

South to the Ice!

A reminiscence of an Antarctic rescue 1932¹



Our sturdy little ship from Hull – the Dias – 25 years old²

I'm Ole Hansen and I am the Mate on the little ship the Dias, based mostly on a speck of land in the far south of the Atlantic, the island of South Georgia. It's a grand place if you don't care too much about the isolation, poor food, the cramped living quarters on the ship and some rough company! But it suits me. The money I make from the Argentine company that owns our ship, Pesca, is pretty good and there's little to spend it on. Unlike most of my fellow crew members I'm not married so all the more for me. I am not so minded about the many months away from Norway either. I grew up in a winding valley in the mountains to the west of Sandefjord in the South of the country. That was pretty isolated as well, so loneliness here doesn't worry me very much. I write a few letters to my parents who still live there, and that's a tough life too.

Well, I must tell you my story of our voyage to Antarctica, and it turned out to be quite an adventure. But, I should start by speaking a little bit about my ship, the old Dias, that in the end proved something of a life-saver. Our ship's really a trawler that used to fish in the North Sea before the Great War. We Norwegians hunted for herring, haddock and sole in much the same waters so I heard. She was based in the great port of Kingston-upon-Hull on the East coast of England. It is probably still the biggest fishing port in the world, so I feel quite proud to work on her. And that's where she was built, up river on the Hull at a small town called Beverley. And she was built strong. Her plates are as thick as my thumb, and rivets aplenty. It means she can tough it out even in the stormy seas down here and push away a fair amount of ice in the fjords. I hear she was first called Viola, which is a pretty name. The Captain says he reckons it was some lady from Shakespeare, but I've never read any not even in Norwegian! But Dias will do. It may be after the Portuguese sailor in the

¹ This is a fictional short story written by David Drewry (@David J Drewry). None of the characters are intended to represent persons living or deceased and the incidents described are entirely imaginary.

² Photo source: Robinson, R and Hart I 2014 Viola. The life and times of a Hull steam trawler, London, Lodestar Books and Hull Maritime Museum, 223pp

olden days that sailed round the African Cape, but who knows. She is over 100 feet long and skinny as a pencil so rolls a good deal but is a very seaworthy ship and handles well. We are out in all weathers around the islands, snow and sleet, wind and rain catching seals from our main wharf at Grytviken. In the season we catch and flense hundreds of elephant seals. The blubber from the huge males can fill a couple of barrels with oil – it's a messy business. But good money for Pesca. We never take more than allowed by our licence and the numbers seemed to keep up each year. Well, the business has kept me in pocket for a good long time.

So, to our journey to Antarctica last year. It started in February just before we were ready to begin the sealing season again. The company sometimes hires out the Dias in the slack period to the government back in Buenos Aires to take men and food down to the base in the South Orkney islands, about 450 miles south west of us (and those are nautical miles so if you're used to kilometres it's 850!). First, we had to sail to the town of Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego to collect our cargo. That was a dismal journey, over a week, battling the wind and high seas to head due west to the Beagle Channel where we got some respite before arriving at the port. You might think we would welcome the change of scene, bars and a bit of life but this town is drear and sad. Much of the place has been built by inmates let out to do work from the big prison they have there. There's not many that escape from Tierra I can tell you, so I guess it was a good place to lock up the malcontents and a few thieves! The depression in America and back home in Europe had sunk the place even more with not many ships going round the Horn now.

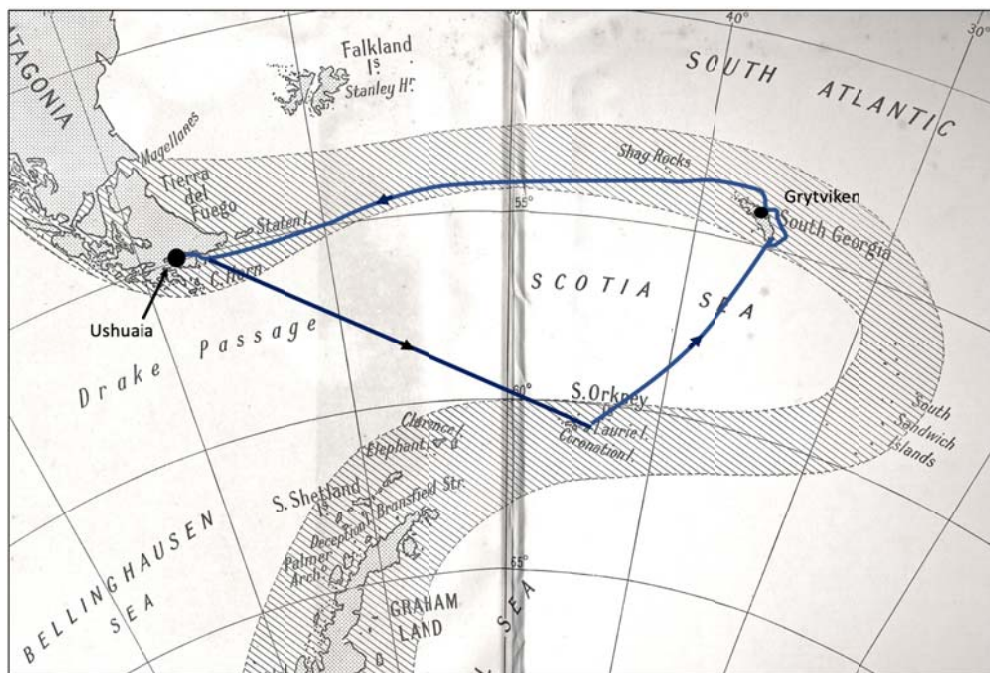


Ushuaia – a lot of wooden buildings built by prisoners and not a place we wanted to stay very long³

Even if we weren't able to have much fun there we did get all our cargo for the South Orkneys – boxes of food, dried fish just like we have back home in Norway, building materials and plenty of beer! We also had about a dozen men to ship down there, some to

³ Photo source: Museu Marítimo de Ushuaia

work repairs on the buildings and those who would stay there over the winter to measure the weather.

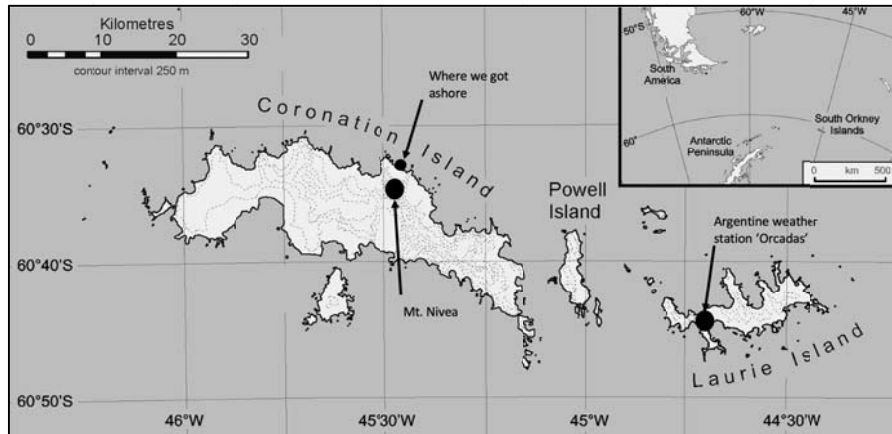


A chart of our journeys in February and March 1932⁴

And then we were off, laden to the gunnels. Once we had put Navarino behind us, passed Picton and rounded Nueva Island, we were back into the roaring forties and beyond to the furious fifties and then screaming sixties. What conditions we have down here! And those wind belts live up to their names. With all that weight, my God, did the old ship roll in those long steep waves pushing through the Drake Passage. Many of the passengers were sick as dogs. We had to take our meals in shifts in the little cabin below the galley. It is no bigger than a cupboard, and the cook can't produce very much at a time. We were going very slowly at only about 5 knots and it took us more than ten days to get to the South Orkney Islands.

It was my first time below sixty degrees South, and I was very excited. As we approached the islands the sun came out from behind the clouds over the biggest one, (it's called Coronation), sparkling with ice and snow, glaciers tumbling down to the sea and I could smell the land after our days at sea. It was actually the smell of the birds. The penguins on the shore make quite a stench. Now don't get me wrong, South Georgia is a spectacular place, with mountains much higher, but this place feels more remote and far-flung, right on the edge of Antarctica proper. We sailed the north coast of the big island and then past a few islets to Laurie Island where the Argentine base is located, called Orcadas. I was later told this was Spanish for Orkney. Well if that's true it's really a name from old Norwegian! My ancestors, the Vikings, settled north of Scotland hundreds of years ago. Then, the name was meaning seal islands – it's funny how these names get changed.

⁴ Base map source: Back endpaper, Rankin, N 1951 Antarctic Isle, London, Collins



The South Orkney Islands and the Argentine base. We rescued the Argentines just inland of where we got ashore⁵

We spent a day unloading the Dias of all the stores. And how those men we had brought from Ushuaia scammed ashore once we had ferried them to the little jetty, keen as mustard to get off the ship but not so much help to cart the crates to the base. The Argentines gave us a great meal, though, of beef and potatoes washed down with bottles of Quilmes beer – made by the Germans in Buenos Aires . I had tasted it there on one of our visits and it is very good, a bit like our beers in Norway that we get sent down to Grytviken – Ringnes is one of them and I think it's better.



We move some stores into the base⁶

The leader told us a little about their work. The base has been there since 1904 when it was sold by a Scottish explorer called Bruce to the Argentine Government. They keep records of the weather which seems a small job for all this effort, but the leader tells me the British

⁵ Base map source: courtesy BAS

⁶ Photo source: Pablo Gabriel Fontana (2019) *Between the ice of the Orkney Islands: filming the beginnings of the Antarctic overwintering tradition*, *The Polar Journal*, 9:2, 340-357, DOI: 10.1080/2154896X.2019.1686811

have said the islands are theirs, so they are staying put to let London know they have an interest too.

Shortly after we arrived the leader asked the Captain for his help. Apparently some men from the base had gone over to the big island in one of their small whalers to try to climb the highest mountain called Mount Nivea. I thought it shows they have a lot of spare time from eating, drinking and watching the weather. This mountain is about 1200 metres high, over four thousand feet, which is not huge, but it rises quickly out of the sea and is pretty steep with a lot of ice covering it. Well, they had been gone a long time without any radio messages and the base was worried. They asked us to sail to Coronation and see if we could find them and their camp, maybe even rescue them if they were in trouble. They needed a bigger ship you see as the ice was starting to come back. By the end of March, the weather is usually turning to winter and with some big storms

We quickly re-boarded Dias and she took us back along the north coast, close in as we dare as a good area of the sea hasn't been sounded for depths, and we spotted a lot of jagged rocks along our track. A big glacier was also ahead, and the sea was full with icebergs that were breaking up into bergy bits and growlers. Any one of these could damage the Dias even with her thick plates. I was on the lookout all the time from the open Bridge which is cold work.



We met ice as we approached Coronation Island which is in the distance⁷

We worked our way carefully for about twelve miles to a couple of headlands which were the closest to the mountain. These looked like they were the ends of ridges running down from the high peak. The sun was still out and the bays and peaks and icebergs looked wonderful. But I knew it was treacherous country. My sharp eyes soon spotted a tent on the ice a little way from the shoreline by the edge of the ridge, and we gave several blasts on the Dias whistle. That certainly brought out a couple of figures who waved to us. Now this

⁷ Photo source: Glasgow Digital Library (Uni https://sites.scran.ac.uk/voyage_of_the_scotia/scotia/images)

was the tricky bit. How to get the Dias close inshore for the dingy to be launched. There was a lot of ice and the lead line gave only a few tens of feet of water. But the Dias proved her worth quickly responding to the helm as we dodged our way in, nudging away the brash ice. We got ready to launch our small boat. The Captain intended to remain on board and told me to be the leader. I had spent a lot of my young days tramping and taking long ski trips in hills beyond our home on the edge of Telemark and was very comfortable with snow and ice. I had three crew with me, all good men and ready for a spot of excitement. We polled a lot of ice out of the way as we rowed towards the shore. Soon we ran up onto the shingle and immediately hauled the boat out of the surf, secured it and went scrambling up a shallow sea cliff to the camp. The couple of Argentines there looked pretty miserable and were in some state of distress. They told us two companions had gone up the nearby ridge two days ago and had not returned. Going up themselves to look for them they had been lucky to survive an avalanche that came down a nearby gully. The end of the summer can be quite a dangerous time to climb in these regions, it would have been better in the winter or spring despite the cold.



The camp before we set off to rescue the two Argentines⁸

We quickly decided to go up ourselves as we were fresh, to see if we could spot anyone. We took off our seaman's long boots and exchanged them for ones with hobnails, took our ropes and knapsacks with some food and water and set off as fast as we could up the snow slope and onto the steep and icy ridge. The going was tough, and the light was getting poor with cloud coming in over the high peaks and a breeze picking up. We found some tracks in the snow and followed them. Suddenly we were stopped still. Out of the gloom we saw two big crevasses cutting across our route. The ice was getting deeper and we could see we were now on the edge of a wide glacier. The crevasses had been hidden by snow but with the summer thaw the snow bridges had sagged and partly fallen through so we could look down into a cold frozen world. Harald, one of the riflemen from the sealing work, a hefty and muscular chap, took the rope and managed to pick his way across the remnants of the

⁸⁸ Photo source: Glasgow Digital Library (Uni https://sites.scran.ac.uk/voyage_of_the_scotia/scotia/images)

snow bridge. We had hold of him and of our breath! He then fastened the rope to a pole he stuck in the snow and assisted the rest of us to get across. We all blew a sigh of relief at the bridge having held. But now we faced the second crevasse about ten metres further on. This was a shock.

As we approached we could see there was a rope hanging over the lip of the gaping void. Harald strode forward but I cautioned him to keep back until we could secure our own ropes. I lay on the snow and edged my way to the lip to look down. Cascades of ice fell inwards but about five metres down in the gloom I saw the two Argentines on a narrow ice ledge, one sitting and the other lying down. They both looked up as I peered in and shouted down to them. I don't have much Spanish, and some of that is unrepeatable, picked up from the crew of the ships that come into Grytviken. "Hola, Hola" I cried, and they called back and we understood they had survived the fall without any injury, very bruised, shocked and cold. We learned their names were Lucas and Gonzalo.

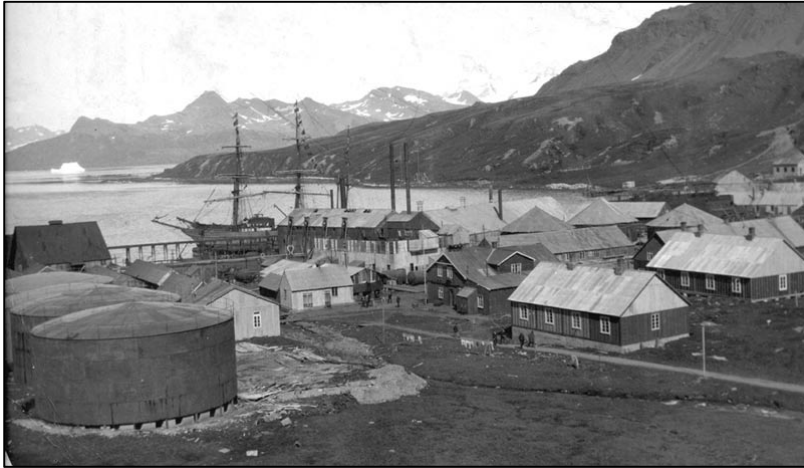
Now we had a job on our hands, how to get them out. I got Gunnar and Egil to dig a pit few metres back from the crevasse edge and bury the end of a rope around one of our stout staffs. We then tied the other end onto an old link from a small anchor chain we had brought with us. Meanwhile Harald and me, we tied two of our ropes together to reach down to the Argentines and then passed one end through the anchor link to make something of a pulley. I had seen this done up in the mountains back home and only hoped I had got it right. We threw one end down and Gonzalo, who was the one who had been sitting, tied the rope around him and waited for us to pull him up. Harald with his huge muscles heaved away with Gunnar, and gradually Gonzalo started up, but the rope kept cutting into the lip of the crevasse and giving way and poor Gonzalo fell back several times. Egil grabbed one of the other walking staffs and slipped it across-wise under the rope just in from the lip and it worked like magic. Egil works on the engines on the Dias and is used to some technical ideas. Soon we had Gonzalo at the edge, and we were able to grab his arms and pull him out. Poor man he was shivering and clearly very exhausted. While Egil and I looked after him Harald again threw down the line for Lucas.

Things went well for a while as he came up but then he started coughing violently and shouting at us. He had not tied the knot securely enough. He had made a slip knot and now the rope was cutting into him and shutting off his breath. Harald had no option but to lower him down back onto the shelf as quickly as he could. As Lucas stepped back onto it a huge chunk gave way and he crashed below with a yank and a terrible scream. Harald held firm and pulled him up quickly so he could scramble onto the remaining portion of the shelf choking and crying out with pain. It was clear he was now almost unconscious with the tightened rope around him. There was nothing for it, I made the decision for Gunnar and Egil to lower me down to Lucas to somehow relieve the pressure on him, re-tie his rope and get him back up as quickly as possible. As I descended, hundreds of small icicles broke loose and tinkled down into the abyss. It was eerie and very cold. I got to Lucas but asked Gunner to still take much of my weight as the shelf looked very weak. I stepped over to Lucas who was in a bad way and carefully untied the slip knot and fastened the rope properly and called quickly above to both Gunnar and Harald to haul us up. Slowly we came up together and I was able to help the others pull out Lucas by pushing from below before I scrambled out and into Harald's bearlike arms.

We now had to see what we could do for Lucas. Gunnar thought the man had broken ribs but there was little help we could give him, none of us knowing much about first aid. He was coming round, but in a lot of pain. We gave him a shot of aquavit from my flask and some bread and along with Gonzalo started straight away to go back down to the tent. With great care and Harald's help we almost carried Lucas across the other crevasse. It was something of a miracle that we got everybody safe to the other side. Now we could go down more securely, but Lucas needed support from Harald and Egil. Gonzalo was weak and tired, and I assisted him as he stumbled along very gamely. It seemed an age, but we arrived eventually back at the camp. Two other of my crew had come ashore, sent by the Captain as back up with another dinghy. They were hearing from the Argentines about their disastrous trip.

It was time to get back to Dias as soon as possible. The wind was rising and getting off the rocky shore was going to be tough. We abandoned the tents and other equipment and helped the two victims down the shelf to one of the dinghies. Bjarne, the Cook's assistant and an old sea dog, got everybody onboard and then we rowed out through the brash into heavy waves that tossed us a great deal, some water coming in over the sides. More rowing brought us to the sanctuary of the Dias. Strong hands took the injured Lucas and exhausted Gonzalo onto the deck and then below to a bunk where food and warm blankets awaited. Dias now turned her bow east and buffeted by the sharp quartering sea from the north west ploughed her way back through more of the ice to Laurie Island and the welcome and grateful thanks of all at the base at Orcadas.

We had little time to do anything but disembark all the rescued men and put back to sea. The Captain was very eager to get away from the islands as the barometer had been falling steadily and he knew we would have a rough sail back across the Drake to South Georgia. With three blasts on the whistle and as ten men came out to wave us off, the Dias pulled away from Laurie Island, headed east, rounding Cape Dundas to sail north and into the teeth of the incoming storm. Well, I tell you we have had some bad trips out of Grytviken, and this was bad, but perhaps not the worst. With the heavy weather coming on the port beam the old thing rolled pitifully but she ploughed on almost knowing she was heading home, even so it was well over 450 miles and it took us more than three days and three sleepless nights before we stood off Cape Disappointment. The Captain reckoned it was worth a little extra distance to reach Cooper Island at the east end of South Georgia where we would get protection from the wind and waves. And so it was, as we then chugged north-west to the safety of Cumberland Bay and our home at Grytviken. We had been away a month, but it seemed a lifetime. We were rightly pleased we had saved the Argentine chaps and delivered their cargo. The old Dias had done us and them proud, down to Antarctica, pounding the sea and ice, a sturdy ship and a credit to the canny fishermen of Hull who had had her built.



Back at our home - Grytviken⁹

⁹ Photo source: "Capt. William Williams", Rhiw. com