Men of Bronze: Netmen of the Antarctic, Preservers of Life in the Southern Ocean

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As early as 1917, it was recognized that the leviathans of the oceans were in danger of being hunted to extinction. A British Government interdepartmental committee was set up to review the excesses of the whaling industry, which then flourished in the Antarctic. However, it was not until 1923 that a committee with the required finances and authority was established to make "a serious attempt to place the whaling industry on a scientific basis."

The key to any operation of this magnitude was gaining control of whale catching, thus avoiding the depletion of whale stocks. But effective control was out of reach for one simple reason: not enough was known about the habits of whales, their distribution and migration, or of their main food – the 4-6 cm.-long shrimp known as krill.

George Ayres and Duncan Kennedy were two individuals intimately connected with catching krill – after all, they were netmen. They became part of an historic scientific program which spanned over a quarter-century, resulting in the award of white-ribboned decorations formed in that deceptively humble metal of bronze.

A netman was a petty officer responsible for the operation of various-sized nets used to collect marine specimens. Long hours were dedicated to raising and lowering these spider webs in all variety of weather and seas – demanding endurance of mind and body, and causing agony to the fingers.

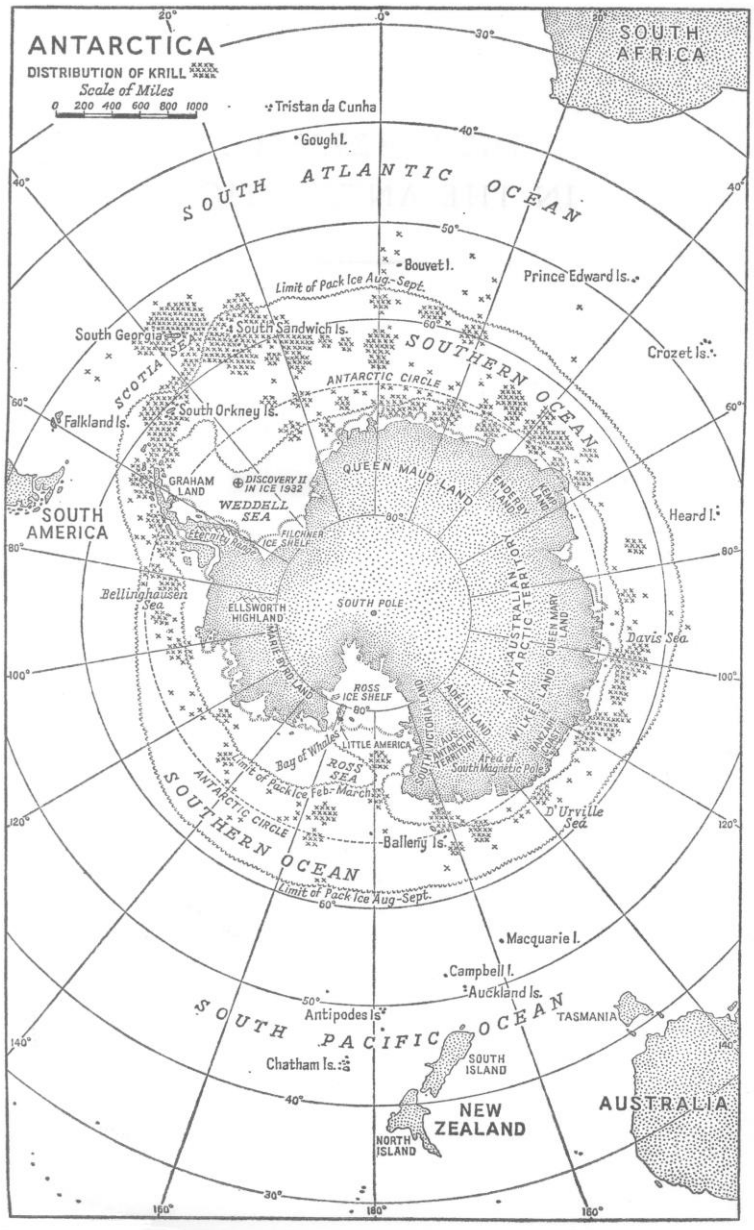
Initially, Scott's former ship *Discovery* was purchased by the newly named Discovery Committee. Then in 1926, the steam vessel *William Scoresby* was built for the Committee and joined the effort, tasked with general oceanographic work, commercial scale trawling and whale marking experiments.

However, it was decided to replace *Discovery* with a new steel ship, specially built for an indefinite and ambitious series of scientific studies called the Discovery Investigations. The Royal Research Ship (RRS) *Discovery II* carried a great deal of scientific and other research equipment, and to meet unknown conditions, her construction required careful planning and original thought. To expend large sums of money at all on serious long-term scientific research was admirable enough, but when one considers the international financial crisis of the early 1930s, it points to the vital importance of this scientific program.

Not all eyes were focused on science; amidst a web of political intrigue surrounding the Southern Continent, the old *Discovery* headed south again as part of the separate British-

Australian-New Zealand-Antarctic Expedition (BANZARE). Norway, France and the United States had been gaining interest in the polar lands, and adjacent waters (filled as they were with seals and whales) – and territorial claims were also at stake.

Londoner George Ayres sailed across the Antarctic threshold with the BANZARE; though the 31-year-old Great War merchant navy veteran signed on as able seaman, he was elevated to netman during the expedition. And he sailed in good company – onboard as photographer was *Endurance* veteran Frank Hurley. The Australian was described by a former shipmate as "a warrior with his camera, [who] would go anywhere or do anything to get a picture". It was not empty praise either.



Antarctica – Distribution of Krill (Coleman-Cooke, 1963)

The BANZARE took place over two southern summers (1929-30 & 1930-31) and sought to chart large areas of coastline, make landings to plant the flag, and carry out inland surveys using a floatplane. In addition, the voyagers were tasked with hydrographic surveys, studies in meteorology, geology and fauna – especially the numbers, species and distribution of whales.

In 1934 Ayres received the Polar Medal with clasp ANTARCTIC 1929-31 for his recent contributions to polar exploration, but by this date he was well into further Antarctic adventures with shipmate Duncan Kennedy.

George Ayres on his 1920 Mercantile Marine identity card (The National Archives)

Kennedy was a Scot, born at Greenock toward the end of the first month in 1888. Not unusually, he took up the fishing trade, and eventually bore a scar in the center of his forehead as a probable reminder of many difficult days at sea. During the First World War Kennedy served in the Pilotage Service and received the British War Medal and Mercantile Marine War Medal. When he joined the RRS *Discovery II* in 1929, given his fishing background, it seemed only natural that he was rated a netman.

In December, as *Discovery II* stood ready at London's St. Katherine's Dock, she received a visit from the King of Norway, who possessed a keen knowledge of everything to do with whaling. The beginning of her three-year odyssey was captured by an *Oxford Mail* reporter:

Hundreds of People gathered to witness the departure of the vessel and after two hours' skilful manœuvring she was steered into the Thames, where much larger crowds were watching.

As the ship glided from her berth girls crowded to the windows of the factories overlooking the dock and waved good-bye to the crew.

One very pretty girl, more daring than the rest, climbed out on to a ledge and shouted 'A Merry Christmas next week,' and the sailors responded with a cheer.

At 234 feet long, and displacing 2,100 tons, *Discovery II* was only a fraction of the size of the 10-12,000 ton whaling factory ships active in Antarctic waters. Still, up until that time, she was the largest research ship ever to explore the Southern Ocean; for both the scientists and crew, it took time to get use to a new ship under conditions of intense cold, storm and pack ice. In addition, working the instruments and winches required constant practice. The surveys, biological collections and hydrographic work were more comprehensive than ever before attempted in southern waters.

RRS *Discovery II* in pack ice. (National Institute of Oceanography library)

The silk nets used for collecting sea plants and animals and were of six different sizes and mesh. The mouth of one tow net was the size of a dinner plate, while another was believed to be the largest in the world – so big that a man could stand upright inside it.

Each vertical net had a silk bag and it was lowered on a wire to whatever depth was being fished, and when a sample of the life in that layer had been obtained the mouth was closed by a messenger, a weight that travelled down the wire and closed the mouth, trapping the contents – an operation that kept two scientists and a deck hand busy for two hours and often a great deal longer at each daily station.

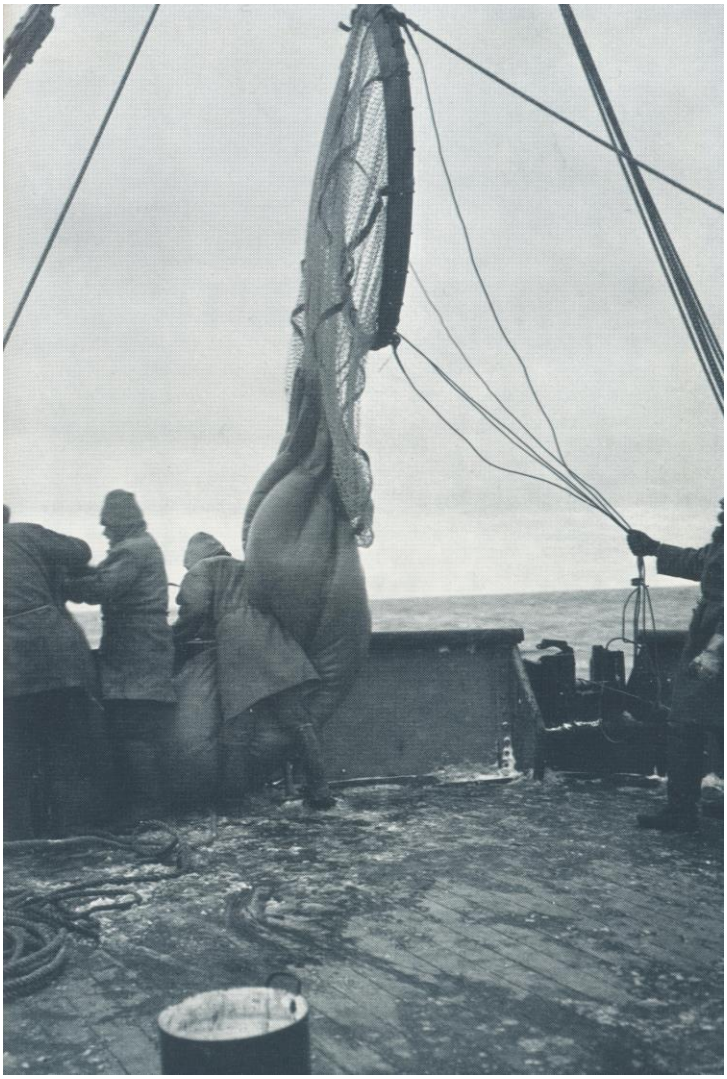
While carrying out these duties during the agreeable weather of the sub-tropical zone, getting a soaking in one's short-sleeved shirt and shorts mattered little, but in Antarctic waters, climatic conditions convinced everyone Hell had indeed frozen over. *Discovery II* was transformed into a Christmas tree by a combination of gale and freezing seas that sprayed the ship's deck, bulwarks and upper works, thickly encrusting them with ice. Torches of burning waste and paraffin were sometimes necessary to thaw the blocks and sheaves over which ran the wires used to lower nets and instruments into the sea.

The high-speed net used to catch krill. (National Institute of Oceanography library)

Under such difficult conditions, a sense of humor was a valuable asset onboard and greatly appreciated by all. Official Photographer Alfred Saunders grinned at Duncan Kennedy's amusing ways of speech:

He had a persistent but unwitting habit of mispronouncing names. One of his jobs was to look after chemical and other scientific stores in the hold. To him sulphuric acid became 'sulfricated acid', hydrochloric acid became 'hydraulic acid', and formalin became 'formamint'. Once when he met a sailor who had had a violent fall on deck still walking about, he said that he thought he had 'discolated' his leg.

In these brief writings, it is impossible to do justice to the many achievements and adventures of the steel explorer and those who served aboard her. However, the drama of one particular incident during the second commission (1931-33) deserves a spotlight. It was during this period that *Discovery II* became the fourth vessel to circumnavigate Antarctica, and the very first to accomplish this feat in wintertime.



Handling a tow net onboard *Discovery II*. (Alfred Saunders, FRPS)

In January 1932, the ship was on her initial voyage deep into the Weddell Sea – the first steel ship to penetrate those waters and the sixth vessel of any type. Near where Shackleton's *Endurance* began meeting ice in 1916, *Discovery II* was caught in a frozen trap and her hull and rudder sustained damage (including a leaking starboard fuel tank). At one point, on January 26, the captain wrote, "Scientific staff and all spare hands employed this day poling ice floes clear of rudder and propeller." Only with great difficultly was the ship extricated from her perilous situation.

In spite of such danger, the wholly natural surroundings never failed to make a marked impression on one's senses. William Peachey, who served from 1931-35 as a fireman/greaser, declared solemnly in a 1991 interview: "it is impossible to describe the stillness and the quietness in the Antarctic, not a sound to be heard."

During *Discovery II*'s third commission (1933-35) her crew made a major impact on Admiral Byrd's Second Antarctic Expedition. On Feb. 5, 1934, Byrd was faced with a severe crisis. Plagued with high blood pressure, his only doctor would have to go home on the support ship *Jacob Ruppert*, leaving only a single medical student. Byrd could not even consider keeping 95 men in the Antarctic with no doctor, and later wrote, "I determined then to get a doctor, or else cancel the expedition."

The previous month, Byrd had been surprised to hear the British ship's radio operator tapping out morse messages on the airwaves. Not that far from each other, the two expeditions exchanged greetings. Now, with an acute crisis at hand, Byrd fired off a radiogram to the captain of *Discovery II*, then at Auckland replenishing her supplies. In the end, New Zealander Dr. Louis Potaka sailed onboard to rendezvous on February 22 with Byrd's *Bear of Oakland* in the Ross Sea – the American expedition was saved!

***Discovery II* and *Bear of Oakland*, Feb. 22, 1934** (www.discoveryinvestigations.ac.uk)

Up until the end of this commission, Ayres was serving as an able seaman on *Discovery II*, but with Kennedy's departure from the ship in 1934, he was promoted to the familiar position of netman. In spite of not yet reaching his 40th year, Ayres was a man of the days of canvas, when iron men sailed wooden ships; he hated fuss and "liked to go quietly and efficiently" about his job. Saunders painted an image of the man and his work:

Ayres became the right-hand man of the scientific staff; conscientious and ever-willing, he performed a multitude of jobs. He kept the scientific equipment and chemicals of all kinds safely stowed in the hold and knew where everything was to be found. He was always mending the nets used for towing, and was always present on stations. His average working day was about sixteen hours, yet he was always helpful and cheerful. When walking along the deck during a station, one could hear him joking with his companions if the din of a raging storm permitted. Only if things went wrong did the tone of his voice change. He sometimes regaled us with numerous sea shanties which he sang at the top of his voice. He was a bachelor, wedded only to the sea.

After two more fruitful voyages, the onset of the Second World War prevented *Discovery II* from venturing into the Southern Ocean during those tumultuous years – bringing an end to an era for the men of bronze. All told Kennedy served through six Antarctic seasons and received a well earned Polar Medal sporting the uniquely dated clasp ANTARCTIC 1929-34. At the start of the Second World War, he was boatswain of HMS *Alice,* and when *The London Gazette* announced his Polar Medal two years later, Kennedy was still serving with this rank. Meanwhile, George Ayres was doing duty as an Able Seaman when the same *Gazette* heralded the ANTARCTIC 1931-39 clasp to his medal, representing in total 11 seasons in the southern Frozen Zone.

Polar Medal in bronze awarded to Duncan Kennedy, Netman, RRS *Discovery II* (courtesy of DNW)

Of a mere 82 bronze Polar Medals and four individual clasps issued for Antarctic research between 1925 and 1939, only two netmen were so honored. Ayres' decoration was just one of eight medals representing two separate awards (including four medals with dates on the rims and single clasps).

The engraved naming in serifed capitals displays the recipients' full names. In cases of naval officers, abbreviated ranks and post nominals were included; for scientists, post nominals were also featured in the naming. Regrettably, ratings and the ships' details were not placed on the edge.

During 1950-51 (on her sixth commission) *Discovery II* sailed to the Antarctic one last time; so too did the *William Scoresby*, on her eighth commission. A few years later the *Scoresby* was sent to the ship breakers. *Discovery III* replaced her hardworking predecessor in 1962, and the latter was broken up the following year.

By 1963, the greatest scientific effort in the history of exploration had accumulated research filling 34 volumes: without the detailed research of the Discovery Committee, its scientists and sailors, no whale conservation would have been possible.

During interviews of Antarctic veterans for his book, John Coleman-Cooke was overwhelmed by the Frozen Zone's effect on its human intruders:

How then does it come about that every man who has visited the south polar seas always refers to it as the greatest of life's experiences? Everyone with whom the writer has discussed this stressed the powerful hold over the imagination of vast oceanic regions with the frozen, deserted continent to the south and the phenomena of the Southern Lights, ice patterns, daylight round the clock at one time of the year and almost total darkness at another. "It is a world apart," said one man, and that sums it up.

Acknowledgements

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