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Antarctic Explorer's Last Words: 100 Years Ago Today

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On this day (March 29) 100 years ago, Antarctic explorer Robert Falcon Scott scrawled his last entry into the diary the British navy man had faithfully kept since the start of his ill-fated expedition to the South Pole.

He and his two remaining companions, Henry "Birdie" Bowers, a lieutenant, and Scott's dear friend [Edward Wilson, a doctor and artist](#) charged with documenting the uncharted continent's geography, had known death was near.



Robert Falcon Scott writes in his diary in his expedition's well-stocked hut three days before he set out for the pole.

For more than a week, a raging storm had kept the trio holed up in their tent on the Antarctic ice sheet, unable to continue toward a cache of food at a pre-established depot only 11 miles (18 kilometers) away.

"Blizzard bad as ever," Scott wrote a week earlier, on March 22, 1912. "Wilson and Bowers unable to start. Tomorrow last chance. No fuel and only one or two of food left — must be near the end. Have decided it shall be natural. We shall march for the depot with or without our effects and die in our tracks."

The arduous journey had already offered a full measure of heartbreak.

The pole, at last

On Jan. 16, after a two-and-a-half month slog across a glacier, over the Transantarctic Mountains, and through blinding snow, the team discovered they'd been beaten to the South Pole.

Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen had gotten there first, on Dec. 14, 1911, a full month before Scott and his four companions spotted a telltale flag whipping in the wind over the coveted spot.

"It is a terrible disappointment, and I am very sorry for my loyal companions," Scott wrote on the occasion.

From there, things only got worse. Hampered by the tightening stranglehold of Antarctic winter, Scott lost two of his men. Petty Officer Edgar Evans was done in by injury, and, hobbled by frostbite, Lawrence Oates famously sacrificed himself by walking out alone into a snowstorm to avoid slowing his companions' progress.

"He said, 'I am just going outside and may be some time.' He went out into the blizzard and we have not seen him since," Scott wrote on March 16.

On Thursday, March 29, Scott recorded his final entry:

"We had fuel to make two cups of tea apiece and bare food for two days on the 20th. Every day we have been ready to start for our depot 11 miles away, but outside the door of the tent it remains a scene of whirling drift. I do not think we can hope for any better things now. We shall stick it out to the end, but we are getting weaker, of course, and the end cannot be far.

It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more.

R. SCOTT.

For God's sake look after our people."

Dreaded discovery

Eight months later, in November 1912, a search party found three frozen bodies in a tent half-buried by snow. Bowers and Wilson were zipped into their sleeping bags, in the attitude of sleep.

Scott apparently died after his companions did. His sleeping bag and his coat were thrown open, his diaries stuffed beneath his shoulder. His arm was stretched across the body of his friend Wilson.

The searchers covered the tent with snow, marked it with a cross made from skis, and left the dead men where they lay.



Happier times: British explorer Robert Falcon Scott stands alone in Antarctica's glittering white wilderness. The photo was included in a remarkable book, "The Lost Photographs of Captain Scott" (Little, Brown and Co., 2011), written by David M. Wilson, the great-nephew of Scott's confidante Edward Wilson.