

Bravery Author: Martin Smith

I have found that when doing research it is very easy to get distracted and go off at a tangent. Whilst researching New Road in Brixham I got intrigued by a blue plaque dedicated to a man called Lionel Greenstreet. He was a long ago resident of Brixham whom made a remarkable mark on the pages of history. At 15 Lionel was a cadet on a training ship the 'Worcester' from where he passed out in 1904 with certificates in navigation and seamanship both first class. He served on mainly sailing ships until joining the 'Endurance' in 1914 on its fateful journey.

Lionel heard of the vacancy for first officer aboard the Endurance and duly wrote to Frank Worsley, the Captain, whom invited Lionel down to Plymouth where the Endurance was birthed at the time. Lionel thought he was to be interviewed but on arrival was offered the job and told to get his kit. Lionel arrived back just half an hour before the Endurance sailed.

The expedition was led by explorer Ernest Shackleton and was due to sail to Vahsel Bay on the coast of Antarctica. They never made it as the Endurance was beset by ice and frozen into heavy pack ice. Lionel was charged with keeping deck watches in the hope of finding open water to sail out. The crew made futile attempts to stop the leaks as the ice punched its way through the ship but Shackleton was forced to issue the order to abandon ship. They made camp on the pack ice where Greenstreet and Alexander Macklin were given a dog sled team with the hope they could hunt for food. They came back with an 800lb Weddell seal which relieved the pressure of starvation. They drifted into warmer seas where the pack ice started to break up. With the three lifeboats rescued from the Endurance they managed to row to Elephant Island with a lot of the crew getting frost bite along the way as the temperatures were still twenty degrees below freezing.

When they reached the island it was decided that Shackleton would head a six man team to try to reach South Georgia Island to get help. Greenstreet was instructed to try and jury rig some sort of shelter out of sailcloth from the Endurance for himself and the remaining crew. Worsley described the effort in his account of the expedition.

'Frozen like a board and caked with ice, the canvas was sewn, in painful circumstances, by two cheery optimists – Greenstreet, Chief Officer of the Endurance, and Bakewell, a Canadian. The only way they could do it was by holding the frozen canvas in the blubber fire till it thawed, often burning their fingers, while the oily smoke got in their eyes and noses, half-blinding and choking them. Then they sewed, often getting frostbitten and having to use great care that the difficult sewing with cold, brittle sail needles did not break all of our now scanty supply. All the time, while repeating the unpleasant task of thawing a length, and sewing it, 'Horace' (Greenstreet's nickname) was irrepressibly cracking his sailor jokes and Bakewell replying.'

They were rescued on 30 August 1916 by the ship *Yelcho*. For his contribution to the expedition Lionel was awarded the Polar Medal in silver. The crew of twentyeight all survived. The only casualties were the two ships cats who had to be put down.

The crew of the Endurance faced an extreme life threatening situation. They faced it with stoic fortitude, courage and bravery. Lionel went on to serve in both world wars and died in 1979 at the age of ninety.

There is a comparison with the situation we find ourselves in at the moment and a group of people who are no less brave and are putting their lives on the line as a daily occurrence. They find themselves in a situation not of their making but are facing that situation with equal courage and fortitude. I am of course talking of our wonderful NHS workers and our people in the care industry. Most of the time they work un-noticed and un-thanked but it is now they are getting noticed and now we need them the most. So please support the NHS and care workers and clap for them on Thursday evening.