

# An Unlikely Antarctic Explorer

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In a suburb of Wellington, New Zealand, the local cemetery is home to a rather unassuming grave. The final resting place of Henry “Chippy” McNish, one of the survivors of Sir Ernest Shackleton’s 1914 *Endurance* Expedition, the grave is also a memorial to one of the most improbable of Antarctic explorers.

McNish himself was a carpenter onboard the *Endurance*, though he didn’t travel alone. During the expedition, McNish brought along a cat that followed him around like an over-possessive wife. Soon enough, the crew named the cat Mrs. Chippy, although the expedition quickly realised that Mrs. Chippy was a gentleman, not a lady.

Mrs. Chippy was an unusual cat, though an avid adventurer, having climbed the *Endurance*’s rigging lines on several occasions. Mrs. Chippy also did some very provocative strolls across the roofs of the dogs’ kennels and even once fell into the frigid water below. Thankfully, the crew heard her cries and quickly turned the ship around so they could pluck her up from the icy cold waters and get her to safety.

Also onboard the *Endurance* was a young man - Perce Blackborow. Perce had travelled to Buenos Aires looking for new employment, but wasn’t hired; at 18, his youth and inexperience counted against him. Somehow, he managed to sneak aboard the ship, and he hid in a clothing locker for three days. Eventually, he was discovered, and Shackleton was furious with him, but was sent to work in the galley where he became great friends with Mrs. Chippy.

In January of 1915, the *Endurance* got trapped in the Antarctic pack ice. McNish’s work prevented the ship from flooding, but he couldn’t do anything to stop it from being crushed. The ship was abandoned and, much to McNish’s despair, Shackleton ordered Mrs. Chippy to be shot, as they couldn’t take her on their survival journey.

Now, the group had to make it back to safety. For months, the expedition drifted through icy waters until they made it to Elephant Island.

Once at Elephant Island, Shackleton set out in a 22-foot-long open boat and made an 800-mile crossing through the rough waters of the South Atlantic to South Georgia. McNish was one of the five men who accompanied Shackleton, making improvements to the boat to make the voyage possible.

For the next fifteen years, McNish lived a difficult life in Wellington before passing away in 1930. He never forgave Shackleton for shooting Mrs. Chippy.

Nearly 30 years later, in 1959, the New Zealand Antarctic Society realised that McNish had been given a very poor burial in an unmarked grave. The Society raised funds for a headstone and even reunited McNish and Mrs. Chippy by adding a life-sized bronze statue of Mrs. Chippy to the grave.

Now Karori Cemetery near Wellington is a pilgrimage site for Antarctic history buffs, who visit McNish’s grave and see Mrs. Chippy watching over him once again.

