

November 23, 2007
ANTARCTICA
by Sven-Olof Lindblad

When the phone rang in the early morning of November 23 in Connecticut, I knew before answering it that the news would not be good.

“Hi Sven, the somber voice said.” “The *Explorer* hit something and is taking on water. The passengers have been evacuated.” “Safely?”, I asked. “Yes” was the answer.

I turned on CNN and the story was breaking. Our flagship, the *National Geographic Endeavour*, was on-site, having been about 50 miles away when the distress message had been sent out by *Explorer*. She and the Norwegian 700-passenger *Nordnorge* assisted in the rescue.

OK – all people were now safely off the ship. Photographs showed the *Explorer* listing significantly. There was no way to save her, that I was pretty sure of.

I was about an hour and a half from my office, driving on pretty empty roads. A flood of thoughts now cascaded through my head.

The *Explorer* had been built in 1969, commissioned by the pioneer of expedition travel, Lars Eric Lindblad, my father. For the first 20 years or so of her illustrious career, she was called *Lindblad Explorer*. She was the first purpose-built expedition ship for travelers and was built specifically to navigate Antarctic waters. The Little Red Ship, as she is affectionately referred to by many, was now going to sink in the waters she was built for.

Memories started flowing, one after the other. I cut my teeth on that ship, first as a zodiac driver and eventually as an expedition leader, 33 years ago. So, many of my ideas and values were developed during those days. Going to the world’s most extraordinary places in the company of the world’s most interesting people was very heady for a 24 year old.

In those days the *Lindblad Explorer* was largely alone out in the world. She attracted remarkable guests and had a staff roster of explorers, writers, scientists and painters that read like a Who’s Who list. Renowned ornithologist, Roger Tory Pettersen, was a regular, as was Sir Peter Scott, son of famed Antarctic explorer, Captain Robert Falcon Scott. Eric Shipton, the accomplished yet ever-humble mountain climber, made a huge impression by referring peaks not as something to be conquered but as journeys to be savored. Tenzing Norgay, Robert Bateman and Keith Shackleton, nephew of Ernest Shackleton, were also regulars. Guests, staff and crew were a bonded community discovering, learning and understanding natural phenomenon as well as cultures on the most remote islands of the world.

It was exciting, to be sure, but it was not without danger. Navigational aids, weather reports and communication systems were nowhere near what they are today. In that one season I spent in Antarctica in 1973/74 we were hit twice by storms so intense and without warning that it's still a surprise to me that no serious accidents occurred. During one of them I was being hoisted up to the ship in my zodiac after we had gotten all the guests back on board and 30 feet above the deck, the boat collapsed from force 12-13 winds and accumulated water. The lines attached ripped out and I fell onto the deck between the crane and the rail, ripping open my left hand. The expedition leader with me had on a survival suit and had been out for just a few minutes and managed to hold on to the emergency rope for maybe 10 or so seconds and then plummeted into the sea. We got him out within 5 minutes but I realized that had it been me, I wouldn't have survived as two hours out in the storm and not properly dressed had sapped every ounce of energy.

A week later we were in the Falkland Islands. Most of the guests were ashore when a massive storm approached out of nowhere. We managed to get 20 or so guests back before it became impossible to continue the operation. About two miles away was a cottage owned by a farmer. We fought our way through driving rain and wind crashing through the huge clumps of tussock grass. The surprised farmer welcomed us into his cottage for the night. We were safe and warm with no injuries except for a few bruises. The next morning was beautiful and dead calm. The staff went to recover the zodiacs that we had hauled up on land the night before. When we got there I was in shock. Shredded rubber was strewn through the tussock grass. All the zodiacs were completely destroyed.

I began to wonder if we were mad, running expeditions here. But, at the end of the day, it was the sheer and unabashed excitement and appreciation of our guests that answered the question unequivocally.

We have a right to have adventure as part of our life. Yes, we should learn constantly how to make it safer and we do. But thank goodness there were no powers who wished or had the authority to shut down this kind of travel at the time simply because there was risk involved.

The *Lindblad Explorer* had many challenges during her career. The greatest took place in February 1972. Here is a quote from my father's book, *Passport to Anywhere*:

In bed I could feel more than ever the heavy swells and waves lifting the ship, then the heeling as the winds caught the ship broadside. I wondered what Bransfield Strait was like if it was this deep in Admiralty Bay. Whatever the winds did, they accentuated the loneliness of our position, far from any shipping lanes and more than 600 miles from Cape Horn to the north of us across the Drake Passage. Whatever the circumstances, however, I was not prepared for what happened next. At three in the morning I heard the sound – a sudden grating crunch that shook the ship from belly to bridge. The moment I woke up I knew what had happened. We had crashed into some of the saw-toothed

rocks that rim the bay. One of the enormous swells must have carried us there and dropped us down on them, like a cargo from a crane. I closed my eyes again, and for many seconds, I'm sure, I was paralyzed. It was not from fear but from an almost physical pain of having been wounded. With the *Explorer* wounded, I was wounded. I felt as if someone had plunged a meat cleaver into my back. The ship was groaning. With each groan, I could hear the rocks boring into the outside of the hull. The noise, combined with the shuddering and heaving that would not stop, was overpowering. It seemed that the sea and the shoal were shaking the ship the way a terrier shakes a rat.

All were safely rescued and after the ship was towed to Norway and repaired, she continued to explore, inspiring thousands of people to experience the world's wild and special places.

I am firmly committed to continue the course that ship, and those who sailed on her, clearly charted.

Nowadays we don't have the luxury of discovering vast swaths of unknown territory but we do have the advantage of knowing so much more and that knowledge allows us, in my opinion, to provide even better expeditions. Back in the 70's we wouldn't have dreamt of kayaking in Antarctica. We didn't have the underwater technology that now enables us to send our ROV (remote operated vehicle) down 500 feet to explore the depths of the sea. And there is no question that everything we do is much safer because of advances in navigational aids, weather reporting and communication improvements.

So, the *Explorer* did sink and is now gone. In many ways she was gone for me in 1982 when my father sold her. Frankly I'm not too sad about the ship itself because I know that in conceiving her and exploring with her an idea so powerful, so meaningful took hold - our need and right to explore our planet. And by doing so, by developing greater understanding, we are far more likely to protect environments so vital to our spirit and our survival.

A footnote:

There will now likely be all kinds of efforts made by governments to control tourism in Antarctica. While well-meaning, the governments are not always as knowledgeable as they could or should be regarding circumstances. Whatever happens now, I hope that IAATO (International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators) is at the forefront of changes. Here's what Captain Leif Skog, our V.P. Marine Operations and Senior Captain who has sailed in Antarctica each year since 1979, said about IAATO:

IAATO is a member organization founded in 1991 to advocate, promote and practice safe and environmentally responsible private sector travel to the Antarctic. IAATO currently has 99 members. IAATO Members work together to develop, adopt and implement operational standards that mitigate potential environmental impacts. Numerous guidelines have

been adopted over the last 17 years that have proven to be successful methods in avoiding impacts. Those include but are not limited to: site specific guidelines, site selection criteria, passenger to staff ratios, limiting numbers of passengers ashore, boot washing guidelines and the prevention of the transmission of alien organisms, wilderness etiquette, garbage policy, ship scheduling and vessel communication procedures, emergency medical evacuation procedures, emergency contingency plans, reporting procedures, marine wildlife watching guidelines, station visitation policies and more.

In addition IAATO members agreed several years ago regarding an emergency contingency plan to ensure safety of passengers and crew. These procedures were followed during this incident.

This is the first incident of its kind with a specially designed tourist vessel in the last 40 years of Antarctic tourism. Very few incidents have occurred since IAATO began.