

# A photographic account of voyages of Captain R L V Shannon to the Antarctic in the 1920s

## L V Shannon

Sea Fisheries Research Institute  
Private Bag X2  
8012 ROGGE BAY  
South Africa

## EDITOR'S NOTE

*Captain Richard Lawrence Vere Shannon, OBE, was born in Aughrim, County Galway, Ireland in 1897 and educated at The Abbey (Co. Tipperary), St Georges College (London), Sandhurst, the Royal Navy College and at Pembroke College, Cambridge. He joined the Royal Navy in 1914 and saw active service during World War I. After the war he eventually tired of peacetime naval life and in 1927 took up a position with the Discovery Committee, serving as master of R R S William Scoresby in the Antarctic until 1930. He was awarded the Polar Medal for his services in the Antarctic. Having fallen in love with Cape Town he immigrated to South Africa in 1930 and joined the Union Government's Fisheries and Marine Biological Survey Division as master of the newly commissioned research ship Africana. The experience gained by Captain Shannon with the Antarctic research proved invaluable and played a major role in early fisheries survey work and in the design of Africana II which was commissioned in 1950. It is not coincidence that the gear and functioning of the two Africanas was so similar to that proven in the Southern Ocean. He served as master of Africana II until his retirement in 1958, being succeeded by Captain K T McNish who subsequently served with great distinction as master of South Africa's first Antarctic research and supply vessel the RSA. Captain Shannon's son, Vere the author of this article, is Director of the Sea Fisheries Research Institute and has recently been appointed as a member of SACAR and as Chairman of its Oceanographic Sciences Task Group.*

*Captain Shannon died in Cape Town on 16 October 1976.*

My late father, Captain Richard Lawrence Vere Shannon, was an avid photographer. After a career in the Royal Navy, followed by a brief spell as a chicken farmer, he served as master of the Discovery Committee's research vessel *William Scoresby* between 1927 and 1930. This was not long after the epic journeys of Scott and Shackleton. On his Antarctic voyages he took many hundreds, probably thousands, of photographs and as a youngster I can remember spending many hours engrossed in his photo-albums (which were numerous).

My father was meticulous in his record-keeping. Each of his photographs was accompanied by an appropriate caption. Unfortunately over the years the captions, which were in white ink, have faded. The prints have aged too — not surprising since they were processed using the *Scoresby's* boiler water. Fortunately however, my father retained the negatives, which he preserved in a rather fine Kodak negative album. Each negative sleeve in the



*Self (Capt Shannon going ashore, Cape Town)*

album was carefully labelled in pencil and both negatives and the writing have survived remarkably well. In the following pages is a selection of photographs, reprinted from the original negatives. The captions are my father's and have not been changed, although I have taken the liberty to add clarifying notes in parenthesis, where appropriate. The photographs and captions tell their own story. All I can add is a little background, some factual, some anecdotal.

The R R S *William Scoresby* was specially constructed for Antarctic whaling research. She was named after a famous whaling captain whose *Account of the Arctic Regions* published in 1820 was one of the earliest scientific studies on whaling. The *Scoresby* was launched on 31 December 1925. With an overall length of 134' she was larger than the average whale catcher of her day, and had an endurance to match. An oil-fired steamship of



*G E R Deacon, the hydrologist 1927 — 1929*

1 050 hp, she was capable of 12 knots (except in the Drake Passage where she clocked 16 knots on occasion!) She was ice-strengthened and her main design function was to mark whales. She was fitted with the usual *Discovery*-type scientific winches and equipment. Any oceanographer who started work in the 1950s or 1960s would have felt very much at home on her!

Following her launch, the vessel spent several years in the Antarctic. In 1927 she returned briefly to the UK and it was there that my father joined the vessel. Heading south they hit a severe storm in the Bay of Biscay, and I gather that a man was lost overboard — a none too auspicious start to a voyage. Later, when my father was to encounter his first large iceberg — he only wanted to do one thing and that was to go back to the more frequented waters of the North Atlantic.

The *William Scoresby* was registered in Port Stanley, in the Falkland Islands (also known as the Malvinas). When she visited Argentinian ports she was not required to pay harbour dues as, in my father's words, "they regarded her as an Argentinian ship because of their long-held claim to the Falklands".

The period 1927 to 1930 was spent undertaking a variety of whale-related research activities. Fortunately the *Discovery* Committee had foresight and wisdom and adopted a holistic approach to research on whales and the Antarctic ecosystem. They actively encouraged relevant biotic and abiotic environmental research in addition to more focused whale biology and assessment. So it was that my father was to meet the likes of Mackintosh, John, Marr, Rayner and Clowes, to name but a few. Some of the famous names in Antarctic science sailed on the *Scoresby* with my father, including a young hydrologist by the name of George Deacon. Included in the accompanying photographs is one of a youthful Deacon. Little did my father know at the time that this man was to lay the foundation for so much Southern Ocean science.

Life on the *William Scoresby* was not all plain sailing (yes, she did carry sails!) and I can remember vivid accounts by my father of being stuck in the ice out of contact with the outside world for months, of food shortages and having to hunt seals for food. Whale meat was a staple food and on one occasion father was complimented by a visiting dignitary (a governor, I believe, who had been entertained on the *Scoresby*) on the excellence of the beef steaks. On being told that he had just eaten whale the dignitary promptly lost his dinner overboard! On another occasion, when at anchor in a remote locality, the bottom came up and hit the ship. A tall story? No, the truth. They had unbeknowningly anchored in a volcanically active area.

Perhaps one of the more interesting episodes of the period was the Wilkins-Hearst Antarctic Expedition. I have included a number of pictures of this from my father's collection because they remain to this day quite unique. Sir Hubert Wilkins was a professional adventurer and explorer, an aviator and photographer of some merit. An Australian, he had been a member of Shackleton's last expedition on the *Quest*, and had returned to the Antarctic in 1928 to lead an expedition that was sponsored by the American Geographical Society with financial support from Vacuum Oil and Hearst's American News Service. With sound backing Wilkins had purchased two Lockheed Vega monoplanes, which were named the *Los Angeles* and the *San Francisco*.

The *Los Angeles* had already achieved fame in flights in the Arctic and was now the first aircraft to fly in Antarctica. Following some success, Wilkins and a team were plagued by bad weather and poor landing conditions at Deception Island



*D D John (zoologist) at South Georgia, 1928*

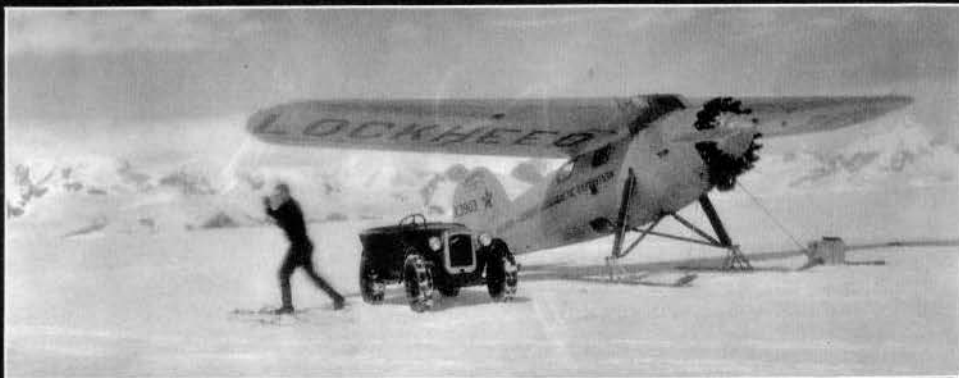
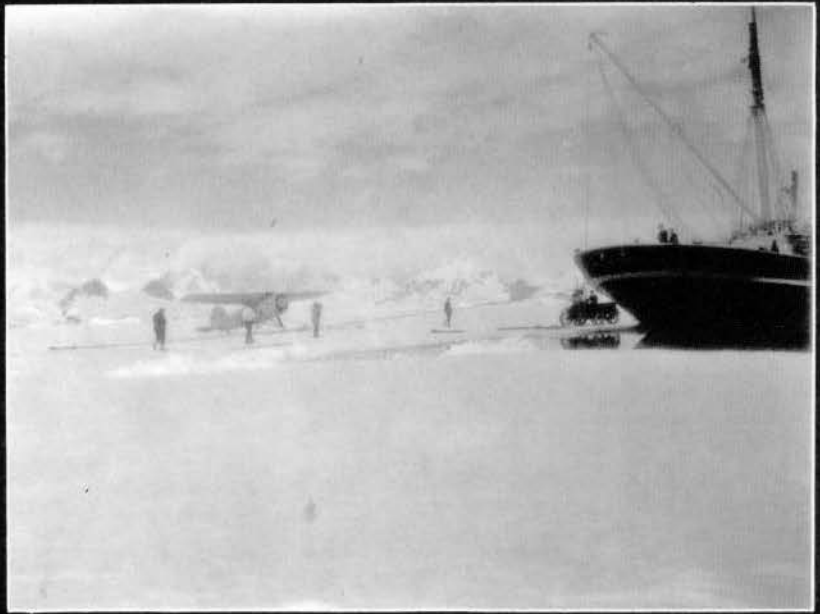
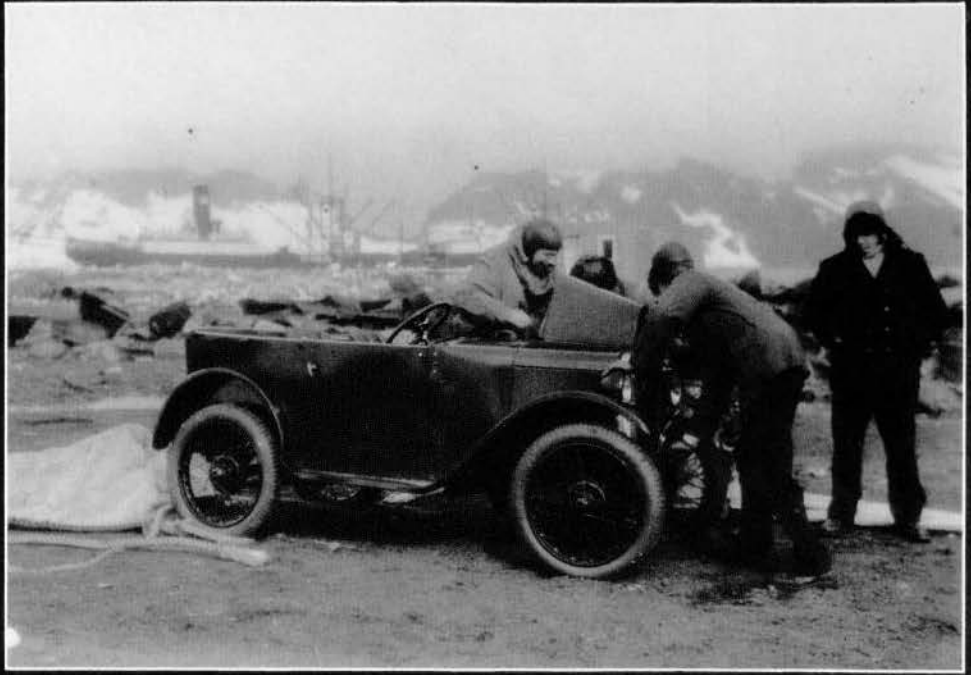
which had been selected as the base. It was then that the offer of the British Colonial Office to provide a ship to find a better landing strip farther south was accepted. The vessel to be used was none other than the *William Scoresby*. The photographs tell the rest of the tale. The Austin VII, shown in one photo, was used to ferry fuel from the ship to the aircraft. It was fitted with double wheels and chains. I wonder how many "standard" motor cars have operated farther south than that vintage Austin, shown on the ice at Beascochea Bay,  $\pm 65^\circ$  S. My favourite picture, however, is an aerial view of Port Lockroy that must surely be among the earliest aerial pictures of the Antarctic.

For his services down South my father was awarded the Polar Medal, which he treasured as the proudest of all his decorations. In 1930 he accepted an offer from the South African Division of Fisheries to serve as master of the new fisheries survey vessel *Africana*. Subsequently he was first master of *Africana II*, until he retired in 1958. Wilkins continued with his adventures into the unknown, including an attempt to reach the North Pole by submarine.



*J W S Marr, scientist on board R R S William Scoresby*







*R.R.S. William Scoresby and plane at Port Lockroy, December 1929*



*Unloading seaplane in Bismarck Strait for first flight*



*Taking off south of Anvers Island*



*Port Lockroy from the air*