



## ANTARCTICA NEW ZEALAND INFORMATION SHEET

# OVERVIEW OF THE TERRA NOVA EXPEDITION

### **Historical Overview of the Terra Nova Expedition 1910 - 1913**

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Robert Falcon Scott, a Captain of the Royal Navy led two expeditions to Antarctica. The “Terra Nova” expedition of 1910-1913 was his second expedition and Scott’s aim was to be the first to reach the South Pole. However there were others competing for this honour and, unfortunately for Scott, he was beaten by a Norwegian, Amundsen, by only five weeks. Tragically all five of Scott’s polar party perished before returning to their base camp.

### **Background to Scott’s “Terra Nova” Expedition**

Sir Clements Markham, a renowned British geographer, after gaining support from the Royal Society and the Royal Geographical Society planned the first British expedition to Antarctica which took place between 1901 and 1903. The aim of this “Discovery” expedition was to conduct experiments, collect information on the climate and to make Britain’s mark on the unknown continent. Markham wanted Robert Falcon Scott, a young naval officer to lead the expedition and put pressure on the two societies to choose Scott. On Scott’s first expedition he explored the Ross Ice Shelf.

Between 1907 and 1909 Ernest Shackleton, a member of the “Discovery” expedition returned to Antarctica with the aim of reaching the South Pole. His attempt failed but it spurred Scott into planning his second expedition. Another motivating factor for Scott was the fact that scientists had been criticizing research conducted on his first expedition as inaccurate. This upset Scott as his critics did not take into account the extremely low temperatures and horrendous blizzards in which the work had been carried out. Scott wanted to prove that his expedition team was capable of excellent scientific experimentation.

Scott announced in September 1909 that he would lead a new expedition to Antarctica, his main aim “securing for the British empire the honour of that achievement”, but Scott also planned a scientific programme. After making his announcement Scott was faced with having to raise £40,000. The government said they would not give him any funding so he embarked on a speaking tour pushing the benefits to Britain of the new expedition. Scott collected some money but in March 1910 the Government gave him £20,000.

Scott chose the “Terra Nova” a 700-tonne, coal burning, whaler built in 1884 as the ship to float his expedition, costing £12,500. He again asked Edward Wilson to be his chief scientist and asked him to choose the other scientists while Scott selected the rest of the team. Scott sought expert advice on special food, clothing and transport to be used on the icy continent.

The "Terra Nova" sailed from London on the 1st of June 1910 and finally on the 4th of January 1911 arrived in McMurdo Sound. Using a ready made hut 18 metres long by 9 metres wide they established their base camp at Cape Evans.

### **What Did Scott Achieve?**

The greatest achievement of this expedition was the polar party of Scott and his four chosen companions Wilson, Evans, Oates and Bowers reaching the South Pole on the 17th of January 1912. However this is marred by the fact that Amundsen had reached the Pole only five weeks previously and that all of the party perished on the return journey.

Two valuable days on the return journey were spent collecting geological specimens like rock samples. This time and the extra weight on the sled were contributing factors to the tragedy. When the bodies of Scott, Wilson and Bowers, who survived the longest, were found frozen in their tent by a search party the rock specimens and valuable documents were recovered. They have been important in our growing knowledge of the Antarctic continent. The "Terra Nova" expedition spent two years on the ice based at Cape Evans. During this time, under Scott's leadership, many experiments were conducted and valuable observations made. King Edward VII Land and the glacier region to the west of McMurdo Sound were explored. During the winter many observations were made of Antarctic birds, meteorology and the characteristics of ice were made and written about. A dangerous expedition was made during winter to Cape Crozier to investigate the Emperor Penguins. Three eggs were successfully taken from the rookery and are in Edinburgh University today.

During the expedition more knowledge was gained on what kind of equipment should be used in Antarctica and improvements that could be made to existing equipment. Scott was the first to take motorised transport, in the form of tractors onto Antarctica. The manufacturers gave the tractors to Scott to use so he could test them and suggest improvements.

### **What Went Wrong?**

One of the last things Scott did before he died was write a message to the Public. In this he attributed his failure to several factors:

1. The loss of the pony transport in March 1911
2. The bad weather on the outward journey
3. The soft snow low down on the Beardmore Glacier
4. The low temperature on the summit and on the Barrier on the homeward journey
5. Shortage of fuel in the depots, and
6. The blizzard that raged from the 21st of March onwards

In hindsight, these reasons have been disregarded and aspects of the planning of the expedition have been suspected. The disaster was due to Scott's wrong choice of equipment, food and men. Cherry-Gerard, a member of the expedition, "estimated the calorific value of the food was at times not much more than half their requirements". Another problem with the food was that the importance of vitamins such as Vitamin C to prevent scurvy had not been identified, although Scott had consulted dietary experts before leaving England.

The choice of members of the polar party has also been criticized. Scott himself may have been too old, Wilson had suffered from Tuberculosis and was 'tired', Oates had no previous experience and Bowers was added at the last minute. Only P.O. Evans was considered a good choice as he was experienced and very strong.

The two days of the return journey spent collecting geological specimens when time could have been spent walking back to base camp and the added weight of the specimens have also been attributed to the deaths. The fact that Amundsen reached the pole first was a huge psychological disadvantage to the polar party, adding to their physical disadvantages.

Scott lost the lives of himself and his four companions because his training had not prepared him for a world which called for "adaptability."

### **How is Scott Remembered?**

When Scott died the world was shocked. A memorial service was held in St Pauls Cathedral attended by the King. The Board of Admiralty said the loss of Scott and P.O. Evans should be regarded as if they had been killed in action.

Before the "Terra Nova" party left Antarctica they erected a memorial cross to those who died, on Observation Hill overlooking Cape Evans, Hut Point and the Ross Ice Shelf. Inscribed on the cross is "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield". The last line of Tennyson's "Ulysses".

Scott Base, a major Antarctic base is named after Robert Falcon Scott and many books have been written about him.

Scott is one of the most celebrated Antarctic explorers even though in reality he failed to accomplish what he set out to, to be the first to reach the South Pole. Nevertheless Scott did reach the Pole and died in the attempt so he became a celebrated hero.