

Information sheet no 016

Lawrence Oates

Lawrence Oates was born on 17 March 1880 in Putney, London. In 1898 after leaving Eton, Oates joined the 3rd West Yorkshire (Militia) Regiment, and two years later joined the army and posted to the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons. In 1901 he went on active service in South African War. He served with distinction, and was Mentioned in Dispatches for gallantry in the field. He was severely wounded in March 1901 and invalided home for a short period returning to the front by the end of the year. He was promoted Lieutenant in 1902 and successively served with his regiment in Ireland, Egypt, and India before being promoted Captain in 1906. In 1910, Oates applied for a post on the Antarctic expedition under Captain Robert Falcon Scott. He was accepted and put in charge of nineteen ponies which were to be used for sledge haulage.

The expedition sailed in June 1910 on the *Terra Nova*. The expedition left New Zealand in November and reached the Ross Sea to establish a base at Cape Evans on Ross Island in January 1911. In November 1911, Oates formed part of the sledging party under Scott which set out for the South Pole. After an arduous journey, the South Pole was reached on the 18 January 1912 - thirty-four days after Roald Amundsen had planted the Norwegian flag there. The return journey was begun the same day. Temperatures were extremely low and weather conditions were adverse. Oates showed signs of feeling the cold severely but the party made good progress to the Beardmore Glacier. On the 17 February, Petty Officer Evans was the first to succumb to the cold and died. The four remaining men in the party continued to the next depot but travelling conditions worsened. Temperatures fell to below minus forty-seven degrees. Survival depended on the ability of the men to reach each depot before their food and fuel supplies were exhausted.

Oates was suffering severely from frost bitten feet but he continued for as long as he was able. As travelling conditions worsened, Oates realised he could go no further and feared he would hold up the progress of the rest of the party, lessening their chance of survival. He asked to be left behind but his request was refused. He struggled on for another day. On the morning of 17 March during a blizzard, Oates told Scott he was 'just going outside and may be some time'. He was never seen again. The self-sacrifice of Oates enabled the three men to push on with the hope that, in spite of their extreme exhaustion, they might cover the thirty miles to the food supplies at One Ton depot. Eleven miles from the depot, a heavy blizzard held them and they were unable to proceed further. The three men perished in their shelter around 29 March 1912.

A search party found the bodies of Scott, Wilson and Bowers on the 12 November 1912, but the body of Lawrence Oates was never found. Near the site of his death, the search party erected a cairn and cross bearing the inscription: 'Hereabouts died a very gallant gentleman, Captain L. E. G. Oates, of the Inniskilling Dragoons. In March 1912, returning from the Pole, he walked willingly to his death in a blizzard, to try and save his comrades, beset by hardships.'

Oates Land, part of the Antarctic coastline discovered by the *Terra Nova* in February 1911, was named in Oates' honour.

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