



ANTARCTICA NEW ZEALAND INFORMATION SHEET

L.E.G. OATES

What Was The Role of L.E.G. Oates in Relation to the Polar Party Expedition of 1910-1913?

By Julia MacDonald, Burnside High School, Christchurch, New Zealand.

The Voyage Out to Antarctica and Initial Preparation

Lawrence Oates's initial recruitment to Scott's second Antarctic expedition was relatively straightforward. He had been a strong and loyal soldier and took an immediate interest in this new adventure by writing a keen letter to Scott, offering both his services and a significant sum of one thousand pounds. After providing glowing references and appearing to be a man of fine physique, energy and spirit, he was selected as a member of the Terra Nova party and taken immediately to London where the other members of the group had already begun working.

Oates's initial appearance shocked many of his future companions who were expecting to receive a well-dressed gentleman and instead greeted a man with a 'bowler' on his head and an old over-coat buttoned up to the neck hiding his collar. He was however a man of great intellect and knowledge and so was readily accepted into the group.

The Terra Nova was in terrible condition and so the team immediately got to work cleaning her up and 'fitting her out' with new appliances and furniture. Due to Oates's insightful input into the reconstruction of the ship he was kept onboard as a 'midshipman' whilst Meares left to choose the ponies and dogs. This was the first big mistake as Meares had a great knowledge of dogs but little understanding of ponies that were to be their main form of transport.

The Terra Nova set sail from Cardiff on June 15th 1910, Scott himself travelling to New Zealand separately with his wife. It appears that Oates was surprisingly pleased with his companions, having written the following in his diary: *'They are a capital lot of chaps with one or two exceptions, the exception I think get rather a rough time as Scott and Evans are both men who say what they think...'*

The Terra Nova left Cape Town and travelled south, Scott now joining the ship in order to become well acquainted with his fellow voyagers and no doubt wishing to get down to business.

The mood of the journey began to alter slightly as Scott and Oates argued about the conditions of the horses and the environment in which they were being kept, however final farewells were said in Lyttelton and the Terra Nova headed south towards the Pole. Further problems arose as the ship hit a huge storm causing the ponies to fall out of their quarters and the dogs to be hanged by their own chains. Oates spent the entire time with the animals attempting to calm them down and make them more comfortable with little regard for his own well-being.

On the 30th December the ship escaped the storm and only two days later land came into view. They landed at the foot of Mt Erebus and the area was named 'Cape Evans' after Scott's deputy. This is where the crew disembarked and the adventures truly began.

The Depot-Laying Journey

The aim of this journey was to travel along the polar route leaving depots for next seasons travel. A team of twelve men were involved in this mission, Wilson and Meares taking the dogs and Oates, Scott, Bowers, Cherry-Garrard, Gran, Atkinson, Evans, Ford and Keohane leading eight ponies.

Initially the ponies travelled well and Scott was impressed and pleased with their progress. However, by the time the party had reached the second camp Keohane's pony was in trouble and all of the animals appeared to be finding it difficult to carry such heavy loads in the snow. Once again Oates and Scott disagreed on the best course of action. Oates wished to continue South and then kill the ponies and store them as food. This idea appeared to shock Scott who disliked the idea of such cruelty and insisted on taking all of the animals back to Cape Evans alive.

On the 4th February the team experienced their first Antarctic blizzard and were forced to remain indoors and although the dogs coped with the intense weather conditions reasonably well, the ponies suffered greatly. Scott, now anxious to return to Cape Evans, deposited the 'One-Ton Depot' and then managed the journey back in our days by leaving Oates, Bowers and Gran to look after the ponies.

A disastrous event took place when the final group attempted to transport the animals over breaking ice from safety point to hut point. The unsafe land meant that the team woke in the morning to find themselves stranded on a bobbing ice-float unable to reach land. After an urgent rescue operation carried out by the other members of the team, the men involved were recovered unharmed and safe but in the process six ponies were lost. This whole episode left Oates feeling extremely bitter and when he returned to Cape Evans he immediately took charge of the animals spending the winter training them for the long journey ahead.

The Journey to the Pole and the Tragic End

On November 1st, after departure had been delayed due to poor weather conditions, the polar party left Cape Evans and began their long journey to the South Pole. Teddy Evans took the motors ahead and the ponies appeared full of life and vitality.

This team, however, seemed to have been destined for disaster right from the beginning as after only 14 miles of travelling one of the motors broke down. It soon became evident that this expensive machinery was unable to work in such a cold climate and so they were quickly abandoned. The climate also seemed to having a large affect on the ponies, and Scott's dependence on Oates and his expertise becoming increasingly more obvious;

'...they are not the ponies they ought to have been and if they pull through, well, all the thanks will be due to Oates.'

After resting for a few days at One-Ton Depot the marching continued, now in silence. It was clear now that the ponies were a poor choice of transport and on the 24th November the weakest pony was shot

and eaten by the dogs and members of the team. Such activities continued to take place until the base of the glacier was reached and finally, much to the relief of all, the animals were no longer required.

The party regrouped into three four-man teams and began the hard task of 'man-hauling' the equipment up the Beardmore Glacier. It was at this point in the journey that Oates's feet began to give him trouble but he was determined to continue, attempting to equal Scott's phenomenal physical stamina. Atkinson, Wright, Cherry-Garrard and Keohane were the first four to be asked to turn back due to Scott only being able to take three others with him on the final march to the Pole. Although Oates's physical weaknesses were becoming more obvious, he was chosen to be a part of the final party along with Scott, Wilson, Evans and a surprising fifth member, Bowers.

The final five marched on towards the Pole with building excitement, however, they reached the end of their hard journey only to find that Amundsen (their great Norwegian rival) had beaten them to the Pole. The return journey was depressing and plagued by illness. Evans's fingernails had fallen off and his nose and cheeks were rotting away slowly. On the 18th February Evans deteriorated rapidly and died in his tent early in to the next morning.

Scott, Oates and Bowers marched on bravely although Oates's feet were now turning black and gangrene was setting in causing him immense pain. On the 15th March he requested that he be left in his sleeping bag to die but Scott and Bowers refused to allow it and forced him to continue. Oates finally could not handle the pain any longer and so after stating; 'I am just going outside and may be sometime', he walked out into the blizzard to meet his death.

Remembering Oates: His Symbolic Significance

Due to a variety of sources Oates's heroic death soon became common knowledge all over the world, Scott's diary entries contributing greatly to the new title that had been bestowed upon his companion;

'We can testify to his bravery. He was borne intense suffering for weeks without complaint...'³ The rest of the party died two weeks later, only three days of walking away from the main camp. It was not however, the deaths of Evans, Scott or Bowers which captured the world, but that of Captain Oates who had willingly sacrificed his own life in the hopes that his fellow comrades may survive.

Although Oates's body was never found, a cairn was built on the site where the tent was pitched and on it engraved the following message;

'Hereabouts died a very gallant gentleman, Captain L.E.G. Oates of the Inniskilling Dragoons. In March 1912 returning from the Pole, he walked willingly to his death in a blizzard to try and save his comrades beset by hardship.'

It goes without saying that his mother, Caroline Oates, was overcome with grief and anguish upon hearing of the death of her son. Perhaps the only source of comfort were the hundreds of letters and telegrams arriving on her doorstep from people wish to send condolences to her and the family.

Oates became a symbol of immense courage and bravery throughout the world, and a mass amount of public tributes were made to him through the media - this example came from a Belgium newspaper called 'Le Temps';

'...his self-sacrifice bears the mark of that absolute self-control which an Englishman prizes above all else in the world. When the question is asked, what is a true gentleman? Our neighbours will have no

need to search their history or Shakespeare. It will suffice to reply that he is the man who behaves like Captain Oates.'

An inexpressible amount of respect must be felt for a person who although wishes to live and have a future, deliberately goes out to seek death in order to save his friends lives. I personally cannot find the words to express what this man has achieved through one unselfish act, so instead I have chosen the words of another who seems to be able to capture the emotions more effectively;

'So it must have been terribly hard to leave the tent ... hard to leave dreams of a future ...He faced the most difficult act of all, a truly horrifying death, and he made it look easy. And because it took him two hours of painful struggling to put his footgear on, he went out to die in his socks. What more can we ask of our heroes?'