



Tom Moates argues that the use of equine snow shoes could have averted the famous Antarctic tragedy



The Tragedy of SCOTT, OATES

AND THE EQUINE SNOW SHOES

CAPTAIN ROBERT Falcon Scott and his team need not have died on their return trip from the South Pole. At their disposal was the key not only to have probably made it to the Pole and back alive in 1912, but quite possibly to have beaten Norwegian Roald Amundsen to it, and lived to tell the tale.

On hand, the crew had horse snow shoes of a type long trusted in Arctic regions. Yet, the choice was made not to use this proven bit of technology even though an ample supply of the snow shoes had been acquired and brought with them to Antarctica. Scott knew the odd discs would potentially have doubled their daily mileage. But they were not used.

This colossal, fatal mishap resulted mainly from decisions by the man hired as the horse expert and trainer for the expedition. That man was Captain Lawrence Oates.

These are the conclusions of the Long Riders' Guild Academic Foundation (LRGAF), a new branch of The Long Riders' Guild – the world's first international association of equestrian explorers. The association initially set out to collect and publish information relating to what it describes as, "the greatest act of collective amnesia in the history of equestrian exploration" – the overarching story of the South Pole Ponies, the Manchurian horses brought by both Shackleton and Scott on their expeditions as their main means of trying to reach the Pole.

Mainstream reports about the failure of Scott's mission have, for 95 years, failed to focus on these 19 horses, let alone the snow shoes they might have worn.

Even now, almost a century after the events in question, the physical evidence literally hangs about the expedition's Antarctic huts. The buildings still stand, windswept in the ice and snow at the bottom of the world. They still house the very items left by the men; they sit untouched since the days of the expedition. Bamboo and leather discs – the horse snow shoes – lie piled up in their dozens. These circular phantoms, unmoved and at the ready since the moment Scott and his men set out for the Pole without them, are a time capsule of accountability for all to see from those fateful days in 1912. It is most curious that no one has fully explored the significance of these HESTETRUGER, as snow shoes are commonly known in the Norwegian language, until now.

Belgian Long Rider Robert Wauters, at the request of the LRGAF, delved into this matter, enlisting the help of equestrian military experts at Le Club International d'Eperonnerie. Baron Albert Moeyersoen and K. C. Richter demonstrated from collected evidence that Scott had a substantial number of horse snow shoes on hand, and they were of a type historically proven effective. The research showed the devices had been used in Sweden for at least 700 years and produced a photograph illustrating their use in Canada 30 years prior to the expedition. Clearly, snow shoes were for generations highly regarded by men in such environments, so it was no surprise Scott



Right: When Belgian Long Rider Robert Wauters began to investigate the use of the hestetruger (equine snow shoes) he discovered this 13th century woodcut depicting a Swedish traveller and his horse, both of whom are equipped with snow shoes

BARON ALBERT MOEYERSOEN



>These two hestetruger were recently excavated by archaeologists working with the Antarctic Heritage Trust from under the ice in the stable erected next to Scott's Antarctic hut. They match exactly the hestetrugers used for centuries by Nordic equestrian travellers



Captain Lawrence Oates with one of the ponies

would have taken them along. The basic design of the snow shoes is so effective, Norwegian soldiers patrolling the Arctic Circle still use them today.

Scott, in a number of journal entries over the course of several years, was strongly in favour of employing horse snow shoes. For instance, he wrote: "One thing is certain. A good snow-shoe would be worth its weight in gold on this surface, and if we can get something really practical we ought to greatly increase our distances next year."

On 11 August 1911, during preparations in Antarctica soon after the sun returned to the



BELGIAN LONG RIVER ROBERT WALTERS, TBRC

Left: Because it enables horses to traverse frozen terrain, the hestetruger is still in use today by mounted Norwegian soldiers

region, he said of getting the horses properly fit and working in the snow shoes: "I am confident the matter is of the first importance."

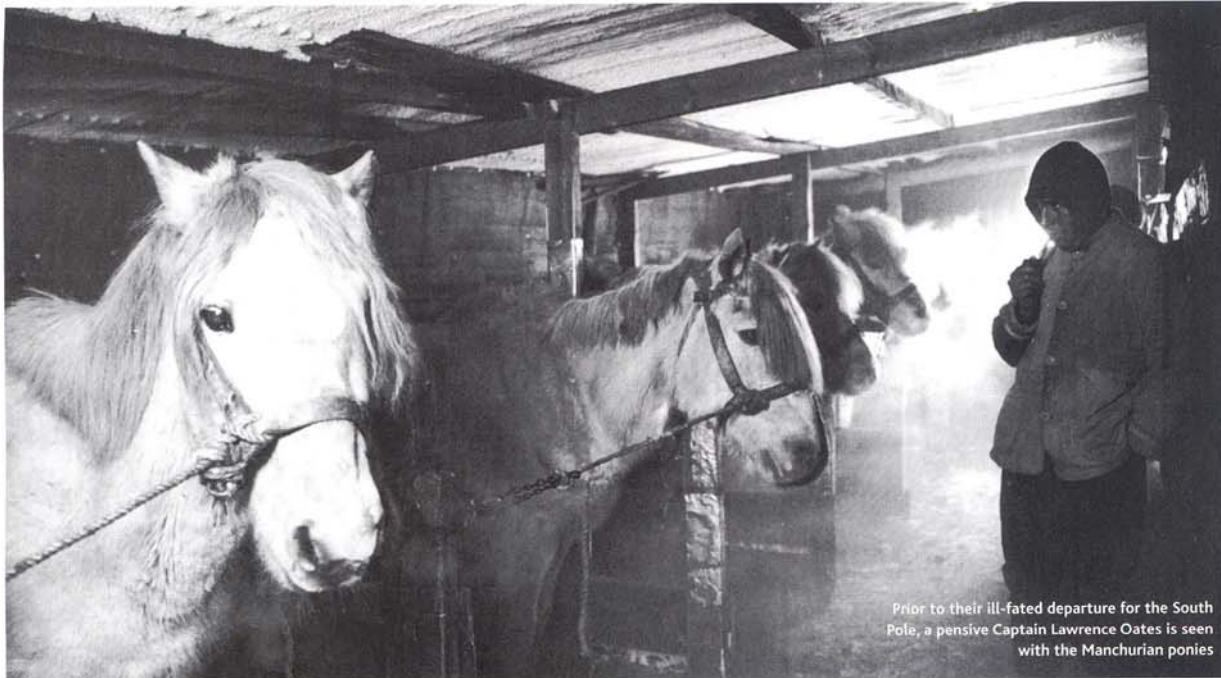
Even though Scott understood the effectiveness of the snow shoes, his ultimate mistake was lacking the leadership to over-rule Oates's desire not to use them. Scott made other errors in regard to the horses during the mission. One occurred before he had even left London. Instead of sending his equestrian expert Oates to China to purchase the horses, Scott sent Meares, the sled dog trainer. The only reason for this seems to have been that Meares, who apparently knew nothing about horses, was relatively close to the area anyway, acquiring dogs for the journey. Oates remained behind as a labourer helping to load the ship for the expedition.

Meanwhile, Meares was swindled into buying 19 old horses, some lame and all completely

untrained, and then shipped them halfway around the world to New Zealand, the departure point from which the reassembled team would sail to Antarctica. There Scott, Oates and the rest of the team met the herd for the first time. Realising the ponies were not tame, Scott employed a local trainer – significantly not Oates – to take the rough edges off the wild ponies.

The other great mishap is that Scott's choice of Oates as a team member had the great flaw that the horseman had absolutely no experience of cold climate exploration. Oates was noted as a formidable hunter, cavalry man, polo player and race-horse trainer. All of this equestrian expertise was gained in England, Ireland, South Africa, and India.

To make matters worse, Oates never actually trained the ponies, according to accounts found by the Foundation. Its research indicates that, with the exception of giving two generalised lectures on



HERBERT POITING

Prior to their ill-fated departure for the South Pole, a pensive Captain Lawrence Oates is seen with the Manchurian ponies

horsemanship during the entire first winter in Antarctica, no evidence exists to indicate Oates spent a single moment of those 10 months training or taming the fairly wild Manchurian horses in his charge.

Even when taking these failings into account, however, the aged, roughly trained Manchurian horses still proved their effectiveness time and again during the expedition. That usefulness would have been increased many fold if Oates had embraced the horse snow shoes staring him in the face.

Oates remained completely against technology that was alien to him. It is an arrogance that clouded his understanding, even as a seasoned cavalry man and hunter, of the significance these odd looking bamboo shoes unquestionably had for the horses on the Antarctic surfaces.

In Michael Smith's biography of Oates, *I am Just Going Outside*, he claims Oates harboured a ferocious animosity towards foreigners which was embodied by his dislike of the Norwegian ski expert, Gran, hired by Scott and a member of the crew. "It was nothing personal. Oates had developed an intense dislike of virtually all foreigners which bordered on xenophobia," said Smith.

Perhaps the definitive piece of evidence in the case is well summed up by Smith who reports: "The oversight this time was the fault of Oates. He had little experience of travelling with horses over ice and snow. In the same way he failed to grasp the value of skis, Oates also failed to comprehend the value of spreading the weight of the animals' hoof-print on ice. Instead, Oates summarily dismissed the shoes as ineffective. In his private log, on the ponies, Oates had inserted a cryptic note: "The ponies are unshod but have snow shoes which I believe will be an unmitigated nuisance to us – the snow shoes I mean."

It is not known if Scott discussed the taking of snow shoes for the ponies with Oates or whether Scott, in a moment of weakness, agreed to Oates' wish to leave the snow shoes behind. What is clear is that the expedition left Cape Evans with only one pair of horse snow shoes. When these were tried on a pony called "Weary Willie", Scott was so

impressed by the results, he realised a great mistake had been made. He wrote in his diary: "We have everything ready to start – but this afternoon we tried our one pair of snow-shoes on 'Weary Willie'. The effect was magical. He strolled around as though walking on hard ground in places where he floundered woefully without them. Oates hasn't any faith in these shoes at all, and I thought that even the quietest pony would need to be practised in their use. Immediately after our experiment I decided that an effort must be made to get more, and within half an hour Meares and Wilson were on their way to the station more than 20 miles away. There is just the chance that the ice may not have gone out, but it is a very poor one I fear. At present it looks as though we might double our distance with the snow-shoes... In any case, it is something to have discovered the possibility of these shoes."

Fatal error: Scott's fears proved to be founded. Oates's dislike of snow shoes and Scott's failings as a leader had combined with devastating effect. The expedition pressed on without the snow shoes and, almost incredibly, managed to leave behind their only available pair.

Scott wrote in this diary: "I inquired for our one set of snow shoes and found they had been left behind... Gran has gone back for the snow shoes – he volunteered good naturedly – certainly his expertness on skis is useful."

Scott's diary goes on to record horses belly deep in snow and ice, being cut by sharp edges as they plunged their legs in, fighting hard and sweating for a few miles a day might instead have been optimistic reports of the team making swift

progress across vast distances walking along top of this wretched surface. With the horse snow shoes, a much swifter trip to the Pole, and a successful return all seem within their grasp.

When one considers the expedition ultimately came to a halt and Scott, Oates and three other men perished only 11 miles from the safety of a camp, the facts are those of an avoidable tragedy.

Not employing the horse snow shoes in their possession was the one huge and deadly mistake of Scott's mission. As leader, Scott has to take ultimate responsibility, but it would seem he was poorly advised and undermined by Oates in this vital matter.

This verdict is the ultimate irony. Oates, long presented as the hero of the expedition, courageously stating: "I am just going outside, and may be some time," thus giving his life that the others might be saved, now faces the indictment that his antagonism towards the snow shoes led to his death and that of the four others.

As an ominous footnote to this forgotten episode of equestrian exploration history, it would be mules wearing snow shoes, well trained and experienced from Himalayan mountain work, that would arrive in Antarctica soon after Scott's death, and with swiftness and ease assist the search party to find the bodies and belongings of the expedition members at their final resting place. ■

>Readers can buy copies of both *South Pole Ponies* and *Scott's Last Expedition* from the BHS bookshop. More of the Guild's titles are listed on the Ride-UK website, www.ride-uk.org.uk/longriders.htm. You can find out more about The Long Riders' Guild Academic Foundation at www.lrgaf.org.

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