

The Tom Crean Story



Tom Crean was born on 20 July 1877, in Annascaul, Co Kerry into a poor farming household. Times were very hard, forcing many young men to leave their country after nothing but the most rudimentary education. He joined the Royal Navy at the age of 15 and spent the following seven years honing his skills as a junior seaman.

What makes Tom's life interesting is that he took part in three of the most famous expeditions to Antarctica at the turn of the 20th century in what was known as the Heroic Age of Antarctica Exploration. Tom Crean was a pivotal figure, intimately involved in the great exploits of Scott and Shackleton. His contribution to these expeditions was enormous and on more than one occasion he risked his life to save others.

His feats, character and general good humour under difficulties make him a worthy hero. His feats, rank in history, among the greatest survival stories every told. In reading this account of his adventures you must realise that they took place in the early 1900's. They had no communications with a home base or outpost, their equipment was basic and they travelled into unknown and unmapped territory under the worst of weather conditions.

The Discovery Expedition – 1901 -1904
The Terra Nova Expedition – 1911 – 1913
The Endurance Expedition – 1914 - 1917

Crean had left the family farm near Annascaul to enlist in the British Royal Navy at the age of 15. While serving on HMS Ringarooma in New Zealand, he volunteered to join Scott's British National Antarctic Expedition on Discovery.

It was here that he met Ernest Shackleton and they became friends. Having proved himself on this expedition he was chosen to take part in the next expedition of Robert Falcon Scott on the Terra Nova. Crean's third Antarctic venture was as part of the Imperial Trans - Antarctic Expedition on Endurance led by Ernest Shackleton,

Robert Falcon Scott's 1911–13 Terra Nova expedition, which saw the race to reach the South Pole lost to Roald Amundsen and ended in the deaths of Scott and his polar party. During this expedition Crean's 35-mile



(56 km) solo walk across the Ross Ice Shelf to save the life of Edward Evans led to him receiving the Albert Medal.

Crean's contributions to these expeditions sealed his reputation as a tough and dependable polar traveller, and earned him a total of three Polar Medals.



In 1920 he retired from the navy and moved back to County Kerry. In his home town of Annascaul, Crean and his wife Ellen opened a Public House called the "South Pole Inn". He lived there quietly and unobtrusively until his death in 1938.

Discovery Expedition, 1901–04

It was during a routine journey to New Zealand that Crean first booked his place with history. A crew replacement position became available on Robert Falcon Scott's ship *Discovery* and Crean duly signed up. The ship was bound for Antarctica with one of the first British expeditions to explore the interior of the continent. The *Discovery* reached the McMurdo Sound early in 1902 and was to remain there for two years. The members of the ship spent the time carrying out a variety of scientific studies along with a number of exploratory forays deep into the continent, going further south than any men had ever gone before.

Crean - now a tall, well built young man in his mid-twenties - was a 'gentle giant', a physically strong man with an overriding emotional concern for the people and animals around him. He was a popular member of the expedition, always enthusiastic and

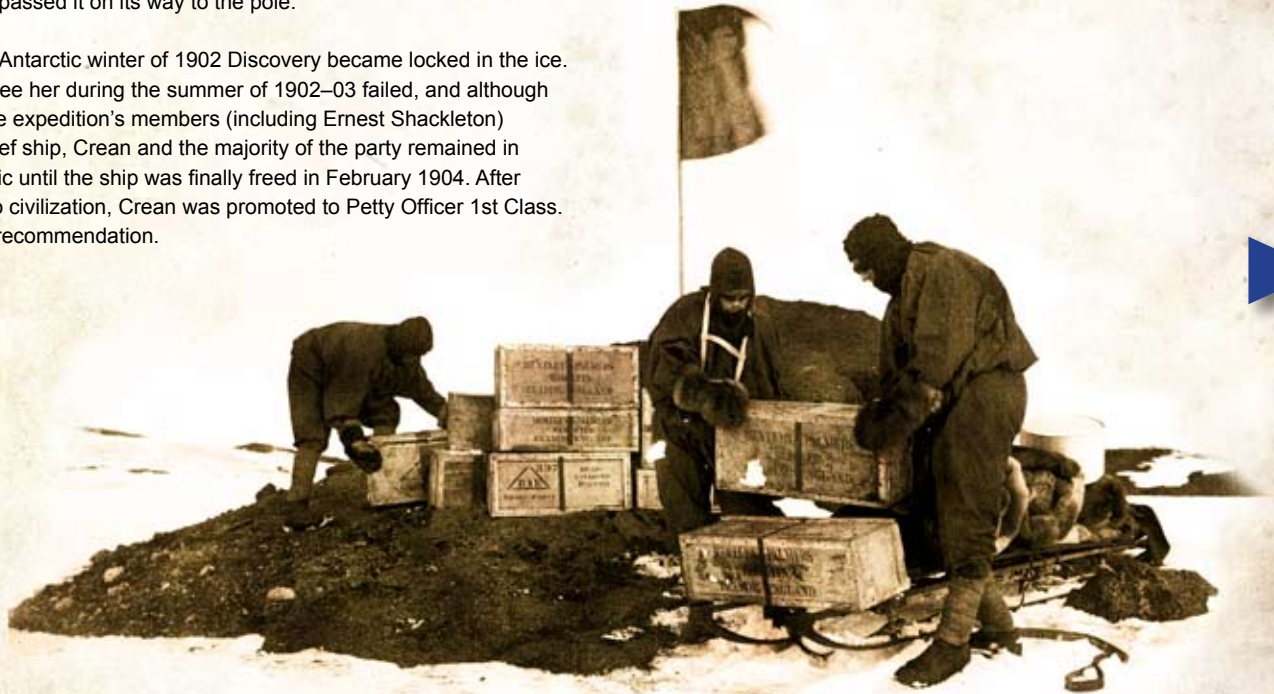
good-humoured, who could strike up a song even during the most unlikely of circumstances. He was extremely hard-working - Scott once observed that the harder the work for Crean, the better. Above all, Crean never lost hope even during the most trying of circumstances, and was able to endure huge hardship long after most men would have given up.

Crean proved to be one of the most consistent man haulers in the party; over the expedition as a whole only seven of the 48-member party logged more time in harness than Crean's 149 days. It was at this time that he formed close friendships with William Lashly and Edgar Evans all three would establish themselves as seasoned polar explorers over the next decade.



Crean accompanied Lieutenant Michael Barnes on three sledging trips across the Ross Ice Shelf, then known as the "Great Ice Barrier". These included the 12-man party led by Barne which set out to lay depots in support of the main southern journey undertaken by Scott, Shackleton and Edward Wilson. The Barne party passed the previous furthest south mark, a record, which they held briefly until the southern party itself passed it on its way to the pole.

During the Antarctic winter of 1902 Discovery became locked in the ice. Efforts to free her during the summer of 1902–03 failed, and although some of the expedition's members (including Ernest Shackleton) left in a relief ship, Crean and the majority of the party remained in the Antarctic until the ship was finally freed in February 1904. After returning to civilization, Crean was promoted to Petty Officer 1st Class. on Scott's recommendation.



Crean had caught Captain Scott's attention with his attitude and work ethic on the Discovery Expedition, and in 1906 Scott requested that Crean join him on HMS Victorious. Over the next few years Crean followed Scott successively to HMS Albemarle, HMS Essex and HMS Bulwark and by 1907 Scott was planning his second expedition to the Antarctic.

Meanwhile Ernest Shackleton's British Antarctic expedition, 1907 - 09, despite reaching a new furthest south record, had failed to reach the South Pole. Scott was with Crean when the news of Shackleton's near miss became public; it is recorded that Scott observed to Crean:

"I think we'd better have a shot next."



Hut point

The Journey to the South Pole - Terra Nova Expedition, 1910–13

One prize still remained beyond the capabilities of even the most seasoned adventurer - to be the first human to reach the South Pole. In 1909, Ernest Shackleton came within 97 miles of the Pole before he made the bold decision to turn back. The next to try was Scott. Even before the expedition had started officially, Crean was already a part of his team.

Scott's ship, the Terra Nova, set sail from London in 1910, reaching McMurdo Sound in the first days of 1911. The team quickly began to prepare for the journey to the Pole, setting up supply depots at strategic points along the chosen route to assist the Polar exploration team on their return to base camp.



One Last Adventure - overview
of expedition to text of the
poem IF by Rudyard Kipling





Video - Untamed and Uncut
showing how Orcas attack
seals on ice floes

It was on one of these preparatory journeys that Crean displayed the depth of character that was to mark him out during the years to come.

Returning from one of the depots, Crean and two other men, Henry Bowers and Apsley Cherry-Garrard, became marooned on an ice floe surrounded by killer whales.

Crean set off on his own to seek help, jumping from floe to floe, seemingly unaware of the huge risks he was taking with his own life. He reached base camp within a few hours and a party was dispatched to rescue his colleagues.



Shortly after the end of the dark Antarctic winter, the assault on the South Pole commenced. The journey itself would entail a 400 mile hike across the Ross Ice Shelf, followed by a punishing climb of 120 miles up the Beardmore Glacier, culminating in a trip of 350 miles over the featureless Antarctic Plateau to the South Pole itself. A team of 12 men, Crean included, set out on 1 November, 1911. Conditions were far from perfect, and the team struggled to cover distances of only a few miles each day. By the time the men reached the foot of the Beardmore, they were exhausted.

There then followed a withering one month slog up the crevasse-strewn Glacier, rising to a height of 10,000 ft above sea level. At the summit, Scott announced the team that he would be taking to the Pole. Crean was not selected and by all accounts he was devastated. After two months of effort to reach this point, Crean apparently wept at the prospect of having to turn back so close to the goal. After having come so far, Tom Crean, William Lashly, and officer Teddy Evans had to return back the way they came.

The return journey down the Glacier and across the Ice Shelf was anything but a cake-walk. Crean, Lashly and Evans now faced a 700-mile (1,100 km) journey back to Hutpoint. Soon after heading north, the party lost the trail back to the Beardmore Glacier, and were faced with a long detour around a large icefall where the plateau tumbles down onto the glacier. With food supplies short and needing to reach their next supply depot, the group made the decision to slide on their sledge, uncontrolled, down the icefall. The three men slid 2,000 feet (600 m), dodging crevasses up to 200 feet (61 m) wide, and ending their descent by overturning on an ice ridge. Evans later wrote: "How we ever escaped entirely uninjured is beyond me to explain".



Evans removed his goggles and subsequently suffered agonies of snow blindness that made him into a passenger. When the party was finally free of the glacier and on the level surface of the Barrier Evans became seriously ill with scurvy and as his condition declined, the two other men had to drag him by sledge for days, dangerously depleting their own supplies and slowing their progress. Evans continued to deteriorate, and eventually a point was reached where the team could go no further.

Once again, Crean set off on his own, with only a little chocolate and three biscuits to sustain him, without a tent or survival pack covering a distance of 35 miles in 18 hours, hardly taking a break despite the sub-zero temperatures and his reduced physical condition. He reached safety just ahead of a fierce blizzard, which probably would have killed him, and which delayed the rescue party by a day and a half. The rescue was successful, however, and Lashly and Evans were both brought to base camp alive. Crean modestly played down the significance of his feat of endurance. In a rare written account, he wrote in a letter: "So it fell to my lot to do the 30 miles for help, and only a couple of biscuits and a stick of chocolate to do it. Well, sir, I was very weak when I reached the hut." Crean's solo walk was to save Teddy Evans's life.

Evans remained forever grateful to Crean for what he had accomplished.





Scott of the Antarctic - profile by
Sir Ranuph Fiennes

Cairn marking the spot of Scott, Wilson and Bower's Grave

Scott and his party were not so fortunate. After suffering the disappointment of having been beaten to the Pole by Roald Amundsen, the entire team perished on the return journey, running out of food and fuel in horrendous blizzard conditions a mere 11 miles from the nearest depot.

Tom Crean was the first to discover the bodies. He was one of the 11-man search party that found the remains of the polar party. They spotted a cairn of snow, which proved to be a tent against which the drift had piled up. It contained the bodies of Scott, Wilson, and Bowers. Crean later wrote, referring to Scott in understated fashion, that he had "lost a good friend".

Crean and the remaining crew of the Terra Nova, returned to England. At Buckingham Palace the surviving members of the expedition were awarded Polar Medals. Crean and Lashly were both awarded the Albert Medals, 2nd Class for saving Evans's life. Crean was promoted to the rank of Chief Petty Officer.



Trans-Antarctic Expedition (Endurance Expedition), 1914–17

“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.

SIR ERNEST SHACKLETON”



One would think that after Scott, Crean's taste for Antarctic adventure would have diminished. His most celebrated achievements were yet to come, however. In 1914, Crean was invited by Ernest Shackleton to join his expedition to be the first to cross the southern continent from coast to coast. He duly accepted the invitation and Shackleton's ship, the Endurance, embarked from London in August that year, just as the First World War began.

Ernest Shackleton knew Crean well from the Discovery Expedition and also knew of his feats on Scott's last expedition. Like Scott, Shackleton deeply trusted Crean: he was worth, in Shackleton's own word, "trumps". Crean joined Shackleton's Imperial Transantarctic Expedition with a varied range of duties. In the absence of a Canadian dog-handling expert who was hired but never appeared, Crean took charge of one of the dog-handling teams, and was later involved in the care and nurture of the pups born to one of his dogs, Sally, early in the expedition.



Endurance Expedition Film
Part 1

Endurance Expedition Film
Part 2





The whaling station at Stromness, South Georgia



Endurance Expedition Film
Part 3

The Endurance sailed into the Weddell Sea in early 1915, aiming for Vahsel Bay on the other side of the continent to McMurdo Sound. Things, however, did not turn out as planned. With no more than 80 miles to go to Vahsel Bay, the Endurance got wedged in pack ice and was to remain in that state until it was eventually crushed by the ice and sank 10 months later. The team had no choice but to stay with the ship, as it moved slowly north with the ice. They were outcasts in one of the most inhospitable regions of the planet, thousands of miles from the nearest outpost of human civilisation.



Shackleton's bold adventure was in disarray and from this point onwards his priority shifted to saving the lives of all 28 men on the expedition.

Shackleton knew more than most that low morale would be the kiss of death to the group. Tom Crean was one of the men Shackleton began to rely heavily on, as his unflappable sense of humour and will to live was just the tonic for the long, cold, eventless days ahead.





Endurance Expedition Film
Part 4









Endurance Expedition Film
Part 5





After 15 months adrift on the ice, conditions finally improved to the extent that the expedition's three small boats could be launched. What followed were six days and nights of abominable conditions, the whole team freezing from continuous soakings and high winds. Crean and Hubert Hudson, the navigating officer of the Endurance, piloted their lifeboat with Crean effectively in charge as Hudson appeared to have suffered a breakdown.



All three boats safely reached Elephant Island on 15 April, 1916. Elephant Island was a barren, inhospitable island. Crean was one of the “four fittest men” detailed by Shackleton to find a safe camping-ground. Shackleton decided that, rather than waiting for a rescue ship that would probably never arrive, that one of the life-boats should be strengthened so that a crew could sail it to South Georgia and arrange a rescue.



Endurance Expedition Film
Part 6



Shackleton hand-picked a team of six men, among them was Crean and another Irishman Tim McCarthy from Kinsale, to travel in a small boat, the James Caird, across the most hostile seas in the world to reach human civilisation. Tim McCarthy like Crean was a seasoned seaman, with good humour and stick-ability and a willingness to endure under extreme hardship and discomfort.

Their destination was South Georgia, 800 miles away.





Endurance Expedition Film
Part 7



The 800 mile boat journey to South Georgia, is described by polar historian Caroline Alexander as 'one of the most extraordinary feats of seamanship and navigation in recorded history', took 17 days through gales and snow squalls, in heavy seas which navigator Frank Worsley described as a "mountainous westerly swell".



Setting off on 24 April 1916, thanks to the navigational skills of Worsley, armed with just the barest equipment, they reached South Georgia on 10 May 1916. Shackleton, in his later account of the journey, recalled Crean's tuneless singing at the tiller: "He always sang when he was steering, and nobody ever discovered what the song was ... but somehow it was cheerful".

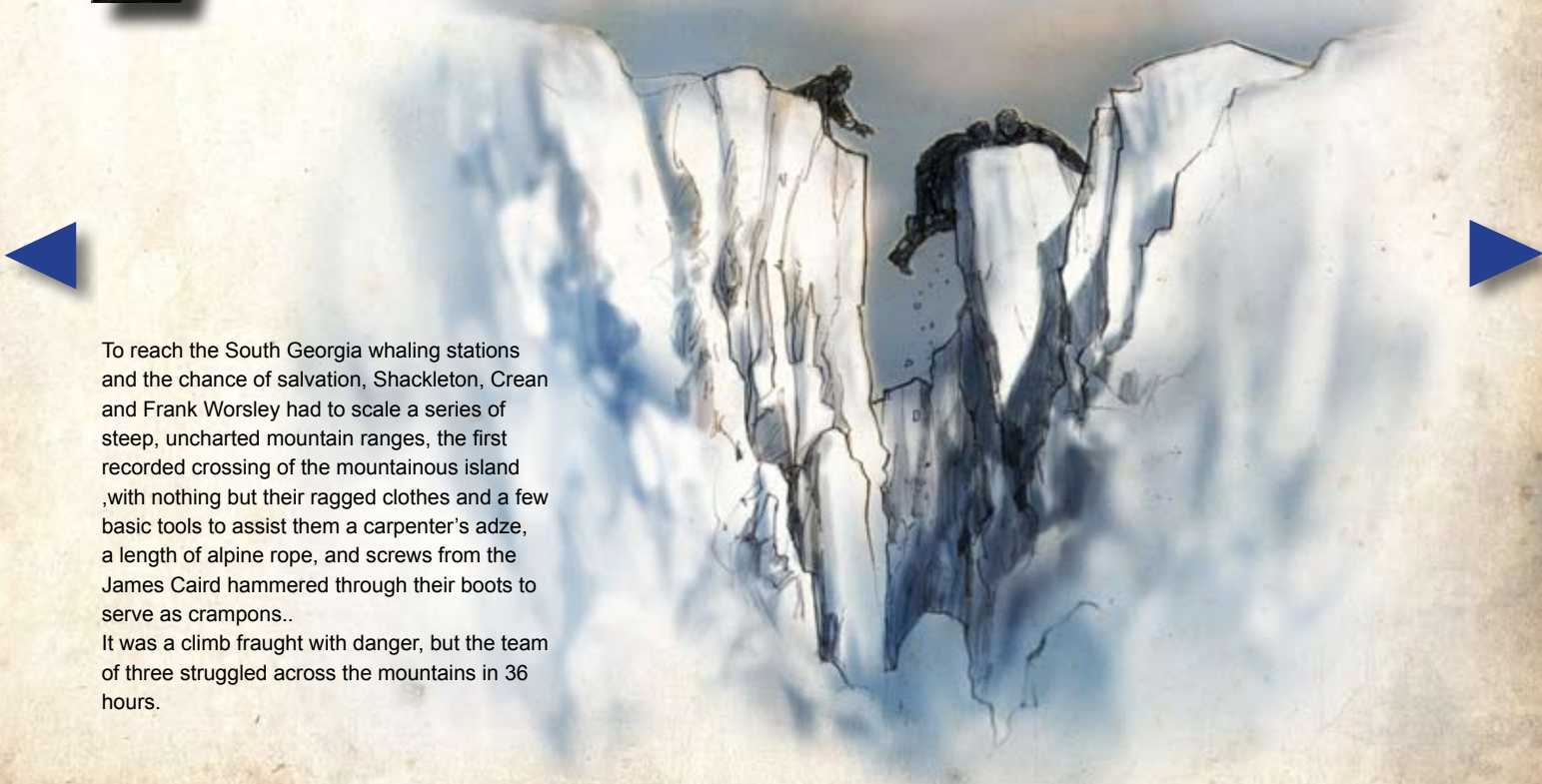
The journey of the six men to South Georgia stands out as one of the most incredible sea journeys ever undertaken. It is nothing short of miraculous that they safely reached their destination but their troubles were far from over.



Endurance Expedition Film
Part 8



Endurance Expedition Film
Part 9



To reach the South Georgia whaling stations and the chance of salvation, Shackleton, Crean and Frank Worsley had to scale a series of steep, uncharted mountain ranges, the first recorded crossing of the mountainous island, with nothing but their ragged clothes and a few basic tools to assist them: a carpenter's adze, a length of alpine rope, and screws from the James Caird hammered through their boots to serve as crampons.

It was a climb fraught with danger, but the team of three struggled across the mountains in 36 hours.

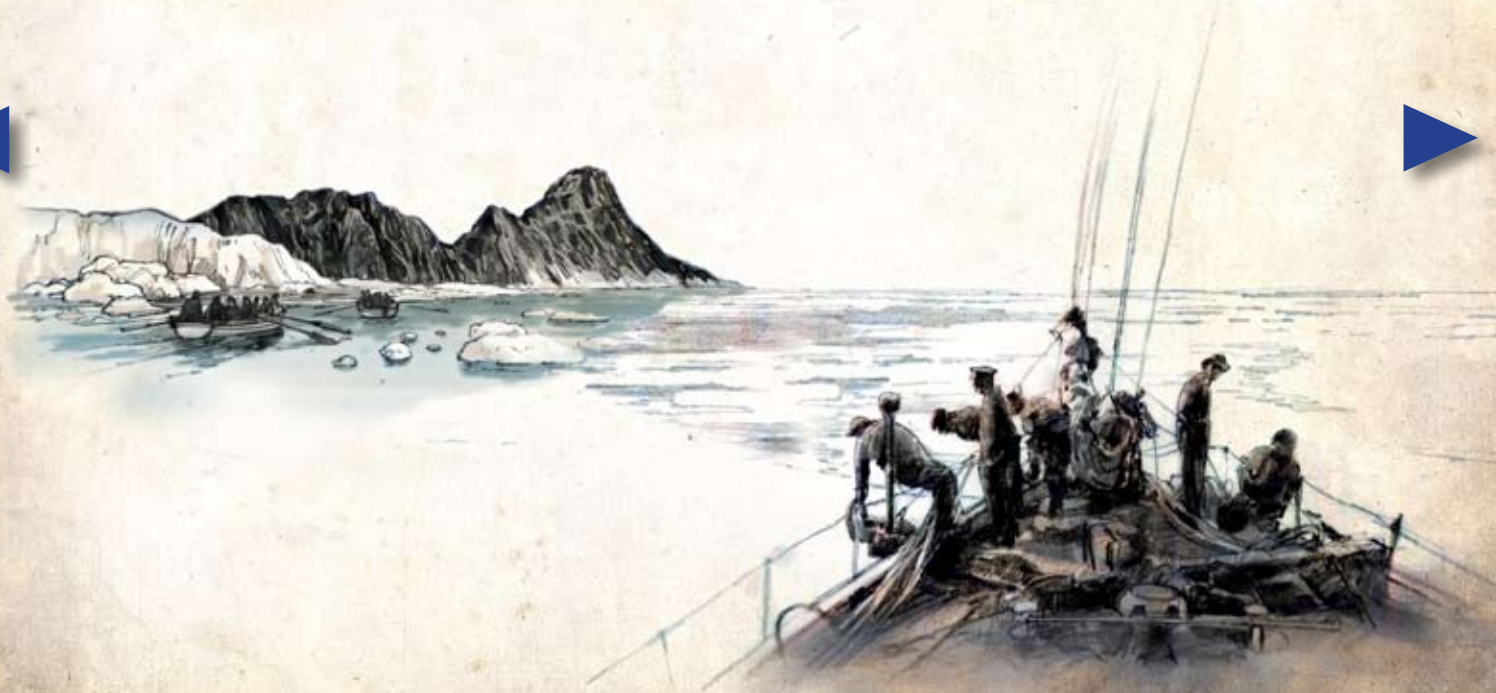
On 20 May, 1916, over eighteen months since they lost contact with the rest of the world, the three dishevelled, exhausted men arrived at Stromness whaling station.



Their journey was at an end and, over the following months, the remaining members of the expedition were rescued. Their achievements saved the lives of all 28 men of the Endurance expedition.



Endurance Expedition Film
Part 10



The Later Years

After returning to Britain, in recognition of his service on the Endurance, Crean was awarded his third Polar Medal.

In early 1920, Shackleton was organising another Antarctic expedition, later to be known as the Shackleton - Rowlett Expedition. He invited Crean to join him, along with other officers from the Endurance. By this time, however, Crean was married, his second daughter had arrived, and he had plans to open a business following his naval career. He turned down Shackleton's invitation.

An interesting Scouting connection – Shackleton and members of the crew had met Baden Powell on his return and greatly admired the new Scouting Organisation. He offered two places on this expedition to two Rover Scouts. The participants would be decided by a competition, via The Scout Magazine. Two Rovers were chosen to join the expedition. One of the Rovers Scout Mooney had to retire due to bad sea sickness and Scout Marr, as he was known accompanied the expedition to South Georgia, whereupon it was abandoned when Shackleton died of a heart attack in South Georgia.

Throughout his life, Crean remained an extremely modest man. When he returned to Kerry, he put all of his medals away and never again spoke about his experiences in the Antarctic. Indeed, there is no reliable evidence of Crean giving any interviews to the press. It has been speculated that this may have been because Kerry had long been a centre for Irish nationalism, and it would have been inappropriate for an Irishman to speak of his achievements on British polar expeditions.



Polar Medal



Cigarette card depicting Scout Marr on the 'Quest' heading for Antarctica

In 1938 Crean became ill with a burst appendix. He was taken to the nearest hospital in Tralee, but as no surgeon was available there to operate, after a week in the hospital he died on 27 July 1938, shortly after his sixty-first birthday.

A Place in History

For a long time, the tragic story of Scott's journey to the South Pole tended to put many of the other expeditions of the time into the shadow. Shackleton's Endurance expedition, while never completely forgotten, was certainly under-appreciated by many. However, in the late 1990s, a number of books, films and television programmes began re-evaluating and highlighting the exploits of Shackleton, and it was then that the story of Tom Crean began to emerge into the limelight.

In 1997, a sailing expedition tried to recreate the amazing boat journey from Elephant Island to South Georgia, but it had to be abandoned due to the rough seas. The boat was called the Tom Crean in honour of the great man. A book Tom Crean, An Unsung Hero, written by Michael Smith, helped to bring the story to a mass audience.

It is unlikely that Tom Crean himself would have been comfortable with this fame and adulation, were he still alive. However, his name will live on for many generations to come.

A mountain Mount Crean (2630 m) in Antarctica and the Crean glacier in South Georgia have been named in honour of this truly inspirational hero.

This account is a compellation of texts and accounts of Tom Crean's life that appear on Wikipedia, BBC.co.uk education and PBS education Channel website 'Shackletons Voyage of the Endurance'

A complete and detailed account of the Tom Crean's Life can be read in Michael Smith's excellent and definitive account - Tom Crean – An unsung hero – Antarctic Explorer.

Michael Smith has also written a shorter version of this book for young people called Tom Crean – Ice Man

