

# A remarkable feat of rescue

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The Imperial Antarctic Expedition of 1914 and its heroic results are well known in Britain. A ship trapped in the ice and its daring commander, Ernest Shackleton, managed to take his men to a small Antarctic Island and then, crossing the savage storms of the Drake Sea on a tinkered seaboat, reached South America to look for help. He relentlessly tried to obtain support in all the countries of the south from Uruguayan fishing vessels to seal hunting schooners. All failed in their attempts to reach the survivors stranded at Elephant Island.

Only when, in utter desperation, he decided to approach Chile, the story took a positive turn. Chile had for nearly a century held a position in the austral and Antarctic seas. Since the foundation of the first settlements in the Magellan Straits in the 1840s, it had laboured against climate and geography to provide a semblance of order and civilisation in the wilderness of the southern archipelago. It had actually built special vessels to patrol the channels and fjords, to preserve life among the numerous shipwrecks and accidents that routinely happen in those latitudes even today, and had a very early interest in the Antarctic due to the need to control both seal and whale hunting.

In early 1916, Shackleton approached the local Chilean authorities at Punta Arenas, and the Chilean Navy's decision was to assign the task to the tug *Yelcho*. Its recently commissioned Captain, 2nd Pilot

Luis Pardo, volunteered to lead the operation, as did his crew.

The *Yelcho* was a small, 30 metre-long and 467-ton tug, originally built for colonisation purposes in austral Chile. Purchased by the Navy, it was certainly sturdy and solid, but nothing could hide the fact of its extremely small size to assume a rescue mission in Antarctic waters in mid-winter.

Its captain was a young officer in his mid-thirties, still awaiting the formal sanction of his post. Having accepted the mission to rescue the British expedition, he wrote a moving letter to his father which made it clear that he understood the difficulty of the assignment. He concludes by saying that by the time his parents received his letter, he would already have completed the rescue or perished in the attempt. But that he, his ship and his men wouldn't turn back from the challenge.

Echoes of the ethos taught by Admiral Thomas Cochrane, the unrelenting British naval officer whose role in the founding of the Chilean Navy rang clear: "Impossible must be a word deleted forever from the lexicon of the Chilean naval officer". Pardo was clearly living to that standard. Unassuming and unpretentious, he left Punta Arenas in his ship to either rescue the British explorers or to perish trying.

The trip was difficult, departing Punta Arenas on the 25th of August, it arrived at Elephant Island on

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The *Yelcho* on its way to Valparaíso with the *Endurance* crew

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the 30th. A simple ship, *Yelcho* lacked even the most basic amenities. Without insulation or heating, the crew huddled around the steam engine and its exhaust and stack so as to prevent freezing, while the engine room personnel had to cope with the heaving of the ship in extreme seas and keep the engine running, as any failure or loss of power would leave the ship against the sea and cause it to capsize. The bridge and its Captain spent whole days without being able to go down to catch some sleep or have a hot meal, as the need to conn the ship against mountainous seas caused by storm after storm wouldn't allow them a minute of distraction. It was both a case of physical stamina matching will and courage.

Despite the stress and fatigue of years of trying to rescue his men, and of repeated sailing in the rough seas of Antarctica, Shackleton stayed with Pardo and managed to keep cordial relations with the Captain of what was, despite its diminutive size, a foreign warship. It must have been tough for such a man and a leader, to stay in his role as passenger and not question the orders and decisions of Pardo. To his credit, he did, and it appears that they managed to keep cordial relations despite the difficult situation

When the *Yelcho* finally arrived at Elephant Island, the survivors remember seeing a "small tug", and indeed it was, but it had succeeded where larger and better prepared vessels had failed repeatedly. With survivors crammed into every corner of the vessel, they departed back to Punta Arenas, where, after facing more storm fronts, they managed to arrive on September 3rd, to the amazement of the world. It seems so simple when it is read a century afterwards!

After the rescue, life separated Pardo and Shackleton.

The British explorer kept leading the survivors for some months, until they parted to travel back the Europe, which was in the midst of one of the hardest years of World War I. The Battle of the Somme was raging, and hundreds of thousands of Young Britons were fighting and dying in Flanders. The Imperial Antarctic Expedition clearly wasn't the main interest of a society facing the loss of the best of its youth, but the feats of Shackleton shone as a beacon of hope among the carnage. His commitment, loyalty and faithfulness to the men under his command were a glimmer of hope in a horrible war. Pardo's feat was summarised into a general report of the help by a "Chilean tug". Nevertheless, Pardo was strongly recognised for his heroism both in Chile and Britain. Remaining true to his status as a Chilean naval officer, he accepted the recognitions and decorations, but refused any financial reward. He had fulfilled his duty and considered it unfitting to receive any prize money, despite the fact that he wasn't a rich man and could well have used it. He was just a bigger man than that.

Retiring from the Navy due to ill health, Pardo accepted a position as Chilean Consul in Liverpool, a position he kept until his failing health forced him to resign and return to Chile, where he finally died in 1935, aged 54, due to respiratory problems. His years of sailing in austral waters had finally taken its toll.

Pardo remains well remembered in Chile. His name has been preserved in a succession of Chilean Antarctic vessels and is now used for the lead ship of a new class of offshore patrol vessels. The ship has also been remembered, and it is quite possible that its name will adorn another ship of the same Pardo Class. Now, it's perhaps fitting to remember him also in Britain. **E**



Captain Pardo and his family arrive at Liverpool, where he was Consul of Chile