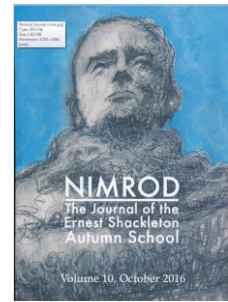


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Top 10 Polar Decisions

By Brad Borkan and David Hirzel

It is fun to watch TV shows about the Top 10 best movies of all time, or read an article about the Top 10 best beaches. Part of the appeal is arguing with friends and family about whether the list creator is accurate or completely misguided in his or her judgement.



Nimrod Journal cover

Having done a small amount of research on Top 10 movies, one thing is clear – absolutely no one agrees on anything. *The Godfather*, *Wizard of Oz*, and believe it or not even, *Tootsie*, appear as the #1 best movie of all time.^[Footnote 1] Arguing about Top 10 movies can be fun to do in a pub, but at a pub like O’Brien’s in Athy, Ireland, a better thing to discuss might be this: Can a Top 10 list be created based on Polar Decisions? If so, what would be your Top 10?

Please read on, because we are going to share our Top 10, and it is may prove to be more controversial than naming *Tootsie* as the all-time #1 movie!

The idea came about when doing research for our book, **When Your Life Depends on It: Extreme decision making lessons from the Antarctic**. Our starting point was, “What were the most important life and death decisions that the Antarctic explorers in the Heroic Age made, and what can we learn from them for modern day decision making?”

To keep our research manageable, we focused on the British, Australian and Norwegian expeditions:

Expedition Name	Dates	Ship	Leader
Discovery Expedition	1901-1904	<i>Discovery</i>	Robert Scott
British Antarctic Expedition	1907-1909	<i>Nimrod</i>	Ernest Shackleton
Terra Nova Expedition	1910-1913	<i>Terra Nova</i>	Robert Scott
Norwegian Antarctic Expedition	1910-1912	<i>Fram</i>	Roald Amundsen
Australasian Antarctic Expedition	1911-1914	<i>SY Aurora</i>	Douglas Mawson
Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition	1914-1917	<i>Endurance</i> (Weddell Sea side) <i>SY Aurora</i> (Ross Sea Party)	Ernest Shackleton

We kept coming back to the idea that some decisions were more important than others, and that some had a more profound effect on what made the Heroic Age truly heroic. Was Oates’ decision to walk out of the tent to his death more important in defining the Heroic Age than, say, Crean’s 35 mile walk to save Lt. Evans and William Lashly? Was Shackleton’s decision to turn around 97 miles from the South Pole more memorable than, say, the Northern Party’s survival in an ice-cave? Where does the Winter Journey for the Emperor Penguin eggs or the James Caird boat trip come in the scheme of things when talking about heroic ventures?

“But wait,” we hear you ask, “What about the Ross Sea Party and their tremendous sacrifice?” Or as one of us recently had in a conversation on this topic, “What about the decision to go back for the third life boat from the *Endurance*?” Surely if Shackleton’s men had not retrieved the third life boat, then some of the *Endurance* crew most certainly would have perished. Isn’t the fact that all the men survived one of the defining moments of the Heroic Age?

The list of decisions to consider goes on and on. Much like movies and beaches, one can say, “Well, let’s rank them.” That’s what we have done. We welcome your thoughts on this.

Like all lists of this style, we will start with #10 and work our way down to #1 to build suspense. Since many readers of this article will be familiar with the expeditions, we have kept descriptions to a minimum.

#10 Frank Wild taking charge and leading the men back from the cliff edge to safety after Vince had gone over.

This event, which happened early in the *Discovery* Expedition, was critical for a number of reasons.

It established Frank Wild as a person who could take a leadership role when required. If he had not secured the situation and ultimately sought help, nine men might have perished right there at the beginning of the expedition. That incident could have stopped the whole heroic age from ever occurring. Firstly, it is difficult to envision the heroic age without Frank Wild, who went on to be a key player in five of the six major expeditions. Also the loss of life may have been too great for the British sponsors back home to support further Antarctic ventures.

#9 Northern Party over-wintering in the ice cave.

What was meant to be a short exploratory venture as part of the *Terra Nova* Expedition, 200 miles north of Cape Evans, turned into an unforgettable survival story.

Six men had been left with six weeks of supplies to explore the area around Evans Cove. The plan was the *Terra Nova* would pick them after six weeks. Unfortunately the sea ice prevented the ship’s approach. The men had to exist on their own for the entire Antarctic winter. They survived by holing up in the dark confines of an ice cave until spring came, and then walked the 200 miles back to the hut at Cape Evans. All lived through at harrowing ordeal. (As a teaser, their survival is important to Polar Decision #2 below.)

#8 Mawson single-handedly climbing out of the crevasse.

This might be the most heroic event by a single person on an expedition during the whole of the Heroic Age.

On the Australasian Antarctic Expedition, Douglas Mawson divided his 24 men into eight sets of three-man teams, each exploring a different region. Mawson, with Belgrave Ninnis and Xavier Mertz set off from their home base at Commonwealth Bay to locate the South Magnetic Pole. Ninnis fell into a crevasse along with most of their dogs and the sledge with their most important supplies including the majority of their food and their only tent. Ninnis and the dogs died; the sledge and its contents were lost.

Mertz and Mawson started the trek home but Mertz died of vitamin A poisoning. With Mawson suffering badly, he continued to walk back alone. Falling into a crevasse, he was barely only saved by his sledge harness, and his sledge being wedged at the top of the crevasse. Mawson attempted to climb out, almost achieved it before slipping back down. Drawing inspiration from a poem he remembered, he tried again and climbed out, made it

back to base, only to discover he missed the boat by five hours, and had to over-winter another season.

#7 Scott's decision to invalid Shackleton home.

Every good story needs a good rivalry.

On the *Discovery* expedition, Scott, Shackleton and Wilson reached a furthest south point at 82°17'S. On the journey back, Shackleton suffered badly from scurvy and ultimately needed to be pulled back on the sledge by Scott and Wilson. When they returned to safety, Scott decided to invalid Shackleton home on the relief ship. The reasons for doing so can be debated today, but from our point of view, this decision spurred the Shackleton-Scott rivalry which was a key ingredient in creating the heroic age, driving each explorer to push themselves to the limit.

#6 Tom Crean's 35 mile walk to save Lt. Evans and Lashly & the Winter Journey in pursuit of science.

Is it wrong to have things tied for position? We decided it was justified. These two events were unrelated, although both happened on the *Terra Nova* expedition. We'll take them one at a time.

Tom Crean's walk: After Scott decided to take five men to the pole, the last supporting party—Crean, William Lashly and Lt. Evans—turned and started the long march back to Cape Evans. By the time they reached the head of the Beardmore Glacier, Evans already was showing symptoms of scurvy. They continued forward and when they were about 60 miles from safety, Evans' condition had worsened to the point that they all believed he would die. Lt. Evans, who was their commanding officer, gave Crean and Lashly an order to abandon him on the ice in his sleeping bag – it was an order Crean and Lashly refused to obey. They got Lt. Evans to within 35 miles of safety and, with almost no food left, came to a halt. They could not go further. Crean took three biscuits, two sticks of chocolate, but no tent or sleeping bag, and in a do-or-die-trying effort walked the last 35 miles alone to seek rescue. Thanks to Crean, both Lt. Evans and Lashly lived. Lt. Evans later said it was the only military order he had ever given that was not obeyed.

The Winter Journey: Described by Apsley Cherry-Garrard in [The Worst Journey in the World](#), this perilous journey was undertaken by Dr. Edward Wilson, Lt. Henry Bowers, and Cherry-Garrard in the dead of the Antarctic winter to retrieve Emperor Penguin eggs, with the goal of verifying Wilson's belief that the embryos would reveal the missing link between reptiles and birds. They survived temperatures so low their clothing instantly froze solid around them. They were getting frostbite in their sleeping bags, and at one point their tent blew away, fortunately recovered later that day. This has to be the bravest feat of survival by three men during the Heroic Age, all in the name of science. The irony of their journey was the eggs did not prove the theory, but that discovery was important, too.

#5 Turning around 97 miles to the pole.

One of the most famous survival decisions made in the Heroic Age was done on the British Antarctic Expedition. Shackleton, Frank Wild, Eric Marshall and Jameson Adams had set off for the South Pole. Man-hauling on limited rations, they pushed to get as close to the pole as

possible. With 97 miles left to go, Shackleton made the decision that they should turn around rather than risk their lives to reach the pole but perish on the way back. He wrote to his wife, “*I thought you would rather have a live donkey than a dead lion.*” Time and again on Everest, even on the week we wrote this article (June 2016) ^[Footnote 2], we see people so goal driven, they chose certain death to achieve their goal, which is what makes Shackleton’s decision so remarkable.

#4 Ross Sea Party keeping their promise.

The more that comes to light about the bravery and resourcefulness of the Ross Sea Party, the more amazing their story seems.

As part of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, their mission was to lay a series of supply depots along the trail from the Discovery Hut to the mouth of the Beardmore Glacier. Shackleton and his men would pick up the depots as they walked across Antarctica from the Weddell Sea side. Before landing all their supplies, the Ross Sea Party’s ship, the *SY Aurora* which was anchored on the coast, was swept out to sea. Using their ingenuity and at the risk of their own lives, the ten men left on the ice, pulled together enough supplies from the previous Scott and Shackleton expeditions to lay the depots for Shackleton. “Padre” Arnold Spencer-Smith died on the horrendously difficult depot laying journey. Towards the end of journey, Aeneas Mackintosh (the expedition leader) and Victor Hayward became so ill with scurvy, the other three men with them willingly dragged their near-lifeless bodies on the sledges the last miles to Hut Point. The depots were never used, but their promise to Shackleton was kept.

It is also worth noting that despite all their deprivations in laying the depots, the Ross Sea Party team never dipped into the supplies they were leaving for Shackleton and his men.

One of the additional reasons we placed this so high on the list, is it’s fascinating (and somewhat scary) to contemplate how a modern business team would approach such a choice.

#3 Not landing the *Endurance* when land was first sighted.

The single, unfortunate decision to seek a better landing site for the *Endurance* led to a series of events and actions, all of which helped to define the Heroic Age. One of the things that our book, [When Your Life Depends on It](#), reveals is that sometimes the Heroic Age explorers made seriously bad decisions, but people rarely died because during adversity the men exhibited tremendous amounts of grit, determination and teamwork.

This single decision, to seek a better landing site, led to some of the most amazing stories of survival against the odds. The *Endurance* continued south into the Weddell Sea, got encased in the ice and ultimately crushed. Shackleton reframed the goal of the expedition to a focus on getting all the men home. They camped for months on ice floes and when ultimately the floes broke up, they spent six hazardous days in the three lifeboats rowing to Elephant Island.

Leaving 22 men behind on Elephant Island under the leadership of Frank Wild (see Polar Decision #10 above) Shackleton set off with five other men (Worsley, Crean, MacNeish, Vincent, McCarthy) in the 23 foot *James Caird* boat to sail 800 miles across the roughest seas in the world to reach the island of South Georgia. They had to land on the unpopulated side of the island. In a do-or-die-trying effort, Shackleton, Crean and Worsley (with almost no

mountaineering equipment or survival gear) traversed the uncharted interior mountains to reach the Stromness Whaling Station. The whalers then picked up the other three men. After three unsuccessful attempts, Shackleton managed successfully to launch a fourth rescue mission to retrieve the 22 men marooned on Elephant Island.

Remarkably no one died. It was a true lesson in leadership and the power of never giving up, no matter how bad things got, and things surely got pretty bad.

#2 (tie) Scott's decision to take five men to the pole, Oates' death, and Atkinson's decision to search for Scott over looking for the Northern Party

We have decided that all of these related, yet independent, decisions deserved equal weight.

The *Terra Nova* expedition had multiple goals in both science and discovery. One aspect of the expedition that captures people's attention is the march to the South Pole. Having successfully reached the turning back site of the last supporting party, Scott decided to take a fifth man (Birdie Bowers) with him to the pole. Scott was counting on Bowers' strength and experience to help them travel faster. Numerous factors conspired against Scott including Edgar Evans' injury which ultimately was a factor in Evan's death. This slowed Scott's team down. In addition, bad weather, food insufficient in nutritional value to support man-hauling long distances, and severe frostbite all affected their return progress. The weight of knowing that Amundsen had beaten them to the pole by one month and three days could have also been an important demoralizing psychological factor.

Captain Lawrence Oates, suffering badly from frostbite, famously self-sacrificed himself to not slow Scott, Wilson and Bowers further. "*I am just going outside and may be some time,*" were Oates' immortal words right before leaving the tent for the last time. His unforgettable selfless act in support of his companions characterized a lot of what made the Heroic Age.

Another decision related to Scott needing to be cited in our #2 ranking is the decision by acting leader Edward Atkinson and the other men in the hut as the Antarctic spring approached in 1912, to seek Scott's remains rather than to try to rescue the Northern Party who might still be living. They knew without a doubt that the polar party could not have survived the winter; the Northern Party, if still alive, might need their help.

In talking about our book to non-Polar people (our intended audience), we often ask people what they would have done had they been Atkinson, and without a moment's hesitation *every single person* said they would have gone after the Northern Party. Most justify it by saying something like, "Why would you seek the remains of a dead team when you can rescue a group of possibly living companions?"

Yet, (and this is incredibly interesting to think about) had Atkinson, Cherry-Garrard and the others not found Scott's tent, it may not have been found until metal detectors were invented (first patented in 1925). Had that tent not been found, just imagine what would have been lost: the famous photograph of the five dejected men at the pole would never have been displayed; the stirring tales and personal messages from Scott, Wilson and Bower's journals may have been lost forever since the journals may have disintegrated in the snow; and the story of Oates' heroic self-sacrifice would have never been told.

Isn't it remarkable that not one person we have asked (ourselves included) would have opted for seeking Scott's remains over helping the Northern Party, yet without that decision, there would almost be no Heroic Age? Part of what makes the era heroic is knowing the true hardships and sacrifices that Scott, Wilson, Bowers, Oates and Evans made in their quest.

#1 Turning the *Fram* around and heading South

Before we get vilified for not placing Scott or Shackleton first, please remember this list is the Top 10 decisions that helped define the Heroic Age. Every good story needs some controversy. Amundsen, who was remarkably successful, added his own flavor of this, which is part of why we enjoy studying and discussing these events more than 100 years after they happened.

Amundsen put together a first rate team, had access to the best ship ever built in that era for polar travel, and had studied all aspects of polar activity and survival. He had a clear purpose, and a determination to make it happen.

He challenged Scott to the South Pole when Scott was not even in a race. To his credit Scott did not change his scientific plans to compete. It was not a race in a true competitive sense, yet Amundsen showed something that other expeditions missed – well managed dog teams and professional skiers will out-perform man-hauling.

Amundsen cryptically warned Scott he was heading south in a telegram simply worded, "*Beg leave to inform you Fram proceeding Antarctic -Amundsen.*" Upon reaching the Pole, Amundsen left a letter for Scott to deliver to the King of Norway. Was this Amundsen "insurance" proving he was first there if he and his team died on the way back, or was this a deliberate act to undermine Scott by making him serve as messenger of the victory of another?

Heroism also requires contrast. Amundsen's success provides that stark contrast to the very sad, yet monumentally noble outcome of Scott's 5-man polar party.

We will leave you with this thought. The reason Amundsen's decision to turn the *Fram* around was the most important Polar Decision is that he led the *only* team to walk to the South Pole and back again successfully. If you take the *Fram* expedition out of the equation, and left all other expeditions *exactly as they occurred*, then Scott would have reached the Pole first, yet perished on the way back. (We know you might say that if he reached the Pole first the psychological advantage would have pulled them through, but please remember our premise that we are keeping all things as they had occurred.)

Shackleton would have gone next with the *Endurance* expedition in 1914, but *keeping things exactly as they occurred*, he would not have landed. With his ship trapped in the ice, he wouldn't have made it to the Pole. Then with WWI raging, no expedition would have been mounted till after 1918. Europe having been decimated in the war, followed by the Spanish Flu epidemic, one might envision the next big news about conquering the South Pole might have been Admiral Byrd's flight over the pole on Nov 19, 1929.

That is why Amundsen's decision deserves the #1 spot.

As a re-cap, here's our Top 10. Perhaps it's not as controversial as naming *Tootsie* as the best film of all time, but for some people it might be close.

Ranking	Decision
10	Frank Wild taking charge and leading the men back from the cliff edge to safety after Vince had gone over.
9	Northern Party over-wintering in the ice cave.
8	Mawson single-handedly climbing out of the crevasse.
7	Scott's decision to invalid Shackleton home.
6 (tie)	Tom Crean's 35 mile walk to save Lt. Evans and Lashly; The Winter Journey in pursuit of science.
5	Turning around 97 miles to the pole.
4	Ross Sea Party keeping their promise.
3	Not landing the Endurance when land was first sighted.
2 (tie)	Scott's decision to take five men to the pole; Oates' death; Atkinson's decision to search for Scott over looking for the Northern Party.
1	Turning the <i>Fram</i> around and heading South.

Please send us your Top 10. We look forward to an engaged discussion in O'Brien's pub in Athy this year and for years into the future.

Footnote 1

Top 10 movie lists:

- Time Out, New York: http://www.timeout.com/newyork/movies/the-100-best-movies-of-all-time#tab_panel_10 Tootsie is #1
- IMDb: <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls055592025/> The Godfather is #1
- Rotten Tomatoes: <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/top/bestofrt/> Wizard of Oz is #1

Footnote 2

Article in Guardian newspaper, June 6, 2016, <http://gu.com/p/4kcnm/sbl> "Subhash Paul, Paresh Nath and Goutam Ghosh continued towards summit despite advice time had run out," says Sherpa