

## COMMANDER ANGUS BRUCE ERSKINE, RN 1928–2006

Angus Erskine died in Edinburgh on 15 April 2006, a respected and much-loved member of both Arctic and Antarctic communities, who had combined a naval career with polar expeditions and then pioneered ecotourism in the Arctic. His dry humour, fund of anecdotes, and quiet confidence made him an excellent companion for all occasions.

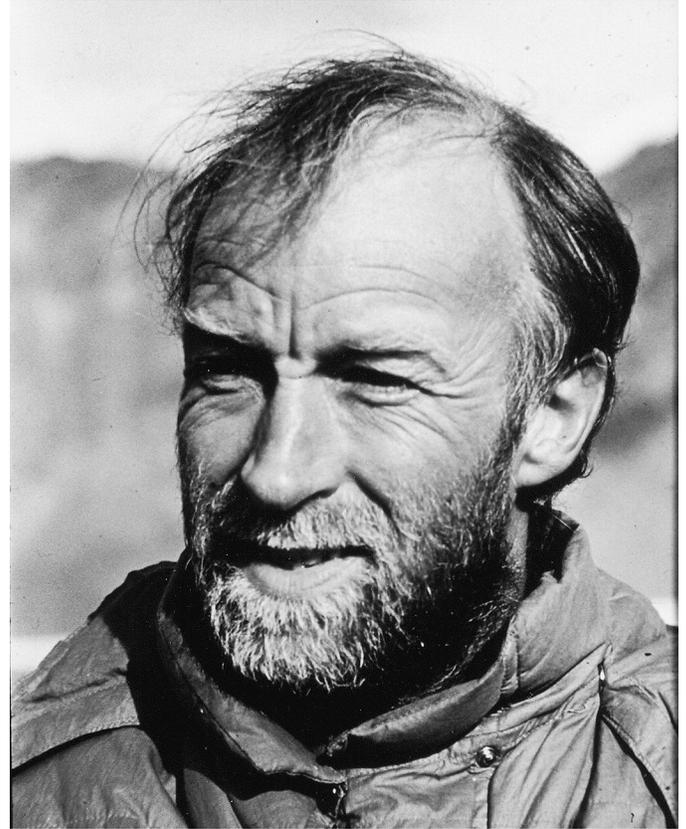
Born on 11 May 1928 in Buckingham Palace, a son of Sir Arthur Erskine, Crown Equerry to King George V and King George VI, Angus was educated at the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, went to sea as a midshipman in the closing weeks of World War II, and was eventually to command three ships: HMS *Wizard*, *Alert*, and *Diana*. Angus's interest in the polar regions may have been aroused by his uncle Pat Baird's stories of Arctic exploration before the war, but his own first encounter occurred in unusual circumstances. He was serving as sub-lieutenant on HMS *Bigbury Bay*, a frigate based in Bermuda but sent in February 1950 as guardship for the Falkland Islands and Dependencies. The ship was sent to Deception Island, where it picked up Vivian Fuchs and other men who had been stranded for an extra winter at the base of the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (later the British Antarctic Survey) on Stonington Island.

As a result of this Antarctic experience and his skill in ski-mountaineering, Angus was chosen for the British North Greenland Expedition, led by Commander Jim Simpson, RN, in 1952–54. Simpson, who had flown to North Greenland in 1950 as a guest of Eigil Knuth's Danish Peary Land Expedition, spotted a range of mountains set in the Inland Ice. He learned that it was the little-known Dronning Louise Land and became determined to explore it. The next year, Simpson visited the mountains with a reconnaissance party, which included Angus, and decided that an unnamed lake, later called Britannia Sø, could be used by flying boats.

The following year, in October 1951, Angus sailed to Jakobshavn (Illulisat) on the west coast of Greenland, where he spent the winter buying Eskimo dogs and sledging equipment and learning how to drive dog teams. In preparing for his first winter in Greenland, he included whisky in his stores: "I took it on principle, the best principle I know."

The expedition was deployed to Greenland by ship and aircraft in the summer of 1952. There was a near-disaster at the start when Simpson, Angus, and one companion were stranded in a sinking boat on Britannia Sø. They were saved by a skilfully manoeuvred Sunderland flying boat, but only after Simpson had nearly drowned and Angus had been "keelhauled" under the plane's hull.

Although the expedition had Weasel tracked vehicles, dog sledges were crucial to many of its activities. Most of the other members of the team were "-ologists" of one form or another, so Angus described himself as a "huskologist." Once the expedition base had been established, Simpson, Angus, and two companions set out by



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dog sledge to establish a field station, Northice, near the centre of the icecap. Stores were dropped at the site from RAF Hastings aircraft, one of which crashed in a whiteout. The crew, none badly injured, were eventually flown out by a USAF Arctic rescue flight. During the rest of the expedition, Angus took part in several sledging journeys, and after the death of Danish Captain Hans Jensen, he became assistant surveyor.

Following three years in the Arctic, Angus was persuaded in a pub to join the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey and go to the Antarctic. He sailed from Port Stanley, Falkland Islands, in 1956 to Deception Island, where he spent nine weeks as harbourmaster at the Survey's base. During that time, the base hosted the Duke of Edinburgh, who was touring remote outposts of the Commonwealth on his way back from the Commonwealth Games in Australia.

Angus then moved south and became base leader of Base W, Detaille Island, for the winter of 1957. He was delighted to find five of his British North Greenland Expedition dogs in residence and immediately started to train three dog teams—the Troggs, the Counties, and the Girls—for the year's surveying programme. Base W, eight miles off the west coast of the Antarctic Peninsula, was isolated from their work area until the sea froze. Angus persuaded the captain of RRS *John Biscoe* to land dogs,

men, and equipment at a refuge hut on the mainland. By autumn, the teams were ready to set out. On the second day, however, the weather broke, and the men were tent-bound for a week in a fierce blizzard. Angus later wrote that it was the most frightening experience he had ever had in polar regions (presumably worse than being keelhaunched under a flying boat). On one occasion, he got lost a few yards from his tent, which he found only by tripping over a guy rope. They got back to Detaille Island in July, after the sea had frozen. In the following spring Angus sledged up onto the Antarctic Peninsula plateau and down what was to become the Erskine Glacier to recover a party that had been stranded by open water. In all, he spent only four months of his year in the Antarctic at the Detaille Island base.

In 1963–64, Angus returned to Antarctica as UK Liaison Officer, visiting United States stations under the terms of the Antarctic Treaty that permit signatories to inspect each other's stations. The United States had decided to exercise this right, so the United Kingdom followed suit. Happily for Angus, the file for this posting had landed on the desk of a friend, who immediately phoned him. As a result, he was able to increase his Antarctic experience by visiting the Americans at McMurdo Sound and the South Pole and the New Zealanders at Scott base.

In 1972, Angus retired from the Royal Navy but used his retirement leave to lead a seven-man expedition to explore northwest Ellesmere Island, between the Milne Glacier and Yelverton Inlet. One of the expedition's aims was to give the Royal Navy and Royal Marine Mountaineering Club a new lease on life after two men had been killed on an earlier Arctic expedition. Ellesmere Island was blanketed in cloud, but John Sesnick, the pilot of their Twin Otter, eventually found a clear area, spiralled down, and landed the party on the icecap. When the weather cleared, they had to climb neighbouring peaks to ascertain where they were and then head to where they wanted to be. One objective was to ski down the Milne Glacier to the coast, where a tabular iceberg had grounded. They hoped to find driftwood that could be radiocarbon-dated to give a minimum date for the stranding. The ground was still snow-covered, so the search proved futile. Eventually, the team climbed 14 peaks, of which 13 were first ascents, before descending Air Force Glacier and being picked up at Tanquary Fiord.

In retirement, Angus skippered the adventure training ship *Captain Scott* for several seasons. Then, in 1979, he set up a one-man travel company, Erskine Expeditions, to take small parties to remote parts of the Arctic. The first trips went to Mesters Vig in Northeast Greenland, where there was an airstrip that had served a lead mine, but soon the programme included a cruise around Svalbard in a

chartered boat, visits to several parts of the Canadian Arctic, and the first "tourist party" to Qaanaaq in Northwest Greenland. At the other end of the world, Erskine Expeditions was the first tour company to visit the Falkland Islands after the 1982 conflict.

These trips were forerunners of what is now known as "ecotourism." They necessarily left a small "footprint" on the environment because parties were never more than eight and food and equipment were limited to what the participants could carry on their backs. They were not "treks" with frequent route marches between camps but "explorations" in which most days were spent hill-walking, botanizing, and bird-watching. However, often the only means of moving camp was by backpacking. Participants were advised to bring "sawn-off" toothbrushes to reduce weight, and it is said that the first-aid kit consisted of sticking plasters for external application and aspirins for internal application. In a less eco-friendly vein, one advertisement offered "Eat only what you catch. Old Arctic hand offers wilderness experience." For his clients, Erskine Expeditions were definitely the trips of a lifetime. Angus was an excellent guide, a competent naturalist and mountaineer, always patient and ensuring that weaker members were not overburdened, full of good humour and a fund of stories. The bottle of whisky included "on principle" was now used for solving local administrative and logistic difficulties.

At the same time, Angus worked as expedition leader and lecturer on the *Linblad Explorer* and *World Discoverer*, the pioneering expedition cruising ships, which were opening new areas of the Arctic and Antarctic to visitors. On his last cruise, he achieved his final ambition of visiting Novaya Zemlya. By then he had become one of the world's most experienced polar travellers.

Angus served on the Council of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society for over 20 years and was also active in the Scottish Wildlife Trust. He was a regular attendee of polar meetings and social gatherings, dispensing quiet wit and wisdom. One of his last activities was to promote the centenary celebration of William Spiers Bruce's Scottish National Antarctic Expedition. He received the Polar Medal for his work on the British North Greenland Expedition and a clasp for his work on the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey.

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