

Commentary on *Could Captain Scott have been saved? Cecil Meares and the 'second journey' that failed*

doi:10.1017/S0032247418000189

The article *Could Captain Scott have been saved? Cecil Meares and the second journey that failed*, by Karen May and Sarah Airriess, first published in *Polar Record* in 2014 (May & Airriess, 2015), builds a case against Cecil Meares for a failure to restock One Ton Depot in accordance with Scott's instructions. The authors claim that Meares was guilty of disobedience, neglect of duty and 'obfuscation'. However, their case is diminished – in my view – by three significant mistakes that undermine their charges against Meares. In the three sections below, I identify those mistakes and consider whether the strong claims May and Airriess make about Meares are justified.

The article in question is a follow-up to the 2012 article *Could Captain Scott have been saved? Revisiting Scott's last expedition* (May, 2013), which identifies several factors that contributed to a planned dog team journey (the Third Dog Journey) not meeting up with Captain Robert Falcon Scott's party on their return from the South Pole. The follow-up article presents additional research related to the Second Dog Journey and an opportunity to restock One Ton.

On page 260, the authors declare their purpose:

In this article, we shall examine circumstances leading to the failure to restock One Ton depot and the culpability of Meares.

On page 268, the authors sum up against Meares:

Whatever Meares' personal reasons may have been, what ultimately matters is that there is no objective justification for his deliberately shirking clearly outlined duties on which the lives of others depended. A clear line of causality links Meares' negligence with the deaths of at least three men, and no amount of retrospective psychology can excuse him from shouldering his portion of the blame.

May and Airriess criticise Meares for a failure to restock One Ton as he had been instructed. They also criticise him for what they call three cases of 'obfuscation' to cover his failure, 'obfuscation' meaning an action of concealing something or making it more difficult to see or understand.

Problems with the claim of a 'second obfuscation'

On page 267, a claim is made that Meares invented the notion of surplus man-food at One Ton, to avoid having to go south again:

The second obfuscation is recorded in [Apsley] Cherry-Garrard's journal on 28 January 1912, when the latter's party returned to base:

[T]wo miles back we met the 2 dog teams [...] [Meares] was thinking of going out with the other 2 XS rations, but the others had told him that with

what they had left at 1 Ton + the 3 XS rations + one taken out by Atch [Edward Atkinson], there would be plenty for all parties. I think this is wrong. (Cherry-Garrard, 1911) [sic] [cited here as Cherry-Garrard, 1912a]

Here Meares presents himself as having initially wished to go out again, but having been dissuaded or overruled by 'others' at base. Among the men at Cape Evans were those who had restocked One Ton with 3 XS rations in December 1911, so they would have known it was understocked. Even if they had told Meares that between their efforts and the final journey 'there would be plenty for all parties', the packed sledges and intended departure on 17 January demonstrate that this opinion had no real power to sway. Set against Simpson's written record of Meares' about-face after sighting *Terra Nova*, Meares' statement here looks like retroactive justification and abdication of responsibility.

There are deep problems with the authors' narrative:

Firstly, the XS Relief Party did not return to Cape Evans until 23 January 1912 (Hooper, 1912, p. 41). They could not, therefore, have been at Cape Evans on 17 January making statements about One Ton being understocked.

Secondly, the article does not establish whether there was in fact any shortage of provisions at One Ton. The so-called B ration or B unit contained food enough to sustain a party of four men for a week, whilst travelling at sea level across the Barrier. The XS ration was similar, but provided additional energy for more arduous conditions such as ascending the glacier, travelling on the elevated Polar Plateau and travelling in extreme cold. The evidence is clear:

1. Cherry-Garrard's journal for 24 February 1912 itemises the provisions known to be at One Ton prior to his departure (Cherry-Garrard, 1912d). This was equivalent to about 1 XS unit and at least 1½ B units.
2. In his journal entry for 6 March 1912, whilst at One Ton, Cherry-Garrard wrote, 'Made the depot this afternoon – only B ration we have for them is cocoa, chocolate and pem, but they have now double what they can eat' (Cherry-Garrard, 1912d, journal section).
3. Atkinson wrote about Cherry-Garrard's trip, 'On March 10 they depoted their two weeks' supply of provisions for the Southern Party, including several smaller delicacies. One Ton was then supplied with sufficient man provisions for a party of five for over a month' (Atkinson, 2011, p. 669).
4. Charles Wright wrote on 11 November 1912 about the provisions the Search Party excavated at One Ton. He itemised a far greater quantity of provisions than the two XS units Scott's party would have needed (Wright, 1993, p. 343).

Thirdly, the article overlooks extra provisions left at One Ton by Meares and by others:

1. Extra provisions left at One Ton by Meares, 'but to make up, Meares had left quite a lot of extras' (Cherry-Garrard, 1912a, 15 January).
2. Extra provisions brought to One Ton by Atkinson's returning party, which had recorded that it was travelling on short rations in order to save food specifically in case supplies at One Ton were insufficient (Cherry-Garrard, 2010, p. 397).
3. Extra provisions left at One Ton by Atkinson's party, 'have left for 2nd [supporting] party double as much as we tookHe [Atch] insists on leaving for the second party two or three times as much grub as we take' (Wright, 1993, p. 238).

On 28 January 1912, when Cherry Garrard wrote the journal entry quoted at the top of this section, with Atkinson due to take out the final two food units, a surplus of food at One Ton was assured. With the replenishment of One Ton by the third dog journey, One Ton would indeed have 'plenty for all'.

There were known shortfalls at depots south of One Ton, which were the concern of the third dog journey, and as things stood on 28 January, replenishment of those depots was Atkinson's responsibility. The conflation of food shortages south of One Ton with the second dog journey indicates confusion between the second and third dog journeys – the second journey was only ever expected to replenish One Ton.

In this section, we have verifiable evidence that Meares did not invent the notion of surplus provisions at One Ton. The authors' interpretation of Cherry-Garrard's text runs contrary to contemporaneous texts of four expedition members. The authors' charge of a 'second obfuscation' does not stand up to scrutiny.

Problems with the claim of a 'third obfuscation'

On page 267, a claim is made that Meares invented the idea of returning parties bringing back instructions for the dog teams' second journey, calling it a 'third obfuscation':

Cherry-Garrard's 1922 memoir *The worst journey in the world* holds the third obfuscation: 'I note in my diary [on 31 January 1912] after we had reached the hut, that Scott was to have sent back instructions for the dog party with us, but these have, it would seem, been forgotten' (Cherry-Garrard, 1994, p. 425). At the back of his journal for November 1912, in a section titled 'Written on the Barrier after finding the Remains of the Southern Party', Cherry-Garrard elaborates: 'I heard that Meares was told that further instructions as to the dogs would be sent back by the 1st Return Party. These however were not sent' (Cherry-Garrard, 1912c).

It appears that the idea of returning parties bringing order for the dog teams originated with Meares.

Cherry-Garrard's journal for 31 January 1912 does indeed contain the words quoted, but only in the context of the

third dog journey, not the second. The complete entry is reproduced below, in order to show the context of the authors' excerpt:

Atkinson has been busy making up dog weights for his trip to meet the last returning party, and also getting up the navigation from Silas [Wright]. He is left in rather a difficult position. **Scott was to have sent back instructions for the dog party with us, but these have it would seem, been forgotten.** [Emphasis added]. Only a very limited line of dog food can be taken since after Corner Camp there is none on the road. Again it would seem that Scott might reach One Ton a few days after March 1st, and on the other hand it might be about March 15. Had the dogs not got back so late a depot of dog food was to have been run out to One Ton, and this has not been done. But the dogs are to go as far south as possible: it is a strange jumble. (Cherry-Garrard, 1912b)

Cherry-Garrard's journal entry is exclusively about the third dog journey, written after Atkinson had agreed to lead it, in place of Meares. It starts by describing Atkinson's preparations for going to meet Scott and ends with the imperative to go as far south as possible. There is nothing to indicate that the sentence in bold font (selected by the authors) is about the second journey. They are mistaken in citing this sentence as evidence of Meares' 'culpability' for anything to do with the second dog journey.

Meares did not invent the idea of returning parties bringing back information for deciding the third dog journey's departure date. That idea came from Scott himself, as recorded in the texts of two expedition members:

- Scott's written instructions to Meares for the third journey include the phrase: 'The date of your departure must depend on news received from returning units ...' (Evans, 1961, p. 162).
- Atkinson's verbal instructions for the third dog journey include the phrase: 'proceed as far south as possible, taking into consideration the times of return of the various parties ...' (Atkinson, 2011, p. 665).

One can understand the need for the third dog journey to know how far Scott was ahead of or behind schedule, in order to meet up with him on the Barrier. However, there was no such imperative with the second journey and there is no contemporaneous record indicating the second dog journey was dependent on news received from returning parties.

Cherry-Garrard's other phrase quoted by the authors, written at the death tent, is repetition; it is not 'elaboration' as they claim. There is no contemporaneous record suggesting Cherry-Garrard understood Scott's three dog journeys – their purposes, payloads or destinations. On page 269, the authors describe how, several years later, Cherry-Garrard wrote to Meares, requesting a copy of Scott's exact orders. This suggests at least a level of doubt in Cherry-Garrard's mind. It is possible that Cherry-Garrard did not understand the three dog journeys until he saw Scott's orders reproduced in Evans's 1922 book.

The alleged ‘third obfuscation’ is based upon a reference that has been taken out of context. The charge does not stand up to scrutiny.

Problems with the claim of Meares’ ‘culpability’

The authors’ case against Meares relies heavily upon George Simpson’s journal entry of 21 January 1912, in particular the single sentence:

Naturally when the ship was seen Meares delayed his departure in the hope of being able to take home news, with him (Simpson, undated, p. 139).

It is remarkable that Simpson’s journal contains no reference to any dog journey after the entry for 21 January 1912. As acting base commander, one would expect Simpson to have recorded key events that took place on his watch. He was expecting Scott back, who would quite possibly seek explanations for events that had occurred at Cape Evans during his absence. If there had indeed been a breach by Meares of his orders or of his duty, as claimed, then Simpson’s silence is inexplicable.

Simpson’s single sentence carries no hint of disobedience or neglect of duty; it seems to indicate goodwill and human understanding between Simpson and Meares. By a series of unsubstantiated assertions, May and Airriess build upon Simpson’s single sentence to create a deeper and more sinister interpretation:

- On page 264, ‘A wish to wait indefinitely for ‘news’ ...’ is attributed to Meares, whilst the following sentence introduces the concept of disobedience: ‘Due to Meares’ refusal to leave, the depot remained unstocked.’
- Then on page 266, the theme of disobedience is reiterated: ‘Meares abandoned the crucial ‘second journey’; ‘Meares’ failure to carry out his mission’; ‘fobbed off with Meares’ prevarications’; ‘Meares’ refusal to leave for One Ton’; ‘the fact that Meares had neglected Scott’s orders’ and so on, over following pages.
- On page 267, a new theme is introduced: ‘Set against Simpson’s written record of Meares’ about-face ...’ and ‘Simpson’s account shows otherwise’, portraying Simpson’s single sentence as being a complete and reliable account of Meares’ alleged misconduct.

Could Captain Scott have been saved? Cecil Meares and the ‘second journey’ that failed: a response to Bill Alp

Received April 2018; accepted April 2018

doi:10.1017/S0032247418000244

Alp’s objections

Alp makes some factual corrections regarding the ‘second obfuscation’ and ‘third obfuscation’ identified in the article. Regarding the ‘second obfuscation’, Alp is correct that the man-haulers (of the 3 X.S. supplies) had not yet returned from base on 17 January 1912, and would not return until 23 January. However, Alp’s objection does

The assertions about Meares’ disobedience and neglect of duty, which the authors have derived from Simpson’s single sentence, are hypothetical. Not one of the assertions is evidence-based or verifiable. The themes of Meares’ disobedience and neglect of duty are artificial constructs.

Bill Alp

Wellington, New Zealand (bill.alp@xtra.co.nz)

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not exonerate Meares. On 31 January 1912, expedition member Apsley Cherry-Garrard recorded that Meares supposedly had considered departing on the ‘second journey’, but had been assured by the man-haulers that there was already ‘plenty for all parties’ with ‘what they had left at 1 Ton’. The key date was 17 January 1912, when Meares still had time to either leave (for the ‘second journey’, a projected two-week depot run) or remain at base. Meares’ inaction on that date therefore cannot be excused by reassurance from the man-haulers on what they ‘had left’ at One Ton, as on 17 January the man-haulers had not yet returned to base to deliver such reassurance.

Alp’s challenge to the ‘third obfuscation’ is that it is taken out of context, and refers rather to the expectations