

Mawson's exploration of Antarctica

A ship carrying team of explorers set sail from Hobart, Tasmania on Decemebr 2 1911. It seemed like the whole of Australia was there to see them off. The ship was the SY Aurora and Douglas Mawson would be leading the Antarctic exploration expedition. Each team planned to complete their exploration course and meet back at the hut on the coast, ready to catch the ship to sail home by January 30th. Any later would mean that they would be frozen in until the next summer.

On arrival, the men split up into several teams, each team taking a different exploration route. Mawson and his team of two companions chose the longest and most difficult route. They packed the sled with provisions for about three weeks, and set out with their team of six dogs. Their provisions included food (dried meat and biscuits), spare clothing, sleeping bags, a tent, kerosene stove and cooking utensils, tools and a rifle. The clothing of those times was not very water proof, being made of only natural materials – cotton, wool, fur and leather.

Mawson's team had to cover 300 km – about 30 km a day. The terrain was dangerous and difficult, with four dogs pulling their heavy wooden sled over an uneven terrain of ice and snow. The other two dogs pulled a smaller sled, driven along by one companion at the rear of the larger sled.

At night they would put up the tent, which was an arduous job with prevailing icy winds, sleet and snow. The team would boil up snow on their kerosene stove, drink the melted water and eat their dried meat and biscuits. They would then try to go to sleep in their fur sleeping bags. But as time went on, their bedding and clothing became wet, making it impossible to get warm. Fingers and toes started to suffer from frost bite and skin started peeling.

One day, as they were traveling, Mawson and his companion heard a noise from behind. They turned around and saw nothing but white. They backtracked to find that the companion leading the rear sled with the two dogs had disappeared into a cravass. They shouted down the crevasse, but there was no reply. All they could hear was the whimpering of the dogs, caught on a ledge. Mawson and his companion tied all their ropes together to make the longest rope possible, but it was not long enough to perform a rescue operation. Tragically they had to walk away, unable to do anything.

With heavy hearts they continued on, but snow storms and blizzards prevented from covering any distance on some days. They were falling more and more behind their deadline – to be back at the hut by January 30th.

As time went on their food ran out, so sadly, one by one they killed their faithful dogs, all of which had names. They sat in their tent each night boiling up meat from a dog, making sure that every part of the dog was eaten, including paws,

brain and liver. What they didn't know was that the dogs' liver contained toxic levels of Vitamin A, which gradually poisoned Mawson's companion. He became delirious, suffered dysentery and eventually died. Now Mawson was on his own. The dogs had all gone. There was only a small amount of food left and still 100 km. to go. Mawson struggled on pulling the sled with his own body. By now he was physically and emotionally exhausted. The soles of his feet were lifting off due to frost bite. His face was blistered and sore. On some days he only covered as much as 5km., as he battled fatigue and blizzards. He was well over the deadline. Would the ship wait? Or was he pushing on in vain?

He was taking many risks, pulling the sled over risky snow drifts rather than going around. This risk taking had its toll. One day Mawson fell into a crevasse. He expected the sled to come crashing down on top of him, but miraculously it became jammed behind some ice and supported Mawson's weight. There he was, dangling from a rope inside the crevasse. Knots had been tied in the rope about a metre apart, so Mawson used the knots to pull himself up. He tried and failed several times. How easy it would be to just let go of the rope and fall to his death. How blissful that would be. But Mawson did not give up. He tried again and again until finally he pulled himself up out of the crevasse. Exhausted, he lay on the snow for three hours before he had enough energy to move once again. He set up the tent and rested for the night.

Day after day he pushed on, now without food. Would the ship wait? He finally saw the coast in the distance, and then the hut. But his heart sank when he saw the ship in the distance, far out to sea. He had missed the ship, now left to die of starvation in the hut. However, over a snow drift he saw the most wonderful site – two humans running towards him. The ship's captain had decided to leave a team of six men, with a year's supplies, to stay in the hut in case Mawson's team returned. One year later the ship came back for them. It was a hero's welcome. Mawson had written all these events in his diary, and many times referred to Providence – his word for a great God who knows everything, and who has given everyone a purpose in life. Sometimes it takes great perseverance to pursue the purpose that God has planned for us. Don't give up when the going's tough!

Activities:

1. What were some of the most difficult problems Mawson and his team faced?
2. Why do you think these men wanted to make such an expedition?
3. Why did Mawson refer to "Providence" in his diary?
4. In difficult circumstances people can either depend on God more, or reject God. List some other people you know (in real life or in history) who have depended more on God through difficult times. Explain the nature of their difficulties.
5. Why might a person reject God because of a difficulty in life? Is it God's fault when things go wrong? Give your reasons.