

# LEADERSHIP IN ACTION: TO THE SOUTH POLE

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## Technical assistance

t +44 (0)1234 756410, e [ecch@ecch.com](mailto:ecch@ecch.com)

North American customers:

t +1 781 239 5884, e [ecchusa@ecch.com](mailto:ecchusa@ecch.com)

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North America  
t +1 781 239 5884  
f +1 781 239 5885  
e [ecchusa@ecch.com](mailto:ecchusa@ecch.com)

Rest of the world  
t +44 (0)1234 750903  
f +44 (0)1234 751125  
e [ecch@ecch.com](mailto:ecch@ecch.com)

## LEADERSHIP IN ACTION: TO THE SOUTH POLE

*Professors Bill Fischer and Andy Boynton prepared this case as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a business situation.*

If we are to win, not a trouser button must be missing.

- Roald Amundsen

On December 15, 1911 Roald Amundsen and his team of nine elite Norwegian explorers were the first to reach the South Pole, beating a rival British team by five weeks. In contrast to the British team of over 25 men led by Captain Robert Falcon Scott of the British Navy, the team led by Amundsen was small and lacked huge financial resources. However it was a highly specialized group of the absolute best professional explorers Amundsen knew. Moreover, this exploit--to reach one of the arctic poles first--had been the principal goal of Amundsen's life since he was an adolescent decades before. Virtually everything that Amundsen had done in his life could be seen as preparation for his achievement, from studying the survival techniques of the Eskimos to devising nutritional strategies that would help his men avoid developing scurvy.

At the time, the South Pole was recognized as one of the greatest leadership and team challenges of the day. The physical elements of Antarctica made certain that the race would be hard fought. It required going beyond preparing for the ordinary, to prepare for and achieve the extraordinary; requiring a carefully choreographed blend of men, technology, teamwork, leadership, planning, project management, and communication skills. All in all, Amundsen was a remarkable character, totally obsessed with his goal of leading a team in ground-breaking polar exploration while constantly seeking to learn from the best. He was also a natural leader, able to run a happy ship and inspire the best men to follow him into danger and the unknown. How did Amundsen lead? How did he manage this breakthrough project? How did he learn from the past and apply it to tomorrow? In short what can we learn from him and the race to the South Pole?

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## *Becoming An Arctic Professional*

Having read Sir John Franklin's Arctic expedition account, Roald Amundsen was struck by inspiration at the age of 15. He immediately set out to learn about polar exploration systematically and from experience. "Oddly enough," he wrote, "it was the sufferings that Sir John and his men had to go through which attracted me most...that got me to see myself as a kind of crusader in Arctic exploration."<sup>1</sup> Already steeped in the national ski culture, Amundsen immediately began to seek out the advice of his Norwegian compatriots. Most importantly, he cultivated Fridtjof Nansen, who was perhaps the most famous arctic explorer of the age. Nansen was pioneering a new, leaner form of arctic travel in place of the large-scale teams then popular. There were other mentors as well, including Eivund Astrup, who argued that "primitive people" had much to teach their civilized contemporaries about their survival techniques and practices. From each mentor and experience, Amundsen strove to learn the arctic trade.

### **Early Learning in Antarctica**

Amundsen sought and acquired a series of arctic "apprenticeships" to learn by experience. One of his early arctic excursions was as a participant in one of the first extended stays in Antarctica, with Adrian De Gerlach, onboard the *Belgica*. By the winter of 1898 the *Belgica* had frozen into a massive ice drift off the coast of Antarctica. Not only was the ship in danger of being crushed by shifting ice flows, but its crew was suffering from depression in the 24-hour darkness and the first signs of scurvy, the deadly nutritional disease that was poorly understood at the time. Disaster, it seemed, was imminent for the freezing crew, virtually all of whom were indulging in "their little private hells."<sup>2</sup> Undaunted by the collective despair, Amundsen was fascinated by the spectacle around him; keeping largely to himself, he took detailed notes about everything he saw during the nine months he was marooned on the freezing ship. He emerged with invaluable notes that he would study in preparation for his own arctic expeditions.<sup>3</sup>

For starters, he observed the leadership style of Captain Adrian de Gerlach, whom he came to despise as a weak martinet, and the poor cohesion of the crew. Nonetheless, he apparently approved of de Gerlach's manipulative leadership style, when he had misled his crew about his aim to spend the winter on the Antarctic ice shelf. Amundsen was also recording each of his ongoing experiments to improve the arctic equipment on hand; with his shipmate, Frederick Cook, he invented a new kind of "aerodynamic" tent better suited to the windy local conditions and assessed various clothing materials for arctic conditions. Even Amundsen's own deteriorating health, from swollen gums to the frightening mood swings associated with scurvy, were coolly noted in his journal. After witnessing what he regarded as needless deaths on board the *Belgica*, he concluded that loss of life and unnecessary risks could be avoided--with meticulous preparation. Taken together, he was learning systematically from the mistakes and oversights of past explorers.<sup>4</sup> Even when involved in an historic achievement, such as his participation in the first Antarctic sledge journey, Amundsen's journal concentrated on the lessons he was learning: he refused to exult in his own glory, preferring instead to analyze in detail what he observed.<sup>5</sup>



### First Command: the *Gjoa*

Seeking to deepen his experience, Amundsen ventured to Tromsø, in Northern Norway, to plumb the knowledge of the "arctic skippers." He was so single-minded in his efforts that he shunned the company of all but the most experienced sealers and whalers, though some scoffed at his interest in these clannish, taciturn men. "There is nobody so stupid," he replied, "that he does not have something sensible to say."<sup>6</sup> Hoping to exploit the opportunities there to the utmost, Amundsen decided to spend his entire inheritance on the *Gjoa*, a small sealing ship. He immediately hired a seasoned crew and took to the sea for almost five months, in April, 1901; they were to hunt arctic sea game to cover the cost of the trip. Meanwhile, Amundsen would live as they were accustomed on seal steak and other available catches.

Though he only broke even on the costs of this "training," as the commander, Amundsen learned many lessons on arctic shipping from the point of view of local professionals. Their manner of "living off the land," he concluded, was a crucially important source of information. Furthermore, the experience of commanding a small and specialized crew reinforced his conviction that Nansen's "new method" of arctic exploration was the model he should follow--for its efficiency and speed. That meant, as one observer wrote, "limiting the number of participants, and selecting a small party able to achieve the greatest possible degree of physical stamina: a small, trained group, in which all keep pace with each other in the coming trials."<sup>7</sup> Nansen's method stood in stark contrast to the current conventional wisdom, in which huge teams were organized on a near-military scale with multiple redundancies and hence, many more mouths to feed.<sup>8</sup> Amundsen was also studying the art of managing a team.

### A Happy Ship

Amundsen worked to improve his leadership skills. On an expedition to find a Northwest passage in 1903, which was Amundsen's first major command, he discovered that, by natural inclination, he was able to run a "happy ship." Though demanding absolute loyalty that was sworn in an oath, Amundsen strove to earn his crewmembers' trust and respect rather than relying on the entitlements of rank and hierarchy to claim them. Furthermore, Amundsen developed a method of human resource selection and planning that eliminated the need for bureaucracy and elaborate rules--his crew was to operate with a clear sense of both immediate purpose and overarching mission; with all team members knowing what they were supposed to do and trusted to play their role, Amundsen rarely found it necessary to issue orders. Taken together, this made his ship akin to a "little republic."<sup>9</sup>

To accomplish this, Amundsen chose his team with extraordinary care, testing them furtively for both their mix of skills and their personal initiative. In addition, he sought an indefinable "fit" of character, which required him to make intuitive snap judgments of personal suitability. For example, when testing one potential recruit, Amundsen asked him to pack fish into a crowded storage hull; when the man told him it was impossible for lack of space, he was immediately dismissed as unsuitable. "There's no space for you either on board this ship," Amundsen is reported to have said.<sup>10</sup> He also refused to accept unqualified adventurers, misfits,



or "hacks" who might bring disaffection into the small group, preferring instead a crew of the highest professional caliber. He was also willing to pay top wages. Furthermore, to avoid the confusion of authority that can arise with cliques of competing experts, Amundsen refused to hire professional scientists or doctors. Not only did he see them as unnecessary challenges to his leadership, but he also questioned whether their expertise warranted the additions to the head count of his team; already, he was unimpressed with the opinions of medical doctors regarding the remedies available for scurvy, the cause of which--lack of certain vitamins--was at the time unknown.<sup>11</sup>

### The Eskimos

During the winter of 1903, which Amundsen spent in Greenland while seeking to discover a Northwest passage, he apprenticed himself to the local Eskimos. His interest and open-mindedness were extraordinary in that Eskimos, during the age of colonial imperialism, were regarded as a primitive--hence "inferior"--stone-age people in need of civilizing influences. Instead of assuming the burden of improving them, Amundsen determined to learn everything that he could from them, about their technology, habits and culture. Upon first contact, he set about earning their trust and then mastering their language.

At each step of the way, Amundsen recorded observations for later study in his usual meticulous style. First, he studied the psychology of their dogs: rather than beasts of burden like horses, he came to believe that they were intelligent companions that required coaching and cultivation as intimate partners; also recognizing that the Greenland variety was superior to those of Siberia, he decided to use only the former in his Arctic journeys. Second, Amundsen examined the natural garments of the Eskimos: unlike the synthetic fabrics available in the industrial world, he concluded, fur coats and pants allowed air to circulate and hence prevented the heat-dissipating sweats that could become dangerous during the physical exertion of arctic travel. Third, he became expert at constructing igloos, the hardy Eskimo shelters that rely entirely on materials immediately available in the arctic tundra.<sup>12</sup> Finally, Amundsen carefully observed how Eskimos conserved their energy. Though many European observers had concluded that they were sluggish and perhaps inherently lazy, Amundsen realized that they were expertly pacing themselves, refusing to exceed a comfort zone that left them ample reserves of energy in case of emergency.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of these invaluable findings, Amundsen was not looking to slavishly imitate the Eskimo. With an eye to boosting his efficiency and enhancing his margins of safety, he would create his own synthesis, experimenting ceaselessly along the way to find the most appropriate mix of techniques. For example, Amundsen was beginning to believe that skis, which were unknown to the Eskimo, were the best means of arctic locomotion for men and would allow his team to keep up with dog sledges. Moreover, Amundsen also concluded that the Eskimo diet of fresh meat represented the best hedge against the development of scurvy, which flatly contradicted the established medical opinion of the time. To augment fresh meat, Amundsen relied on pemmican and chocolate as dietary staples, both of which he had specially prepared to avoid losing their nutritional value during processing.



## Failure and Success

Amundsen could also learn from his failures. After having wintered in Greenland, Amundsen set off in the spring of 1904 to find the magnetic North Pole, which was the scientific portion of his journey. By some obscure miscalculation and in terrible traveling conditions, he missed his goal by about 30 miles. This failure weighed extremely heavily on him, apparently for the rest of his life.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, not only did he test his skis under spring thaws as well as during an icy squall that proved particularly hazardous, but he also learned more about the symbiotic relationship of men and dogs. He could now travel and manage a traveling team in virtually any arctic condition, from wet slush to the most frigid ice storms.<sup>15</sup> After a second winter in Greenland, Amundsen's team went on to discover a Northwest passage. While this secured Amundsen a place in history, he saw it largely as the completion of his "arctic apprenticeship," the first step in his life's work, the conquest of the North Pole. He was in his early thirties.

## *A Minor Change: Reversing Poles*

Opening the newspaper on September 1, 1909, Amundsen was stunned to read that Cook, his friend from the de Gerlach expedition to Antarctica, announced that he had "discovered" the North Pole nearly six months before. To make matters worse, soon, in a rival claim, Robert Peary announced that he had been there first, generating a controversy that has lasted to this day. This development led to an abrupt reversal of Amundsen's plans to make a scientific expedition to the North Pole basin in 1910. He decided immediately--and in secret--that he would go to the South Pole instead, to be announced *after* departure. Then, two weeks following's Amundsen's secret decision, the British Naval Captain Robert Falcon Scott announced his intention to journey on the *Terra Nova* to the South Pole in 1910. To gain a tactical advantage over Scott, neither his faithful mentor, Nansen, nor his creditors or anyone in the Norwegian government would know what Amundsen had decided to do. A race was on, in complete stealth.<sup>16</sup>

## Preparation and Plan

As painstaking as ever, Amundsen set about formulating his plans. He started with a dispassionate analysis of the recent experience of Ernest Shackleton in Antarctica. Although Shackleton had been heralded as a daring hero, Amundsen viewed his expedition as a near disaster. Shackleton had, he concluded, committed a number of significant mistakes: 1) his supply depots were too few, too small and poorly marked, which so greatly reduced his safety margins that a missed depot would have immediately become a matter of survival; 2) man hauling slowed and exhausted Shackleton's team to such an extent that it was perhaps the principal reason that he had failed to reach the South Pole; and 3) though dogs had been taken, no one had known how to handle them properly and hence they were a costly waste. From this, Amundsen concluded that his own lean combination of skiing and dog-pulled sledges was the right one. Plodding and workman-like as ever, Amundsen was convinced that bravado, courting danger and seeking adventure for their own sake merely reflected poor planning; his team would advance slowly at a carefully chosen pace, with reasonable goals and allowing for



plenty of rest. Finally, Amundsen chose to land on the uncharted Ross Ice barrier, which he judged was worth the risk because it would shave 120 miles or 9% of the round trip from the expedition, as opposed to Scott's decision to follow a more establish route.<sup>17</sup>

With his secret plan laid out, Amundsen oversaw every detail of preparation. He personally supervised the purchase, and often the manufacture, of the equipment and provisions; the food regimen would combine pemmican with arctic meats that they would hunt. For his crew, Amundsen wanted 10 men or perhaps less, each of whom, as a specialist, would play a clearly defined role in his plan. Refusing to admit the disaffected and incompatible, his team had to be psychologically as well as physically fit and able to adapt and learn quickly. Willing to pay for the best, Amundsen hired an expert dog driver, highly experienced ice sailors and even discovered a cook who could prepare seal meat in a variety of tasty ways in anticipation of the months of isolation ahead. For example, judging him a splendid as well as useful companion, Amundsen engaged the champion skier Olav Bjaaland, who was also an expert carpenter and, for leisure, a violin maker. The sole exception to his rule of personal compatibility was Hjalmar Johansen, a veteran of Nansen's arctic expeditions. Because Johansen judged himself the stronger skier and more experienced explorer, from the start there was friction between the two. Amundsen felt compelled to invite Johansen to join his team and then tried hard to win him over. Amundsen's overtures to Johansen were made to illustrate his commitment to Nansen (who supplied the Fram), who owed Johansen his life and hence recommended him vigorously.<sup>18</sup>

### The Rival

Robert Falcon Scott stands as a study in contrast with the simplicity and clarity of Amundsen's methods. Scott was blessed with a large budget from both public sources and private donors. For a team of about 30, he purchased his supplies over the counter and, with the exception of motor sledges newly designed for arctic conditions, did not consider customizing anything for his purposes. Though he remained suspicious of dogs and decided that horses should handle the bulk of initial hauling, he hired a dog driver, Cecil Meares. In addition, Scott brought a Norwegian ski instructor along, though eventually declined to allow him to train his team once they arrived. As a consequence, none of his core team mastered skiing techniques and only Meares knew how to manage dog teams.<sup>19</sup> Following the route that Shackleton had pioneered, Scott made bold plans. He would use four kinds of transport: horses, dogs, motor sledges and man hauling for the final leg of the journey on the Antarctic plateau. The heavy investment in multiple technologies illustrated Scott's commitment and ambitions. As they shuttled between supply depots, the various modes of transport were a recipe for confusion and breakdowns. Their diet would consist of pemmican, biscuits, butter, sugar and tea, which unbeknown to Scott virtually ensured that the team would develop scurvy during the long months of arctic encampment. Moreover, as a naval man, Scott's management style was rigidly hierarchical and offered little opportunity for either questioning or loyal dissent. His team lacked cohesion and carefully meted roles. Finally, the supply depots would be very far apart and marked in the same manner as Shackleton had done, cutting margins of safety to the absolute minimum.<sup>20</sup> When compared with Amundsen's plan and continually revised



preparations, it appeared that Scott had chosen a path that virtually assured his defeat.

### All or Nothing

At great risk, Amundsen carefully timed the revelation of his secret change of plans. In spite of the quality and trustworthiness of his crew, he had informed only his brother and the officers of the *Fram* of his plan to conquer the South Pole rather than the North Pole. They set sail without fanfare in April 1910. Once out of port, Amundsen informed the crew of his plans; they unanimously voted to support his course of action but it was not easy. He had to openly discuss why he chose to withhold the truth from them, his own personal risks and, in the same speech, express his confidence that the team could achieve the new goal. Amundsen took everyone into his confidence, posting a map with a detailed summary plan of the expedition, so that the team members could carefully recalibrate their roles in light of the change of course. First, they would beat Scott to the Pole and then be the first to inform the press of their version of events, which he viewed as a crucially important way of engraving their victory into the popular mind.<sup>21</sup> This subterfuge, he knew, put his career and indeed his chosen mission in life into jeopardy: if he succeeded, he reasoned, all of his secrecy and duplicity would be forgiven, but if he failed, he would never recover his reputation. Now that he and his ship were cut off from the outside world, he put these worries out of his mind and concentrated on the task at hand, which was to ensure that his equipment was fit to purpose. For example, during the ship voyage, Bjaaland was constantly adding custom improvements to the equipment, which he came to understand intimately. There was not a moment to spare for rumination.<sup>22</sup>

Upon his arrival on October 12, 1910 in Melbourne, Australia, Captain Scott learned of Amundsen's change of plans by telegram. Scott's first reaction was to keep the telegram secret; apparently he resolved to ignore the race rather than alter his original course of action. Scott's only discussions onboard *Terra Nova* regarding Amundsen and his methods, his shipmates noted, were about the Norwegian's questionable ethics.<sup>23</sup>

### To the Pole

Scott and Amundsen both arrived in Antarctica in January, 1911. There was much work to do before the assault on the South Pole. Before waiting out the winter months in total darkness, each team had to lay supply depots. Tensions ran high. Where were the competing parties? Would the South Pole reveal surprises, after all, it was unknown territory? They planned to begin their race in the "spring" of the southern hemisphere, around October. Amundsen's team immediately set to break camp and hunt seal, each man knowing what he had to do; they were applying the lessons that Amundsen had learned from a lifetime of preparation. Awaiting orders, Scott's much larger group of men sat idle, uncertain how to proceed: their commander had made few of his plans known, and so they had nothing else to do but brood. When the competing teams met briefly at McMurdo Sound, Amundsen made an ostentatious show of his huge team of dogs, which impressed the British onlookers to the point of intimidation.<sup>24</sup>



### The Norwegian Camp

Amundsen's talent for leadership was reflected in the upbeat mood in the Norwegians' camp, where everyone continued to occupy themselves with tasks to improve equipment. The team was cohesive and full of purpose. Amundsen repeatedly emphasized that each improvement, and by extension every person's role, was of crucial importance: Bjaaland eventually reduced the weight of each sledge by up to 50 kilos while strengthening their frames; the boots for the trek were torn apart and re-sewn a total of four times; and the tents were dyed black with shoe polish to improve their visibility and retention of solar heat as well as sewn together to increase their internal warmth by the sharing of body heat. While delegating these tasks, Amundsen strove to avoid the appearance of snooping into their activities, preferring that each team member felt valued, trusted and autonomous. In an effort to maintain morale, he also made little occasions for his group to look forward to, such as Brandy toddies every Saturday or weekly saunas; there were also prizes for weather prediction.<sup>25</sup>

On a few trial runs for the supply-depot journeys, Amundsen demonstrated for everyone that his plan to combine dogs for transport with men accompanying on skis was a good one: avoiding redundancy, it was simple and fast, covering up to 30 miles per day. The dogs, of which there were approximately 200, were well suited for the terrain and of the highest quality that existed; their diet was so flexible that they could eat anything from seal meat to each other and even their own excrement if necessary. They were also excellent psychological companions for his men, whose affections helped them to overcome the loneliness and celibacy forced on them for the duration of the multi-year expedition. Amundsen planned to travel an average of 20 miles per day, which set a concrete and realizable goal; between five to six hours was allotted for rest each day and one day in four could be set aside for rest in case of bad weather. The placement of supply depots was, of course, clearly marked and included far more than their diets required. Taken together, there were wide margins of safety.<sup>26</sup>

The depots had been laid and winter had set in, but Amundsen kept Framheim busy. The hut was improved with three new subterranean rooms built into the ice for sewing, storage, laundry, a WC and carpentry workshop. Work on the sledges continued to make them lighter and lighter, in addition to making four new ones. The boots were too small and were remade. Packing crates were lightened. 40,000 biscuits and powdered milk were stored so they could be retrieved without undoing the crates, a small but important innovation for the time. Plans were gone over again and again, frequently giving rise to discussions and more suggestions for small innovations. All in all, the team was kept busy, on a routine, and focused on their goal.

Nonetheless, a number of uncertainties gnawed at Amundsen. First, the performance of Scott's motor sledges greatly worried him: they represented the most significant unpredictable factor in the race. Second, while his choice of base camp shaved 120 miles from their path to and from the South Pole, the terrain was entirely unexplored with the exception of the supply lines they had laid. In particular, Amundsen had to find a path through the mountain ridges, which were riddled with potentially lethal crevasses and dead ends, onto the plateau of the South Pole. Third, there was the simmering conflict with Johansen. Not only was



he openly competing for psychological leadership of the expedition, but his blunt manner grated on Amundsen. Virtually all of the other team members understood that, while confident in his methods, Amundsen was sensitive to challenges to his authority; they had learned that the best way to contest his judgments was to ask questions, which put Amundsen at ease to discuss them openly and rationally. Johansen ignored this, arguing abrasively and in the process damaging the harmony of the group. These worries pushed Amundsen to the edge and his first great mistake.<sup>27</sup>

### **Amundsen's Leadership Crisis**

A big decision was when to start the run for the Pole. Leave early and it would be too cold. Leave late, and the race might be lost. In spite of all his preparation, this decision was one that had to be made on the spot based on weather and a sense of the competitors' moves. Worried that Scott had superior technology and being driven by his dream to be there first, Amundsen rushed into a premature attempt at the Pole, only to be forced back at the danger of losing the lives of both men and dogs. This failure split his team into opposing camps, which forced Amundsen to exclude the dissenting members from the core team that would make a second try for the Pole. Knowing that a second place arrival at the Pole meant ruin--the Norwegian Government had declined to support him when it learned of his change of plans--Amundsen had been anxious to take off as soon as possible. He decided to leave at the end of August, when by all measures it was far too early. Not only was it dangerously cold for the dogs at -40 degrees Centigrade, which was compounded by a bitter head wind, but the nights were still extremely long. During their humiliating return, all order broke down in the final as the men dashed on alone for the warmth of the winter hut. Those who had arrived waited, demoralized and worried that they faced defeat. Johansen, left behind without provisions, may have saved the life of a frost-bitten comrade and arrived at the hut in a brutal rage.<sup>28</sup>

Amundsen's mistaken judgment--and the panicked retreat--exposed the hidden tensions within the group. The moment he asked why they were so late, Johansen erupted into a screaming denunciation of his leadership. It was an open call to mutiny. However much the other team members might have agreed with Johansen regarding Amundsen's decision to leave at such an early date, they were stunned at the bitterness of Johansen's outburst, which was driven in part by his own feelings of a failed career. Amundsen knew something had to be done quickly or his men might refuse to follow him again. Unlike Scott's military command, Amundsen needed his men to follow him predominantly by choice and that meant they had to understand his actions and agree with the course of action he chose. Though Johansen apparently regretted his outburst, it was the end of the "splendid unity" that Amundsen had striven so hard to instill; thereafter, the two were no longer on speaking terms. Amundsen also suspected that Johansen might sow further dissention during the next attempt to reach the Pole, which he deemed a threat to group survival.<sup>29</sup>

Without discussion, Amundsen immediately decided that Johansen and two other team members, who were openly embittered by the premature Pole attempt, would not be included in the next trip; instead, they would explore the nearby Edward



VII island, whose interior was uncharted, a change for which Johansen demanded written orders. This reduced the Polar team to just five men, each of whom Amundsen interviewed individually, requesting a renewed declaration of loyalty to him. Those who would go with him “unreservedly accepted [his] leadership.”<sup>30</sup> In effect, Johansen and his sympathizers were permanently excluded from the inner circle and the final run to the Pole.

### *Victory*

Amundsen embarked again at the end of October 1911. The morale of his chosen group remained good and, by agreement, they followed their leader’s plan in clockwork order. Scott’s team, however, was divided and wary of their leader; the motor sledges had proven unreliable and would be left behind for lack of spare parts, while the horses were faltering in the cold and the dogs were left at base camp with Meares. That left man hauling, which translated into eight hours of trudging through the snow each day to advance about 12 miles per day, or less than half the rate that Amundsen could achieve. Nonetheless, Amundsen’s route was completely uncharted and in fact turned out to be the most difficult of all the routes to the South Pole.<sup>31</sup>

Amundsen’s team quickly settled into a routine that included ample rest and relaxation, keeping them fresh for their task; they had plenty of energy reserves and their balanced diet ensured against vitamin deficiencies. When they hit the uncharted mountain range, which they counted on the dogs to ford with their supplies, Amundsen had budgeted a full week to find a crossing; they headed due South rather than seek a more circuitous route. Once, when Amundsen chose the wrong path, wasting an entire day, the team avoided all recrimination at least in part because they had participated in his decision. At the top of the mountain range, they slaughtered many of their dogs, keeping a best few for the remaining trek to the Pole. In spite of his many anxieties, Amundsen kept a level head, never pushing his men to exhaustion to save a few hours or days, but sticking to the pace they had agreed upon. On December 15, they reached the Pole, which felt like something of an anti-climax.<sup>32</sup> As Amundsen wrote:

I had better be honest and say right out that I believe no human being has stood so diametrically opposed to the goal of his wishes...the North Pole had attracted me since the days of my childhood, and so I found myself on the South Pole. Can anything more perverse be conceived?<sup>33</sup>

The entire team planted the flag together, sharing the historic moment equally. His attention then shifted to returning safely and quickly to get his message out before Scott, who was 360 miles behind them and would not arrive for another five weeks. They arrived back at base camp without incident.<sup>34</sup>

On 17 January, 1912 Scott’s team arrived at the Pole to find that Amundsen had defeated them. Upon turning back, Scott and his men labored under the grim realization that their survival was at stake--finding each supply depot had become a race against starvation and frostbite. Because the horses had delayed the group’s start, the weather was also 10 degrees colder than when Amundsen had passed through and was worsening rapidly as the arctic summer ended.<sup>35</sup> In addition,

thoroughly alienated, Meares had announced to Scott as he turned back at the arctic plateau that he planned to depart as soon as the supply ship arrived, prior to the return of the Polar party; this deprived the team of their only capable dog driver, whom Scott had assumed would replenish the depots without explicitly explaining this in his orders. Even worse, Scott's men at the base camp were disinclined to take fresh initiative: the orders he had written before departure were so copious, and yet unclear in the circumstances that had evolved, that they felt little immediate responsibility to question their original supply plans.<sup>36</sup> The first casualty of Scott's group was Lawrence Oates, a cavalry captain whose gangrenous feet had become so painful that he could no longer continue. Silently, like a good soldier, he crawled out of the tent to die with no announcement. The group struggled forward for a few more days. Then they were overcome by a blizzard. Starving, exhausted, and suffering from scurvy and frostbite, the remainder of Scott's party lay in their sleeping bags to await their deaths, surviving for about nine days. Scott, ever thinking of his legacy, spent much of the time writing letters on the assumption that his tent would eventually be found.<sup>37</sup>

### *Aftermath*

In spite of the souring of his victory, Amundsen remained obsessed with exploration to the exclusion of virtually everything else. With the dawning of the era of mechanized exploration, he also became the first explorer to cross over the North Pole in an airplane, which he flew himself. While this led to even wider acclaim than his trek to the South Pole, Amundsen continued to live under the threat of personal and financial ruin, eventually going bankrupt. Never married himself, he conducted a number of affairs with married women that led only to painful disappointments. Sometime in June 1928, Amundsen died mysteriously on a rescue mission into the northern Arctic in search of the *Italia*, an airship that had disappeared on a flight to the Pole.<sup>38</sup>



## References

All references below are from Roland Huntford, *The Last Place on Earth*. New York: The Modern Library, 1999.

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- <sup>1</sup> As cited on p. 19
  - <sup>2</sup> p. 61
  - <sup>3</sup> p. 61
  - <sup>4</sup> p. 68
  - <sup>5</sup> p. 57
  - <sup>6</sup> As cited on p. 72
  - <sup>7</sup> Ludvig Schmelck, as cited on p. 24
  - <sup>8</sup> p. 29
  - <sup>9</sup> p. 84
  - <sup>10</sup> As cited on p. 85
  - <sup>11</sup> pp. 85–90
  - <sup>12</sup> pp. 85–90
  - <sup>13</sup> p. 98
  - <sup>14</sup> p. 99
  - <sup>15</sup> p. 100
  - <sup>16</sup> pp. 205–208
  - <sup>17</sup> pp. 242–45
  - <sup>18</sup> pp. 248–51
  - <sup>19</sup> pp. 222–24
  - <sup>20</sup> pp. 383–85
  - <sup>21</sup> p. 290
  - <sup>22</sup> p. 245
  - <sup>23</sup> pp. 303–309
  - <sup>24</sup> p. 329
  - <sup>25</sup> pp. 366–73
  - <sup>26</sup> pp. 290–95
  - <sup>27</sup> pp. 374–76
  - <sup>28</sup> pp. 390–92
  - <sup>29</sup> p. 393
  - <sup>30</sup> pp. 395–96
  - <sup>31</sup> p. 431
  - <sup>32</sup> pp. 466–69
  - <sup>33</sup> As cited on p. 469
  - <sup>34</sup> p. 470
  - <sup>35</sup> p. 491
  - <sup>36</sup> pp. 519–21
  - <sup>37</sup> pp. 523–39
  - <sup>38</sup> pp. 552–60