

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.

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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

for the ‘third journey’. Having re-consulted the original handwritten transcription at the back of Cherry-Garrard’s November 1912 sledging journal, it is a fair comment that Cherry-Garrard discusses the expectations for the ‘third journey’ rather than the ‘second journey’. Whilst this can now be corrected, it does not undermine the case against Meares significantly.

Alp provides evidence that One Ton depot was well-stocked with human food, but he has misunderstood the main issue with the 2014 article: the lack of *dog food* at One Ton. As Cherry-Garrard pointed out in *The worst journey in the world*, ‘Since there was no depôt of dog food at One Ton it was not possible [for the ‘third journey’] to go farther South (except for the one day mentioned above) without killing dogs’ (Cherry-Garrard, 1994, p. 434). This absent depot of dog food was the depot of dog food that Meares had been ordered by Scott in October 1911 to deliver to One Ton depot in January 1912, and which Meares did not ultimately deliver. This absence of dog food at One Ton necessarily limited the dog-teams’ progress during their later ‘third journey’ in February–March 1912: lack of dog food limited the dog-teams’ time out on the Barrier and ultimately prevented them from travelling beyond One Ton, to meet Scott’s polar party further south (in accordance with Scott’s written orders of October 1911). The dog-teams’ inability to go further south to meet the polar party had tragic consequences for Scott and his men later on. Meares’ failing to deliver the dog food to One Ton depot is therefore a crucial feature of the 2014 May–Airriess article.

Whilst Alp challenges both the ‘second obfuscation’ and the ‘third obfuscation’ in the May–Airriess article, he does not mention the first of Meares’ obfuscations, namely the ‘stock of luxuries’ anomaly. Rather than tackle this anomaly directly, Alp has instead quoted a very small part of George C. Simpson’s journal, the sentence ‘Naturally when the ship was seen Meares delayed his departure in the hope of being able to take home news with him’. Alp then accuses May & Airriess of ‘portraying Simpson’s **single sentence** as being a complete and reliable account of Meares’ alleged misconduct’ (Alp, 2018, bold emphasis mine). This has the effect of misrepresenting the May–Airriess article. The main issue was not a ‘single sentence’, but the significant anomaly of Meares’ declared sledge cargo of ‘luxuries’ in January 1912. This anomaly will be explained below.

The ‘stock of luxuries’ anomaly

First of all, we must determine the cargo that Scott had instructed Meares to transport on the ‘second journey’, in his October 1911 written orders for the dog-teams. Scott’s orders to Meares were as follows:

At some point during this month or early in January you should make your second journey to One Ton Camp and leave there:

5 units X.S. ration.

3 cases of biscuit.

5 gallons of oil.

As much dog food as you can conveniently carry (for third journey) (Evans, 1921, pp. 161–162; May & Airriess, 2014, p. 261, bold emphasis added).

The ‘5 X.S. rations’ were later amended to 2 X.S. rations during the expedition, when Scott sent a written update back to Cape Evans stating that a separate man-hauling party should transport 3 of the 5 X.S. rations instead (May, 2012, p. 80). However, Scott never cancelled the delivery of the remaining 2 X.S. rations, biscuit, oil and dog food, so Meares knew that he had to undertake this task. Particularly important was Scott’s explanation that Meares should bring ‘as much dog food as you can conveniently carry (for third journey)’. Meares understood that during the ‘second journey’, dog food had to be deposited at One Ton to facilitate the ‘third journey’ (where the dog-teams were expected to meet and intercept Scott’s polar party out on the Barrier in March 1912 (May, 2013, p. 79)). If Meares did not undertake the ‘second journey’, then the distance of the ‘third journey’ would be compromised.

With this context in mind, we must now examine Simpson’s 1912 journal entry describing the contents of Meares’ sledges on 17 January 1912:

On their return the dogs were rested, but there was more work ahead for them. **Meares intended to go out to One Ton Camp again taking a little more food, but chiefly to take out a stock of luxuries like Irish Stew, Marmalade and Tinned Fruits . . .** On the 17th of January **Meares had his sledges packed with the idea of starting that evening**. During the afternoon Anton [Omelchenko] rushed in to me saying ‘the Terra Nova has come’ . . . [T]here was the ship on the horizon. . . **Naturally when the ship was seen Meares delayed his departure** in the hope of being able to take home news with him (Simpson, 1911, pp. 52–53, 56–57; May & Airriess, 2015, p. 264, bold emphasis added).

In the 2014 May–Airriess article this lengthy quotation from Simpson was cited in two separate parts on page 264. Strangely, Alp has quoted solely the latter part rather than the earlier, highly anomalous part (Simpson’s belief that Meares’ sledge chiefly held ‘a stock of luxuries like Irish Stew, Marmalade and Tinned Fruits’). This cargo of ‘luxuries’ was not what Scott had ordered, which instantly raises concerns for a modern historian. Alp’s omitting all mention of this ‘red flag’ in Simpson’s journal entry, and claiming that the only suspicious content cited against Meares is the later ‘single sentence’, has the effect of misrepresenting the 2014 May–Airriess article.

Rather than refer the reader to the original article, I shall briefly outline below why the ‘stock of luxuries’ statement raises concerns about Meares’ conduct. Readers may thus be informed of the strongest evidence against Meares in the 2014 May–Airriess article, and understand why it is unusual that Alp did not address it directly in his letter.

Explaining the ‘stock of luxuries’ journal anomaly

First of all, we must establish the primary source of evidence for this description. In writing his journals in 1912 Simpson, as head of base, had the task of recording events at base (not least for Scott, who in January 1912 was still expected to return from the south pole later that year, and read Simpson’s account to see what had transpired in his absence). Unusually, Alp in his letter labels Simpson’s 1912 journal entry ‘undated’: in fact, Simpson’s entry may be safely dated to 1912, as it can be located in Simpson’s original holograph [hand-written] journal of November 1911–April 1912 (SPRIMS 704/4) as archived in the Scott Polar Research Institute (Simpson, 1911).

Simpson’s written record of the cargo (‘Irish Stew, Marmalade and Tinned Fruits’ (Simpson, 1911, pp. 52–53)) is too specific to be a vague misunderstanding, and Simpson’s source for it could only have been Meares. (The other dog-driver, the Russian Dmitri Gerof, had rudimentary English, using phrases like ‘a plenty big smile’ (May & Lewis, 2015, p. 657): Gerof was incapable of such sophisticated phrasing as ‘a stock of luxuries like Irish Stew, Marmalade and Tinned Fruits’.) When the plain cargo specified in Scott’s orders (‘X.S. ration’, ‘biscuit’, ‘oil’, ‘dog food’) is contrasted with the ‘stock of luxuries’ (‘Irish Stew, Marmalade and Tinned Fruits’) that Meares claimed was on his sledges, there is an obvious discrepancy. The May–Airriess article therefore hypothesised that on 17 January 1912 Meares misrepresented his sledges’ cargo as ‘luxuries’ to Simpson to mischaracterise the ‘second journey’ as unimportant and easily cancellable, and that Simpson, believing Meares, recorded this misrepresentation in his 1912 journal in good faith.

The May–Airriess article also presented evidence that Simpson, when interviewed in 1948 by Cherry-Garrard, stated that he had not understood back in 1912 that Meares’ delivery of dog food was important: ‘I [Cherry-Garrard] finally told Simpson the real question was the dog food. This was apparently the first time Simpson had even heard of the dog food’ (May & Airriess, 2015, p. 269). Simpson was not the only expedition member to doubt Meares. In 1918 Edward L. Atkinson wrote to Cherry-Garrard that

I think you may make trouble with Meares by insisting we know his orders but have no proof in writing of them. **You and I know that he disobeyed orders.** I thought unwillingly then that he was flying the white feather [i.e. demonstrating cowardice]... if you make a statement to that effect and if it was challenged, you would have to substantiate it in writing... The Owner [Scott] unfortunately never kept copies of his orders. (Strathie, 2015, p. 175, bold emphasis added)

Evidently Atkinson in 1918 could not locate a hard copy of Scott’s orders with which to confront Meares. However, modern historians can now read Scott’s October 1911 orders in two separate, corroborating formats: the full transcription in E.R.G.R. Evans’ 1921 memoir (Evans, 1921, pp. 160–163), and a condensed, ink-written

transcription in Dr Edward A. Wilson’s private 1911 sketchbook (Wilson, 1911). We now know what Scott wanted Meares to deliver on the ‘second journey’: it is now clear that Meares did not fulfil Scott’s orders. ‘As much dog food as you can conveniently carry’ should have been transported by dog-teams to One Ton depot on the ‘second journey’, in order to facilitate the dog-teams’ progress south on their later ‘third journey’. Meares did not do this.

Alp argues that Simpson in January 1912 was fully cognisant of Scott’s requirements: ‘If there had indeed been a breach by Meares of his duty or of his orders, as is claimed, then Simpson’s silence is inexplicable’ (Alp, 2018). However, this misrepresents the 2014 May–Airriess article, which hypothesised that Simpson misunderstood Scott’s requirements. Although he was acting ‘head of base’ during Scott’s absence, Simpson’s priority in 1912 was the expedition’s substantial scientific workload, and hence he was unlikely to have committed to memory Scott’s October 1911 orders for various parties. The dog-teams, after all, were Meares’ responsibility.

Additionally, Simpson depended upon updates from Scott relayed by expedition members returning from the south (in his orders to Meares, Scott mentions that departure dates may depend upon ‘news received from returning units’ (Evans, 1921, p. 162)). Scott’s system hence depended upon expedition members trusting the word of their colleagues. The 2014 May–Airriess article hypothesised that Simpson in January 1912 naturally assumed that any transport update from his colleague Meares would be truthful, and that he trusted Meares’ word as accurate.

To forestall unrealistic debate, I will state firmly here that Simpson could not have engaged in conscious deception when writing his 1912 journal. Had Simpson intended to deceive, then he would not have deliberately included a strange anomaly that, if spotted during his lifetime by Scott or others, would cause controversy and come down to Meares’ word against his. Had Simpson intended deception, he would have safeguarded himself either by destroying his journal or by blaming the omission of the ‘second journey’ on something beyond human control (such as the condition of the dogs). Furthermore, the narrative of Simpson being deceived by Meares has self-evident limitations when employed as an excuse: it still exposes Simpson to accusations of being lax and overly credulous. As Simpson would not consciously record a humiliating and potentially reputation-damaging story for posterity, it follows that he genuinely did not know in January 1912 that he was being deceived. The only reasonable explanation for Simpson recording the strange ‘stock of luxuries’ story in his 1912 journal, and preserving that journal, is that he honestly believed he was recording the truth.

In recording events at the time, Simpson was clearly willing to be held accountable to no less an authority than Scott himself, upon Scott’s expected return later in 1912. After the expedition, Simpson not only gave his four

handwritten journals of 1910–1912 (SPRI MS 704-1/4) to the expedition archive (allowing external comparison with other people's expedition journals), but also allowed an official typescript to be made (SPRI MS 1097/49) for further circulation. Evidently Simpson did not think he had anything to hide.

The 2014 May–Airriess article tackled Meares' probable motive for refusing the 'second journey'. This was Meares' recorded wish to leave the expedition early, in 1912, rather than remaining until 1913. Captain Oates wrote in October 1911 that Meares wanted to head 'home in the ship' and 'to clear out [of the expedition] whatever happened' (Oates, 1911; May & Airriess, 2015, p. 268). This motivation was repeated in two further sources, a 1937 newspaper review stating that Meares 'did not want to lose the chance of an early return home' (May & Airriess, p. 269), and a 1938 interview in which Simpson stated that Meares 'wanted to get home and did not want to miss the ship' (May & Airriess, 2015, p. 269). With three sources pointing in the same direction, the 2014 May–Airriess article had strong reason to hypothesise that Meares was so determined to leave Antarctica in 1912 that, when the ship was sighted on 17 January, Meares decided to mislead Simpson into believing that the 'second journey' was the transportation of 'luxuries' and hence easily cancelled. This would enable Meares to stay at base, rather than undertaking the 'second journey' and taking the risk of missing the ship. However, the 'second journey' was vital: Meares' failure to deposit dog food in January 1912 led to the dog-teams' movements being curtailed on their 'third journey' during February–March 1912, leaving the polar party without support on the Barrier.

'Verifiable' evidence implicating Cecil Meares

Alp makes an unwarranted claim in stating that there is supposedly no 'verifiable' evidence indicating Meares' disobedience. His exact words are, 'Not one of the assertions is evidence-based or verifiable' (Alp, 2018). However, Alp is mistaken. There is verifiable evidence in the 2014 May–Airriess article, which, when taken together and evaluated in sequence, identifies Meares as having disobeyed Scott's orders.

This is the sequence of evidence, with verifiable reference:

- 1) Scott's orders of October 1911, addressed to Meares, specified that 'as much dog food as you can conveniently carry (for third journey)' should be taken by dog-teams to One Ton depot on the 'second journey', to facilitate the dog-teams' progress beyond One Ton on the later 'third journey'. Scott's wishes for the 'second journey' are verifiable from Scott's orders, reproduced in Evans' 1921 memoir (Evans, 1921, pp. 160–163) and transcribed in Wilson's 1911 sketchbook (Wilson, 1911).
- 2) Meares took too much food from Mount Hooper depot whilst returning from the south, but left a written message later at One Ton depot (for parties

following behind him) stating his intention to return to restock One Ton 'by the end of the month [January 1912]' (May & Airriess, 2015, p. 266). This indicates Meares' awareness that restocking One Ton was vital. Both Meares taking too much food from Mount Hooper depot, and his stated intention to return to restock One Ton (with the dog food necessary for the 'third journey', allowing dog-teams to proceed south towards Mount Hooper) are verifiable from the 1912 journals of Wright and Cherry-Garrard (May & Airriess, 2015, pp. 265–266).

- 3) In January 1912 Meares knew there was still the possibility of departing on the 'second journey' to One Ton depot and returning in time to give the dogs a rest (of two weeks) before they undertook the 'third journey'. This is verifiable from Simpson's original 1912 journal, showing Meares on 17 January 1912 with 'sledges packed, with the idea of starting that evening' (Simpson, 1911, p. 53; May & Airriess, 2015, p. 264).
- 4) In January 1912 Meares gave Simpson to understand that his sledges contained 'chiefly a stock of luxuries'. This curious statement is verifiable from Simpson's 1912 journal (Simpson, 1911, pp. 52–53; May & Airriess, 2015, p. 264). This 'stock of luxuries' was not what Scott had ordered, which indicates that Meares was not following Scott's orders.
- 5) As early as October 1911 Meares had expressed a strong desire to leave the expedition early; this is verifiable from Oates' letter of 24 October 1911 (Oates, 1911; May & Airriess, 2015, p. 268) and corroborated by further sources from 1937 and 1938 (May & Airriess, 2015, p. 268).
- 6) Because Meares did not undertake the 'second journey' in January 1912, One Ton depot did not contain the depot of dog food which was supposed to be used later by the dogs on their 'third journey' to meet Scott's polar party. This is verifiable from Cherry-Garrard's statement that when he and Gerof arrived at One Ton in March 1912 'there was no depôt of dog food at One Ton' (Cherry-Garrard, 1994, p. 434).
- 7) Upon discovering inadequate food supplies at Mount Hooper depot, Scott recorded despondently on 10 March 1912 that 'the dog-teams which would have been our salvation have evidently failed' (Scott, 1913, p. 406; May & Airriess, 2015, pp. 269–270). This is verifiable evidence for Scott's expectation that by 10 March the dog-teams should have travelled from base far enough to either have met the polar party around Mount Hooper, or to have restocked Mount Hooper (compensating for the known food deficit). The dog-teams could only have travelled as far as Mount Hooper in March 1912 had One Ton depot been previously stocked with dog food by Meares on the 'second journey' in January 1912. As Meares did not undertake the 'second journey', this necessarily limited the dog-teams' movements during the 'third journey' in February–March 1912. In March 1912,

the polar party was left without expected support from dog-teams at a time when Oates' severe debilitation required external rescue.

- 8) Meares left the expedition early in 1912, and from then until his death provided no written account of his actions. During 1918–1948 four people (Atkinson, Simpson, Cherry-Garrard and a 1937 book reviewer) voiced belated realisation that Meares had disobeyed Scott's orders in 1912. These sources were recorded in the May–Airriess article (May & Airriess, 2015, p. 269).

This is all verifiable historical evidence. When taken together, it forms a picture of Meares not having followed Scott's orders despite knowing in January 1912 that the 'second journey's' delivery of dog food to One Ton depot was important.

When a subordinate does not follow their leader's orders then one expects the subordinate to explain themselves, especially when not following orders results in the later curtailment, and ultimate failure, of a life-saving plan. Meares did not follow Scott's orders: he did not restock One Ton depot with dog food in January 1912, resulting in the polar party's being abandoned on the Barrier in March 1912. Meares gave no justification, remaining silent until his death in 1937; had he been entirely without blame, one would expect him to have provided an explanation.

The article '*They are not the ponies they ought to have been*': revisiting Cecil Meares' purchase of Siberian ponies for Captain Scott's British Antarctic (*Terra Nova*) Expedition (1910–1913)' (May & Lewis, 2015) gives a further troubling instance of Meares' misrepresentation. In September 1910 Meares informed the Australian media that he had bought the ponies in Siberia for expedition transport because, due to his time in Siberia, he knew 'the types well' (May & Lewis, 2015, p. 659). However, by June 1911, when the poor quality of the ponies was criticised by several eyewitnesses, Meares backtracked to avoid all association with those ponies; he evaded responsibility by claiming he was 'no judge of horse flesh' and spreading the intrinsically unlikely narrative that a 'friend' had bought them instead in Manchuria (May & Lewis, 2015, p. 657). This demonstrates Meares' ability to tell different stories at different times for self-protection, a skill probably acquired as a military intelligence agent in Asia (May & Lewis, 2015, p. 662).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Alp has subjected the May–Airriess article to a fact-check, and corrected peripheral factual errors. However, Alp's erroneous claim that 'the themes of Meares' disobedience and neglect of duty are artificial

constructs' (Alp, 2018) is refuted by points 1–8 above. Alp's attempt to declare Meares innocent of all charges is fundamentally unsatisfactory, as it omits consideration of two previously identified and significant problems with Meares' conduct: Meares' responsibility for purchasing poor-quality ponies for the expedition transport in 1910 (May & Lewis, 2015), and Meares' anomalous 'stock of luxuries' claim to Simpson in 1912 (May & Airriess, 2015). The identification of both problems is based on credible primary evidence indicating that Meares had not followed Scott's orders. Both examples of Meares' neglect of duty would eventually contribute to the *Terra Nova* expedition disaster.

Acknowledgments

I must thank Bill Alp for bringing some incidental errors to my attention in the co-authored article concerning the *Terra Nova* expedition's dog-driver Cecil Meares (*Could Captain Scott have been saved? Cecil Meares and the 'second journey' that failed* (May & Airriess, 2015, first published online 17 February 2014)). However, Alp's response has not tackled the most anomalous and serious of the article's charges against Meares.

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