

The South Polar Race Medal



Created by
Danuta Solowiej

The way to the South Pole / Sydpolen.



Roald Amundsen's track is in Red
and Captain Scott's track is in Green.

The South Polar Race Medal

Roald Amundsen and his team reaching the
Sydpolen on 14 Desember 1911.

(Obverse)

Captain R. F. Scott, RN and his team reaching
the South Pole on 17 January 1912.

(Reverse)

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Background

The 100th anniversary of man's first attainment of the South Pole recalls a story of two iron-willed explorers committed to their final race for the ultimate prize, which resulted in both triumph and tragedy.

In July 1895, the International Geographical Congress met in London and opened Antarctica's portal by deciding that the southernmost continent would become the primary focus of new exploration. Indeed, Antarctica is the only such land mass in our world where man has ventured and not found man. Up until that time, no one had explored the hinterland of the frozen continent, and even the vast majority of its coastline was still unknown. The meeting touched off a flurry of activity, and soon thereafter national expeditions and private ventures started organizing: the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration had begun, and the attainment of the South Pole became the pinnacle of that age.

Roald Engelbregt Gravning Amundsen (1872-1928) nurtured at an early age a strong desire to be an explorer in his snowy Norwegian surroundings, and later sailed on an Arctic sealing voyage. He furthered that experience by shipping as first mate with Adrien de Gerlache's Antarctic expedition onboard the *Belgica* (1897-99). In his youth he admired Fridtjof Nansen's achievements, and dreamed of becoming the first to sail the Northwest Passage, which he did from 1903-06. During this expedition, Amundsen learned from the Inuit how to construct igloos, and notably, how to drive dogs.

Next setting his sights on attaining the North Pole, Amundsen received a grant from Norway's parliament, and Nansen's permission to sail in the polar ship *Fram* ("Forward"). Naval First Lieutenant Thorvald Nilsen served as her captain and the expedition's second-in-command. Amid his preparations for departure, in September 1909 Amundsen got word of the separate claims

by Robert Peary and Frederick Cook to have reached the North Pole. However, the South Pole remained unconquered, and the Norwegian formulated a secret plan to accomplish one objective as rapidly as possible – get to the Pole and back – and then continue on with his original objective in the North.

Amundsen favored skilled skiers, and trusty canines were his locomotive mainstay. Assembling a team of highly capable men was crucial for the plan's success; among the nine chosen for the shore party were: excellent skier and dog driver F. Hjalmar Johansen, skiing champion Olav O. Bjaaland, dog drivers Helmer J. Hansen, Sverre H. Hassel, and Oscar Wisting, who was a naval seaman and afterward trained as a dog driver in Antarctica.

When *Fram* sailed from Kristiansand on 9 August 1910, she headed for the North Atlantic island of Madeira, from where Amundsen telegraphed Captain Scott: “Beg leave to inform you *Fram* proceeding Antarctic. Amundsen.” He also addressed his entire crew on deck and reviewed plans to strike for the South Pole, and was greeted with smiles all around.

Fram entered the Bay of Whales on 14 January 1911, and established his Framheim base two miles inland. Although he was 60 miles closer to the Pole than the British starting point of Cape Evans, Ross Island, Amundsen would be trailblazing his way south. Depots were laid through the end of March before the Norwegians settled down for the long winter. By late August, several false starts were the crucible of Amundsen's patience, until he and his seven-man team finally burst southward on 8 September. But the Antarctic would have none of it, and after three days of good progress temperatures plunging to -56°C (-69°F); and things only worsened. It was 14 September before Amundsen finally ordered a retreat back to Framheim, 40 miles away. Much battered, the Norwegians nursed their wounds and waited for better days.

When 19 October came around, Amundsen set out again, but with a smaller team: Bjaaland, Hanssen, Hassel, and Wisting – each of whom commanded a sledge with 13 dogs. The unknown trail was kind to them and Amundsen allowed for five hours of travelling per day. By the end of the third week in November, the team rested atop the newly named Axel Heiberg Glacier, having discovered it and the Queen Maud Mountains along the way. After a few days the men moved out into unfavorable conditions of poor visibility, and a minefield of crevasses awaiting them beyond the mountains.

Leaving dangers further and further behind with each mile gained, the Pole now beckoned Amundsen. In the afternoon of 14 December, on what was christened the King Haakon VII Plateau, the five Norwegians grasped their flag together and planted it at the South Pole. Not wishing to suffer the same scrutiny as Peary and Cook, due to their conflicting and unverified claims related to the North Pole, Amundsen crisscrossed the whole area for three days, carefully making observations and calculations. Only then did he erect a tent called Poleheim, in which he left a message for Captain Scott, asking for another message to be delivered to King Haakon in case anything should happen to him. Their objective accomplished, the five Norwegian turned northward for *Fram* on 18 December.

Robert Falcon Scott (1868-1912) came from a family where several members had served in the army or navy, and he joined as a naval cadet in 1881, at age 13, following a traditional path for a Victorian naval officer. Six years later, the now Midshipman Scott caught the eye of Royal Geographical Society Secretary Clements Markham, a strong proponent of polar exploration and himself a veteran of the Franklin search during the 1850s. Markham made a note of the young officer as a possible future choice for exploration work. In mid-1899, a chance encounter on a London street

between Lieutenant Scott and Clements Markham – now RGS President – forever changed Scott’s life. Scott first learned of an upcoming Antarctic expedition, and a few days later volunteered to be its leader, thereafter being promoted to commander.

In the tradition of 19th century Royal Navy Arctic expeditions, Scott arrived at Hut Point, Ross Island, with a large party onboard the purpose-built *Discovery* in early 1902. Ahead was a comprehensive two-year program: geographical exploration and scientific inquiry. Only one man actually had any experience with dogs, and sledging experience was almost non-existent as well – it would be on-the-job-training for the men. A primary aim was to reach the South Pole, and Scott led a man-hauling team that achieved a farthest south of 83° 16’ 33” before turning back; he made it to the polar plateau along a practical route via the Beardmore Glacier for reaching the South Pole.

After returning home, Scott was promoted to captain, and though he continued his naval career, he also planned to return south one day. That day came in January 1911 when the *Terra Nova* (“New Land”), carrying an even larger party of men than *Discovery*, approached Cape Evans on Ross Island. Scott’s program again included exploration and science, along with a run south, this time utilizing mechanized sledges, ponies, dogs and man-hauling. Scott was determined to prove he could make it all the way, and surpass Ernest Shackleton’s 1909 farthest record (88° 23’ S), in which he came within 97 miles (190 km) of the Pole.

Depots for the South Pole attempt the following year were laid, and by mid-May everyone was back at Cape Evans for the winter. On 24 October the first of three southern elements departed, aiming for a rendezvous at 80° 32’ S. The motor sledge team clanked out of camp, but the machines soon succumbed to mechanical failures, and the team reverted to man-hauling. Scott followed-up

with ponies on 1 November, and afterward came two dog sledges. Everyone met up at the rendezvous on 21 November, and one month later the top of the Beardmore Glacier was reached, giving way to the polar plateau; now there were only three sledge teams, and one more was sent back.

Finally, on 4 January 1912, the final Pole Party was set at five men, one more than the original plan of four. Since Scott decided to take an extra man along, this meant a recalculation of food and weight, and a more crowded than usual tent on the trail. Scott chose Dr. Edward Wilson, Lieutenant Henry Bowers, Captain Lawrence Oates, and Petty Officer Edgar Evans. Five days later, Shackleton's farthest south was surpassed: but jubilant expectations were soon shattered. On 16 January the white landscape was interrupted by a marker flag left by the Norwegians. The following day Scott and his men stood at the South Pole, "but under very different circumstances from those expected," wrote Scott, and they found the tent and messages left by Amundsen.

With an 800-mile trek back to Cape Evans, Scott left the Pole on 18 January. Initially, the party made good progress, but as Scott approached the summit of the Beardmore, two of the men, Wilson and Evans, were suffering particularly badly, the latter having received a concussion after a bad fall. The effects of weather and the limited sledge diet had taken their toll. Evans made it to the bottom of the glacier, but died in his sleep on 17 February. A month later, not wishing to continue to be a hindrance to his comrades' chances for survival, Oates sacrificed his life by walking out of the tent during a blizzard.

In the meantime, on 26 February, Assistant Zoologist Apsley Cherry-Garrard and Russian Dog Driver Dmitriy Girev departed from the coast with two dog teams to deposit extra rations for the Pole Party at One Ton Depot. They arrived on 4 March, but

not finding Scott, waited six days, and then amid deteriorating weather and diminishing supplies made a turn for home - at this time the desperate Pole Party was fewer than 70 miles (110 km) away. One more attempt to reach Scott was made through the man-hauling trip of Surgeon Edward L. Atkinson and Petty Officer Patrick Keohane, but they were unsuccessful.

By 19 March, Scott, Wilson and Bowers had struggled to within 11 miles (18 km) of One Ton Depot - and safety - until a ferocious blizzard trapped them in their tent: Scott set down his last journal entry ten days later. Atkinson led a sledge party that found the three men that November. Scott was frozen solid, sitting upright, eyes open and journal in his lap, with Wilson and Bowers leaning against him. The swell of the Heroic Age had reached its peak.

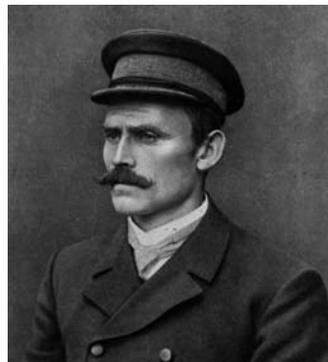
As for Amundsen, the North occupied him the rest of his days. He continually assaulted it by ship, flying boat, and airship, but in the end the Arctic triumphed. Amundsen disappeared on 18 June 1928, somewhere in the Barents Sea, while attempting to rescue the lost crew of the airship *Italia*, which had reached the North Pole but failed to return to Spitsbergen.

It is with the creation of The South Polar Race Medal that these extraordinary men, and those who followed them, are remembered.

Glenn M. Stein, FRGS.



Locating the exact position of the South Pole / Sydpolen on 17 December / Desember 1911.



O. Bjaaland, Roald Amundsen, H. Hanssen, S. Hassel and O. Wisting.
The *Fram* in ice.

Licensed with permission of the The Fram Museum, Oslo, Norway.



Dr. Wilson, Capt. Scott, Lt. Bowers, PO Evans and Capt. Oates.
Terra Nova at anchor.

Licensed with permission of the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, England.

The Artist

Danuta Solowiej (aka Solowiej-Wedderburn) is a Polish-born artist residing in the United Kingdom. She arrived in the UK in 1988 after graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw, where she studied sculpture having specialised in medallic art. Her many medal and coin designs include the five pound crown coin celebrating the 80th birthday of Queen Elizabeth II and recently a five pound coin for Alderney commemorating John Lennon.

Samantha Marsden engraved the medal's legends.

Production

Each medal is cast by using the lost wax process at the works of Niagara Falls Castings located in Warwick, England. Following casting, the central images are burnished by Danuta, rims and edges are polished by Reg Elliot, Sam engraves the medal number, then hallmarked and lastly, passed to SCA for distribution.

The Offering

The South Polar Race Medal is approximately 6 cms / 2.4 inches in diameter and has a sterling silver weight of 3.0 troy ounces / 93 grams. The edition is limited to 100 medals with each medal signed by the artist and numbered. The price is £395 plus vat and shipping.



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