Note

Whaler's cross on Deception Island

Susan Barr
Directorate for Cultural Heritage, PB 8196 Dep, N-0034 Oslo, Norway
Rod Downie
British Antarctic Survey, High Cross, Madingley Road, Cambridge CB3 0ET
Rodolfo Sánchez
Dirección Nacional del Antártico, Cerrito 1248, C1010AAZ, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Received April 2003
DOI: 10.1017/S0032247403003279

ABSTRACT. The cemetery at Whalers Bay, Deception Island, was the largest in the Antarctic prior to being partially buried and partially washed away during a volcanic eruption in 1969. In 2002 a wooden cross at Argentina's Decepción Station was identified as being that of the Norwegian whaler Peder Knapstad. It was removed, secured in a base, and re-erected at Whalers Bay.

Deception Island was the centre of Antarctic whaling during the first half of the twentieth century. The Sociedad Ballenera de Magallanes of Punta Arenas, established by the Norwegian Adolfus A. Andresen, first used Whalers Bay, Deception Island, as a sheltered anchorage for whaling factory ships in 1906–07. In 1912 the company Hektor a/s of Tønsberg, Norway, built a shore station for processing whale meat and bones, which operated each austral summer until 1931 (Headland 1989).

In 1908, four years before the shore station was built, a cemetery was established for those who lost their lives at, or near to, Deception Island. A total of 35 men, from Norway, Sweden, Chile, Russia, and the UK, were buried in the cemetery between 1908 and 1953 (Headland 2001), making it the largest number of graves anywhere in the Antarctic. Contemporary photographs of the cemetery show a neat and orderly site enclosed by a wire fence with impressive stone monuments and carved wooden crosses (Fig. 1). Generally, the wooden crosses were of a temporary nature, which would be replaced the following season by gravestones. In 1969 the site was partly buried

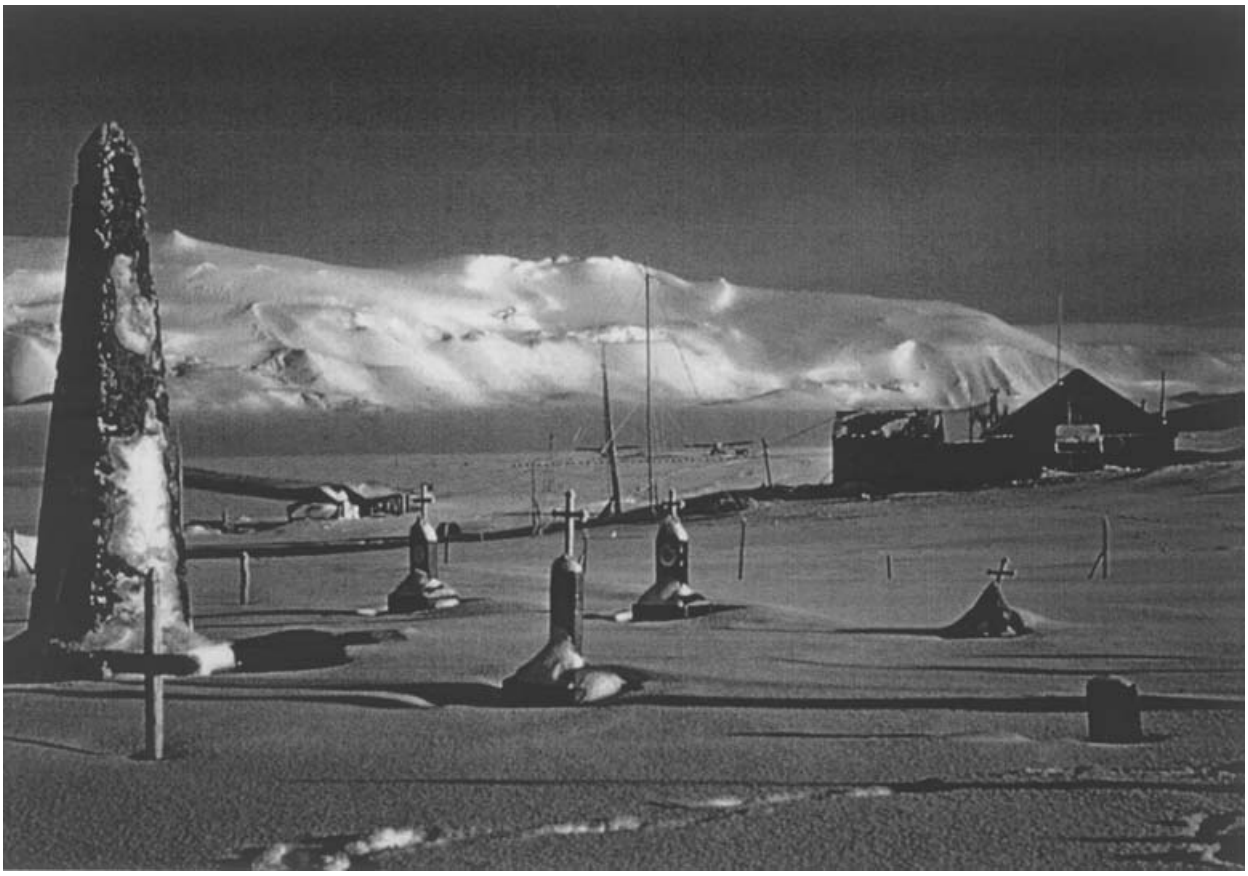


Fig. 1. Whalers Bay cemetery, 1961. Photo: J.B. Killingbeck, British Antarctic Survey archives, AD6/19/3/C/B6B.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247403003279 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and partly washed away when a volcanic eruption triggered a lahar, or mudslide. Nothing visible remained of the cemetery until approximately 10 years ago, when an open and empty coffin became exposed through erosion of the mud. In 1972 the site of the cemetery was designated as Historic Site and Monument Number 31 under Measure VII-9 at the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting.

In February 2002, a wooden cross located on a small hill behind Decepción Station (Argentina) was identified by one of the authors (Susan Barr) as belonging to the Norwegian whaler, Peder Knapstad. The cross had been found a decade previously, washed up on the western shore of Port Foster, and had been respectfully erected on the hillside beside the Argentine station.

Knapstad, who came from a small farm near Tønsberg, worked as a carpenter for Hektor a/s at Whalers Bay. He fell from a building and died of a fractured skull. Aged 45, he was the last of the whalers to be buried in the cemetery, in March 1931, weeks before the closure of the station.

The cross is probably made of Norwegian pine and measures approximately 5×2 ft. Knapstad's name and the year he died are just legible. A small engraving of a cross is also discernible above the weathered text. The three ends of the cross itself are decorated with a modified neo-Gothic trefoil, which is partly repeated at the cross points. The style is usual in church architecture, but is not typical in this form on crosses. Possibly the cross was made with details of a home church in mind.

On 17 February 2002, the Argentine station leader, Miguel Angel Ponce, oversaw the removal of the cross. It was secured in a base of concrete and re-erected the following morning nearby the remains of the coffin at Whalers Bay. There is nothing to suggest that the coffin was also that of Knapstad. A simple ceremony was performed in Norwegian to Knapstad's memory.

Barr later contacted the descendants of Knapstad through the County Museum in Tønsberg to inform them of the return of the cross.

References

Headland, R.K. 1989. *Chronological list of Antarctic expeditions and related historical events.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Headland, R.K. 2001. Whalers cemetery: Deception Island, South Shetland Islands. *Falkland Islands Journal* 7 (5): 37–39.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247403003279 Published online by Cambridge University Press