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“ We spent about 40 minutes on the island, and it was completely miserable. ”

— Dennis Perkins



Photos provided by The Syncretics Group

The stark terrain features icebergs, in various shades of white, and water, sometimes placid, sometimes violent.

Following Shackleton

Business leadership consultants take voyage to Antarctica

By Steve Higgins
Register Business Editor

Searing cold, choking winds, jagged ice, angry seas.

Dennis Perkins spent 20 years talking about the extreme challenges faced by Ernest Shackleton's 1914-16 expedition to Antarctica but had never experienced it for himself — until now.

Perkins, founder and president of The Syncretics Group Inc., a Branford-based leadership consulting firm, and his partner, Paul Kessler, joined 48 other adventurers last month on a 244-foot wooden ship that followed part of Shackleton's legendary route through the treacherous waters of Antarctica.

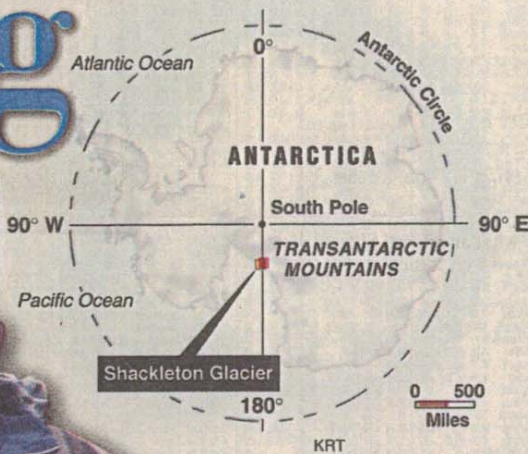
"We understood it on an intellectual level, but now as we talk about some of these adventures, there is a visceral sense to it," said Perkins, author of "Leading at the Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition," published in 2000.

Perkins, a former Yale School of Management professor, developed a unique approach to teaching courses on leadership, teamwork and organizational effectiveness based on his experience as a

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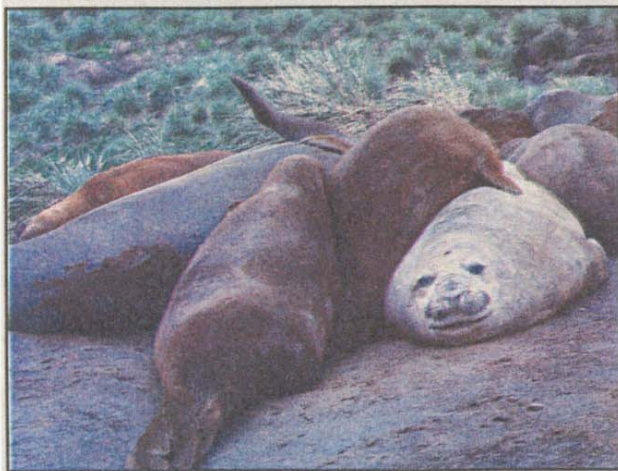
Above: Paul Kessler, left, and Dennis Perkins of The Syncretics Group stand on Elephant Island before a storm drove them back to their ship.



Leadership at the Edge 10 Strategies for Success

- ▶ Never lose sight of the ultimate goal and focus energy on short-term objectives.
- ▶ Set a personal example with visible, memorable symbols and behaviors.
- ▶ Instill optimism and self-confidence, but stay grounded in reality.
- ▶ Take care of yourself: Maintain your stamina and let go of guilt.
- ▶ Reinforce the team message: "We are one — we live or die together."
- ▶ Minimize status differences and insist on courtesy and mutual respect.
- ▶ Master conflict — deal with anger in small doses, engage dissidents and avoid needless power struggles.
- ▶ Find something to celebrate and something to laugh about.
- ▶ Be willing to take the "Big Risk."
- ▶ Never give up: There's always another move.

Source: The Syncretics Group Inc., 250 W. Main St., Branford



A group of elephant seals huddle together on South Georgia Island.



The Polar Pioneer carried 50 passengers and a crew of 24 into the dangerous waters of Antarctica on a three-week trek.

VOYAGE: Explorer's route traced

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Marine infantry officer during the Vietnam War.

He studies the behavior of people at the limits of human endurance and applies the lessons to modern-day corporations and other organizations. His clients include American Express, Bose, Corning, Deloitte & Touche, GTE, Hartford Life, Honeywell, IBM, Johnson & Johnson, Marriott, United Technologies and the state of Connecticut.

"The Shackleton story was so intriguing that we wanted to experience that," Perkins said. "There is a magnetism, an almost mystical pull, once you get interested in that continent."

Kessler, managing director of The Syncretics Group, said the three-week voyage with a Russian crew of 24 was the experience of a lifetime.

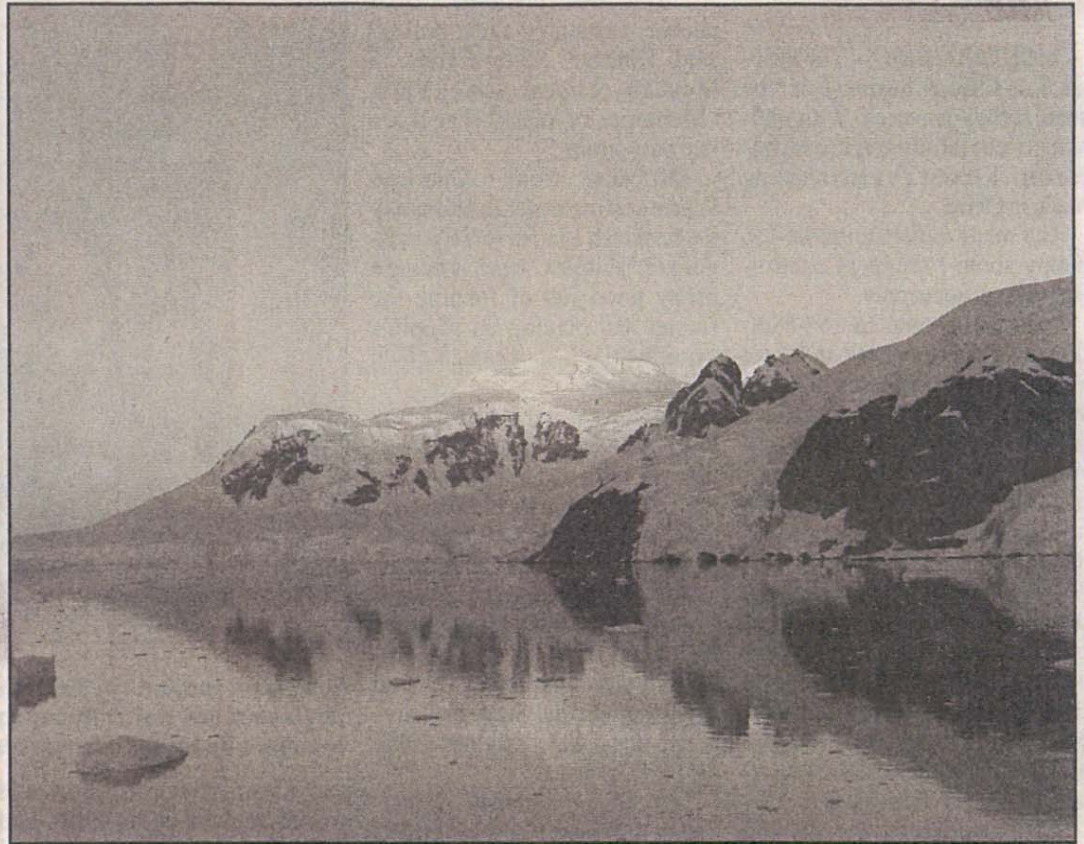
"It's like a different world," he said. "You can see firsthand and smell and hear the water and the ice. Now when I stand up and talk about Shackleton, I'll really know."

Shackleton's quest to be the first man to traverse the Antarctic continent became a desperate effort to survive after his ship, the *Endurance*, was caught between ice floes and slowly crushed.

Shackleton then led a heroic effort that resulted in the survival of the entire crew, who lived on the ice and in lifeboats for 23 horrific months.

Perkins said he got a feeling for what Shackleton's crew endured when he and Kessler joined an expedition to Elephant Island, a rocky speck of land 100 feet wide and 50 feet long, covered with penguin guano, where 23 of the 28 Shackleton crew members spent 128 days awaiting rescue.

"We spent about 40 minutes



The Syncretics Group

The three-week trip to Antarctica included stunning landscapes as a backdrop.

on the island, and it was completely miserable," he said. "A storm came up, the swell increased to 7 to 8 feet within a few minutes, and we had to get off quick."

Perkins and Kessler visited Elephant Island in the middle of Antarctica's summer; Shackleton's crew was stuck on the island in the middle of a particularly brutal winter in 1915.

Another enlightening moment came when Perkins' ship, the *Polar Pioneer*, was hit by a 40-foot rogue wave in the treacherous Drake Passage, and Perkins went flying through his cabin, smashing his elbow into a desk. Ignoring the blood flowing from his arm, Perkins kept videotaping the swelling seas through a porthole, until Kessler came in and insisted he get his elbow stitched

up.

Perkins said the experience left him in awe of Shackleton's decision to cross the Drake Passage with five of the crew members in a small lifeboat, enduring an 800-mile voyage to seek help.

Perkins and Kessler took 2,775 photos and shot 17 hours of video to chronicle the trip, capturing 20-foot waves, penguins, seals and whales, along with endless varieties of ice, ice floes and icebergs.

Perkins and Kessler offer a wide variety of leadership programs to corporations and government agencies around the world. Perkins said grounding leadership lessons in real-life adventure stories makes them easier to understand and remember.

"What was it that enabled Shackleton and his men to succeed where others could have easily perished? I believe that the strategies he adopted were crucial to his triumph," Perkins said.

While Perkins and Kessler use Shackleton as their primary example and even wrote a book based on his adventure, they also use other adventure stories and continue to research more modern survival stories.

Perkins is also the author of "Managing Creation: The Challenge of Building a New Organization."

The term "syncretics" is derived from the Greek word syncretism, a process of blending conflicting forces to create a stronger, more unified whole.

Steve Higgins can be reached at shiggins@nhregister.com or 789-5752.