

A Stranding in Antarctica

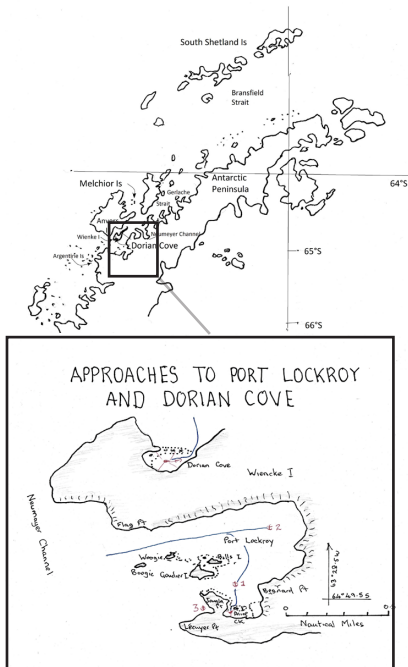
Trevor Robertson

On 17 November 1998 I sailed single-handed from New Zealand towards the Antarctic Peninsula in *Iron Bark*, a 35 ft steel gaff cutter, intending to winter over in the ice. That passage of a bit over 5000 miles took 48 days. Any long Southern Ocean voyage is likely to be rough; this one certainly was.

I made my landfall in the Melchior Islands in the north part of the Antarctic Peninsula then worked 120 miles south looking for a bay suitable for winter quarters. As you go south down the Peninsula the charting becomes more rudimentary, the ice thicker and the weather worse, especially south of the Argentine Islands. This was my first experience in ice and it was a steep learning curve. On one occasion I spent 10 hours weaving through ice under engine with the motor held in place by wood wedges after an engine mount failed. This lash-up held long enough to

get back north to the Argentine Islands where I borrowed a welding machine from the Ukrainians at Vernadsky base to make a new mount.

In mid-February 1999 I moored in Dorian Cove on the coast of Wiencke Island. Dorian Cove is separated from the Gerlache Strait by a low rocky bar with a narrow entrance at its eastern end. The bar keeps out the bigger bits of ice and gives protection from waves but not the wind. The holding in the cove is only fair so, in addition to an anchor ahead, I had lines ashore from each quarter. The two starboard lines and the line from the port quarter were firmly attached to large rocks. The line from the port bow led NE to the ice-smoothed reef on the seaward side of the cove. There it was attached by a chain sling to a boulder that weighed about half a tonne; smaller than ideal but the best available.



A day or so later two young Australian climbers, Dave Thomas and Duncan Adams, arrived in Dorian Cove by dinghy from Anvers Island, where they had climbed Mt Francais (2760m). They camped on the glacier above the cove intending

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to do some climbing while awaiting their pre-arranged pick up by a cruise ship. Early on 22 February the wind picked up, blowing from the NE with snow and poor visibility. Gerlache Strait acts as a funnel for any strong winds from the NE, compressing and accelerating them so that what is a gale a few miles away often reaches F10 or 11 in Dorian Cove and nearby Port Lockroy. True to form, the NE wind quickly hardened to NE11. *Iron Bark's* security now depended entirely on the anchor and the line from the port bow to the rocky bar, all other lines being to leeward and slack.



Iron Bark in Dorian Cove

As a precaution, I started the engine and left it idling in neutral. At about 0800 the line to the reef let go throwing all the strain on the anchor, which dragged immediately. I put the engine into gear and opened the throttle hoping to hold position with the engine pulling against the stern lines, but it was not powerful enough to push *Iron Bark* into that wind. She sagged backward into the now slack stern lines which left me with no option but to shut down the engine before these lines fouled the propeller.

Iron Bark swung pendulum fashion on the remaining bow line onto the rocky shore. The keel grounded and she heeled over until the bilge was pounding on the granite ledges that formed the shore. Fortunately, the tide was falling and she quickly sewed, heeling about 30° to starboard with the bilge bearing heavily on a ledge but no longer pounding. The situation was not good, but on the positive side *Iron Bark* was stable and the ice driving up the sloping windward side and cascading down the deck was only brash. Some large growlers found their way over the reef and into the cove but grounded before hitting *Iron Bark*.

I hauled in the now useless bow line and coiled it down. The line and chain sling were intact; the sling had slipped off the boulder. I think ice driving under the rope had lifted the sling off.

I needed to re-establish a line to the offshore reef so that when the tide rose I

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could winch *Iron Bark* off the rocks and back into the middle of the cove. It was now blowing F10 so there was no possibility of using a dinghy to run the line. The only option was to drag a very long line around the west end of the cove, astern and to leeward of *Iron Bark*, then out along the reef until it was far enough ahead and to windward to allow me to winch her off. I needed help to do this.

I jumped ashore on to a ledge above deck level and stumbled into the horizontal blizzard to find the climbers. There is a bunkhouse above Dorian Cove formerly used by the British Antarctic Survey, now relegated to being a refuge hut. I thought it likely that Duncan and Dave would have retreated from their tent on the glacier to the bunkhouse. As indeed they had. I roused them out and in a few minutes they were dressed for outdoor work and we set off.

We needed 400m of rope to get around the bottom of the cove and out along the reef. We dragged this line around the shore with a large bight streaming to leeward. The bight repeatedly snagged on the numerous lumps of ice aground in the shallows. Each time this happened one of us had to go out to free the line. Sometimes we could jump from one growler to the next and flick the line clear, sometimes the only way was to wade out. Soon we were all wet to the waist. On the Antarctic Peninsula a NE wind is relatively warm (perhaps +5° C) and by now it had eased to F9, but we were wet and the wind chill was vicious. At least it had stopped snowing.

Then came the scramble along the ice-smoothed reef towing several hundred metres of rope. Although the rocks were slippery, it was easier than it first looked as this was the windward side of the cove so there was little grounded ice to catch the rope. Once the line was reattached to the reef we stumbled back to *Iron Bark*, hauled the line tight and belayed it, then retreated below. The cabin was cold and canted 30° but mercifully out of the wind. I made a stew to warm up the crew.

The wind was down to F9 and *Iron Bark* had dried out sufficiently not to be pounding. Only small lumps of ice were bashing into the hull; the bigger bits grounded before they reached her. The hull plating was a little dented where it had pounded on the ledge but there were no leaks. There was a haul-off line in place ready for high tide. Things were looking up.

The climbers retreated to the hut to get out of their wet gear and into dry sleeping bags. I changed clothes, coiled down the surplus lines and prepared for high water. *Iron Bark* had driven ashore an hour or two after high water so she would float well before the next high tide. I needed to get her off as soon as she floated lest she be driven further up the rocky ledges on the rising tide by the gale force wind. This was no place to be neaped.

The tide rose and at 1700 the bilge lifted off the rocks and the keel started to bump. Simultaneously the wind eased to from F8/9 to F6. I joyfully seized the chance and hauled away on the windward line (the one newly re-attached to the reef). Off she came. I winched *Iron Bark* into the middle of the cove, tensioned up all lines and within an hour had her secured with lines from each quarter.

It took me another eight hours to get everything squared away. First I doubled

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the line leading NE to the reef. The ice-polished rock bar had nowhere suitable to tie the back-up line so I dropped a length of knotted chain into a crack in the rock and attached the line to that. The knot jammed in the crack like a climber's nut. Then I retrieved the anchor by under running the chain with the dinghy (a dodgy business as it was still windy), rowed it out to near full scope and dropped it. Finally I checked and adjusted the chain slings on the other shore lines. It was 0230 when everything was secure; I had a whisky then to bed.

I had been fortunate. *Iron Bark* grounded on a falling tide and sewed quickly, limiting the damage done by pounding on that unforgiving granite shore. Then there were two exceptionally tough climbers camped nearby who plunged unhesitatingly into action (and into very cold water) to run a haul-off line. The wind eased just as she floated, which made winching her off easy. And of course *Barky* is a doughty little vessel, capable of surviving a great deal of abuse.



Iron Bark's winter quarters



A week later I moved around to Port Lockroy and moored in Alice Creek, my chosen winter quarters. In mid-March, with winter fast approaching, the last ship of the season sailed north from the Peninsula, leaving me alone. They hoped to return in eight months, ice permitting.

Trevor, Bantry Bay, Ireland, 2018