

Robert Falcon Scott

Who was Captain Scott?

Robert Falcon Scott was an explorer who died in 1912 after attempting to reach the South Pole before anyone else. Over time, some historians have criticised Scott's decision-making during the expedition. Others have put the team's failure down to poor weather and bad luck. Whatever the reason, the facts of that fateful sequence of events are well-known from Scott's diary and the accounts of other explorers.



Captain Robert Falcon Scott

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Scott's first attempt

Scott had already commanded a successful expedition to the Antarctic between 1901 and 1904. At the time, few humans had visited Antarctica. During that expedition, Scott's team travelled further south than anyone had gone before. After that success, Scott started raising funds for another expedition to Antarctica. He wanted to be the first person to make the ambitious journey to the South Pole.



Scott, with team members Shackleton and Wilson, on the British National Antarctic Expedition, 1902

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Travelling to Antarctica

Once Scott had raised enough funds, his team of scientists and explorers left Cardiff on 15th June 1910, travelling on a whaling ship called the *Terra Nova*. The team had two major goals: to reach the South Pole and collect scientific specimens to learn more about Antarctica.

When the *Terra Nova* reached Australia, Scott's team learned that a Norwegian explorer called Roald Amundsen was planning to reach the South Pole first. This news suddenly turned Scott's expedition into a race for the South Pole.



Terra Nova

Image from: Wikimedia Commons/Public domain

The race begins

Scott's first group left the Antarctica base camp on 24th October 1911 with mechanical sledges, ponies and dogs. Amundsen's team had already set off with experienced skiers and dogs pulling their supplies on sledges. Scott had little trust for dogs and thought it was more honourable to use human effort to pull the sledges to the South Pole. Another advantage Amundsen had was that his only mission was to reach the South Pole but Scott planned to do scientific research as well.



Scott and his team

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Challenges

From the beginning, Scott's team faced many challenges. The mechanical sledges broke down almost straight away. The temperatures on the way to the South Pole were unusually high for the time of year. Wet blizzards soaked the team and their ponies sank into the deep snow.

Scott and his team had food rations that provided about 4500 calories per day. Historians now believe that they would have needed almost double that amount because of the brutal cold and amount of physical exertion needed to pull the sledges. Having too little food meant their bodies had to work even harder to stay warm because they weren't getting enough calories.

At the bottom of the Beardmore Glacier, the team shot the ponies as food for the men and their dogs. Then, the dog teams went back to base camp. Some historians believe Scott and his team could have used the dogs more efficiently to make their journey quicker and easier.



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Scott in his polar clothing



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Oates with horses and dogs

The final push

Once the dogs had left, the sledging teams continued. On 10th December 1911, the team started to climb Beardmore Glacier with three sledges. When they were drawing nearer to the South Pole, Scott chose four men to travel with him: Wilson, Bowers, Oates and Evans. He had originally planned to take three men with him to the pole but added Bowers to the team at the last minute. The downside of this was that they had only brought enough food for four men, not five, and Bowers did not have skis. This meant his feet sank into the deep snow with every step.

The five men reached the South Pole on 17th January 1912, only to discover that Roald Amundsen had beaten them over a month before. Scott was bitterly disappointed.



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Bowers, Wilson, Oates, Scott and Evans



The return journey

Scott and his team made good progress at first. He had left orders for the dog team to meet them on the return journey to supply them with food and help them haul their sledges. The orders were not carried out and the dogs didn't come. Already exhausted, and with no extra food rations, the team had to continue the journey alone.

The weather was brutally cold (around -50°C). At this time of year, such low temperatures were very unusual. Constant blizzards slowed the team's progress and it was so cold that the snow had a grainy texture, making it hard to pull a sledge. Evans admitted that he had wounded his hand and it had become infected. Oates was also suffering from severe frostbite on his feet but had not admitted it to Scott.

Evans died on 17th February. A month later, Oates feared he was slowing the team down and went out alone into the blizzard. He said these final words to the team:

'I am just going outside and may be some time.'

They never saw him again.

Accepting their fate

Scott and his team were trapped in their tents by a blizzard that lasted over a week. They were 240km from base camp and about 17km from the next depot of supplies. They died in their tents on 29th March 1912, after being without food, water and warmth for eight days.

Eight months later, a search team found the bodies of the missing explorers. They also discovered Scott's diary, which explained what had happened during the failed expedition. Their bodies were buried on Antarctica.



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Scott and his men at Amundsen's base, South Pole



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Graves of Scott, Bowers and Wilson



Scott's discoveries

Scott's team encountered one hardship after another but they also made valuable discoveries. On their return journey, they discovered plant fossils that had also been found on other continents. This proved Antarctica had once been connected to a larger landmass. The weather readings taken by the team have also helped scientists since then to understand the conditions on Antarctica. In addition, the team collected thousands of scientific specimens and wrote many reports.



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Scott writing in his diary in his hut at Cape Evans

Remembering Scott

Many explorers and historians since the expedition have debated over whether Scott was a hero or a poor leader who made many mistakes.

However history remembers Scott, he and his team achieved their objective of reaching the South Pole and made important discoveries that have helped scientists to understand more about the brutally cold, fascinating continent of Antarctica.



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Statue of Robert Falcon Scott in Christchurch, New Zealand

