area. (When being

picked up by the ship Nimrod Mawson fell into a 6m crevasse and was aided out, at great personal risk, by First Officer, John King Davis, admired by Maurice as one of the greatest of modern Antarctic Navigators and another of his Heroes.

Raymond Priestley and his party of 6 had been landed by Terra Nova on the Victoria Land Coast for summer work then stranded there when their ship was unable to reach them at the onset of Winter. This led to the party living in a snow cave for 9 months, eating penguin and seal meat, being covered in a black greasy combination of smoke and oil, experiencing no sun for 110 days, having no fresh clothes and, later, having to walk 500 kms back to Base Camp at McMurdo!

Shackleton with his 27 men and their ship Endurance were stuck in ice and marooned. After 500 nights at sea or stuck in ice, Shackleton decided to sail a small 22 foot boat with 5 companions 1500 kms through rough seas (and no GPS) to the small island of West Georgia to seek assistance. Four months later and after several attempts Shackleton rescued the remaining 22 men he had left behind. It has been recognised as one of the greatest survival stories ever told, and an extraordinary story of leadership. Less known is the story of the Ross Sea Party who in their efforts to support the Shackleton expedition endured terrible physical conditions, dragging sledges in gale force winds and sub zero temperatures, with scurvy and ice floes leading to the tragic loss of three lives. "In the annals of history there are few parallels for their courage, dedication, determination and self-sacrifice"

On behalf of all members David Brand thanked Maurice for a most informative talk highlighting quite extraordinary feats of endurance and leadership.

Alan Locke