

# Island at the End of the World

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photos by Urs Siegenthaler

The hurricane-like storm lasts for six hours, the barometer falling and falling, from 1010 to 778 millibars. The American crew and we of the film crew crowd into the wheelhouse and stare out at the impenetrable night. Only our onboard lights give us a glimpse of our immediate surroundings, the deck of our three-masted sailing yacht "Sol."

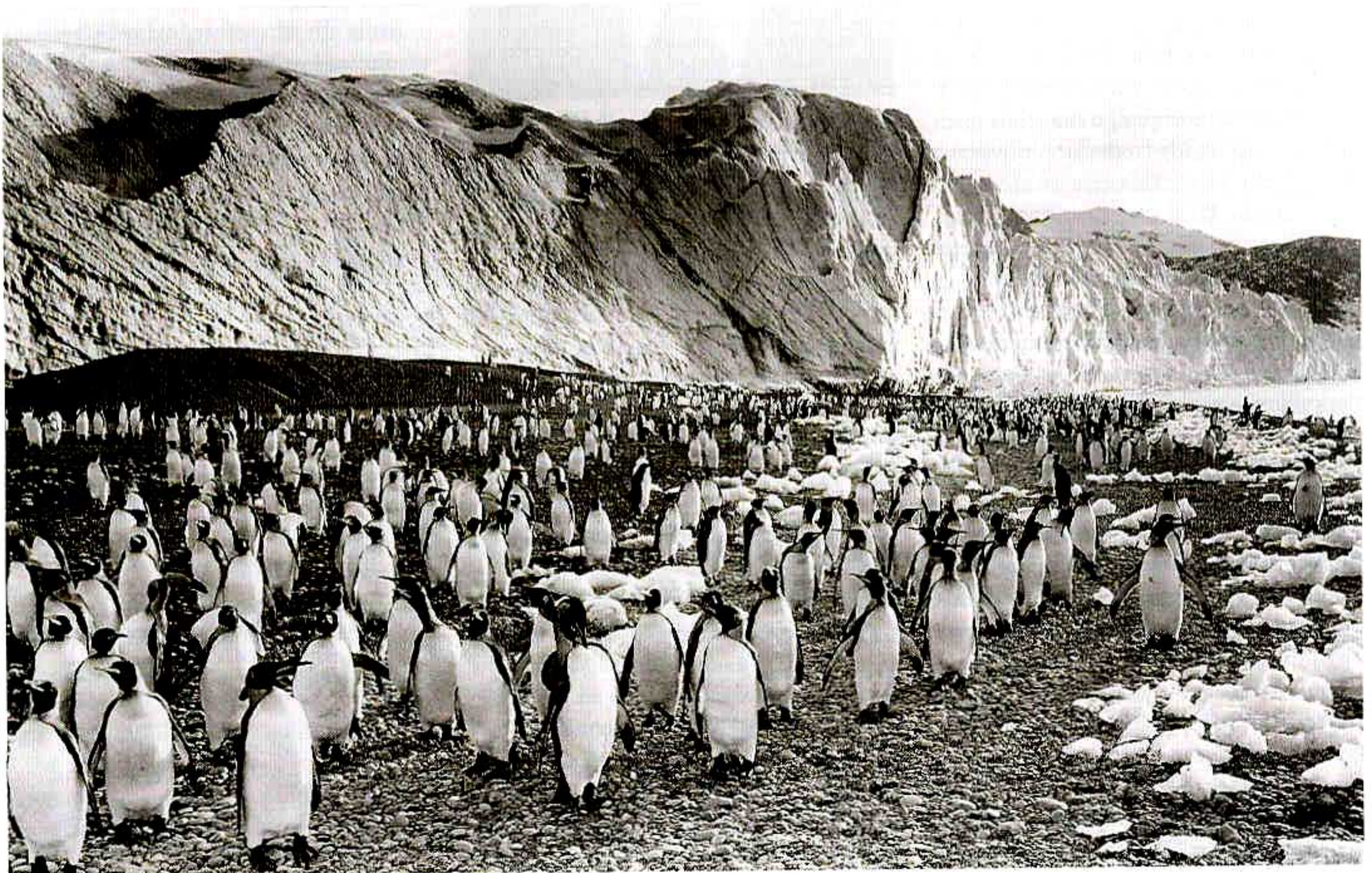
The wind comes straight at us, laden with heavy snow so that the cabin windows are repeatedly covered and we can

hardly see out. High waves break over the bow, and the stern disappears in wild swirls of foam. Our vessel makes little headway, seems to be only treading water, fighting its way forward yard by yard with the engine's help. Our radar shows that we are two miles from a natural harbor on the western tip of South Georgia, where we hope to seek refuge. Captain Keith studies the chart again and again, checks the radar, the sonar, and patiently holds course for the narrow channel. It's a tricky maneuver and could take a long time. At four in the morning I decide to go below to my

cabin, get into pyjamas and pretend this is just an ordinary night. The ship's violent movements toss me around in my bed, but oddly enough I feel no fear. Waves pound against the stern. I lie somewhere between dozing and wakefulness, and finally fall deeply asleep. I awake immediately when the engine's roar stops and the pounding of

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South Georgia is situated not in the Caucasus but in the Southern Hemisphere, some 2,000 kilometers east of Cape Horn, the southernmost tip of South America. Large flocks of king penguins are among the wildlife inhabitants of the glacial island.





the waves subside into an even splash. Coming up on deck I'm overwhelmed by a remarkable scene. The air is clear and biting cold; a few wispy snow clouds still ride high above us. The ship glides slowly into a circular natural harbor, moving between ragged mountains rising vertically from the water. The bare rock walls are banded with new snow. Dozens of fur seals swim around the ship. The water is churned up by seals and several varieties of penguin hunting for fish. The most surprising thing is the thousand-voiced animal barking and shouting which fills the air, sounding like hordes of children or crowds of cats. This comes mainly from seals chasing each other along the beach, jostling and playing, mostly young males following each other about. Undeterred by the commotion, a line of king penguins waddles along the strand single-file. The entire scene is like something from the first days of Creation.

Our anchor falls, the ship rides quietly, and suddenly we are all similarly relaxed, cheerful, telling each other

about the worst moments of last night. It had taken us six hours to sail the last two miles. Keith laughs sardonically and says that, for himself, he would never have come here, it was all my idea. After a beer, everyone heads to their cabins for some sleep. It is 6:30 a.m. Twelve days after setting sail from Punta Arenas, the South Chilean port on the Strait of Magellan, we have arrived in South Georgia.

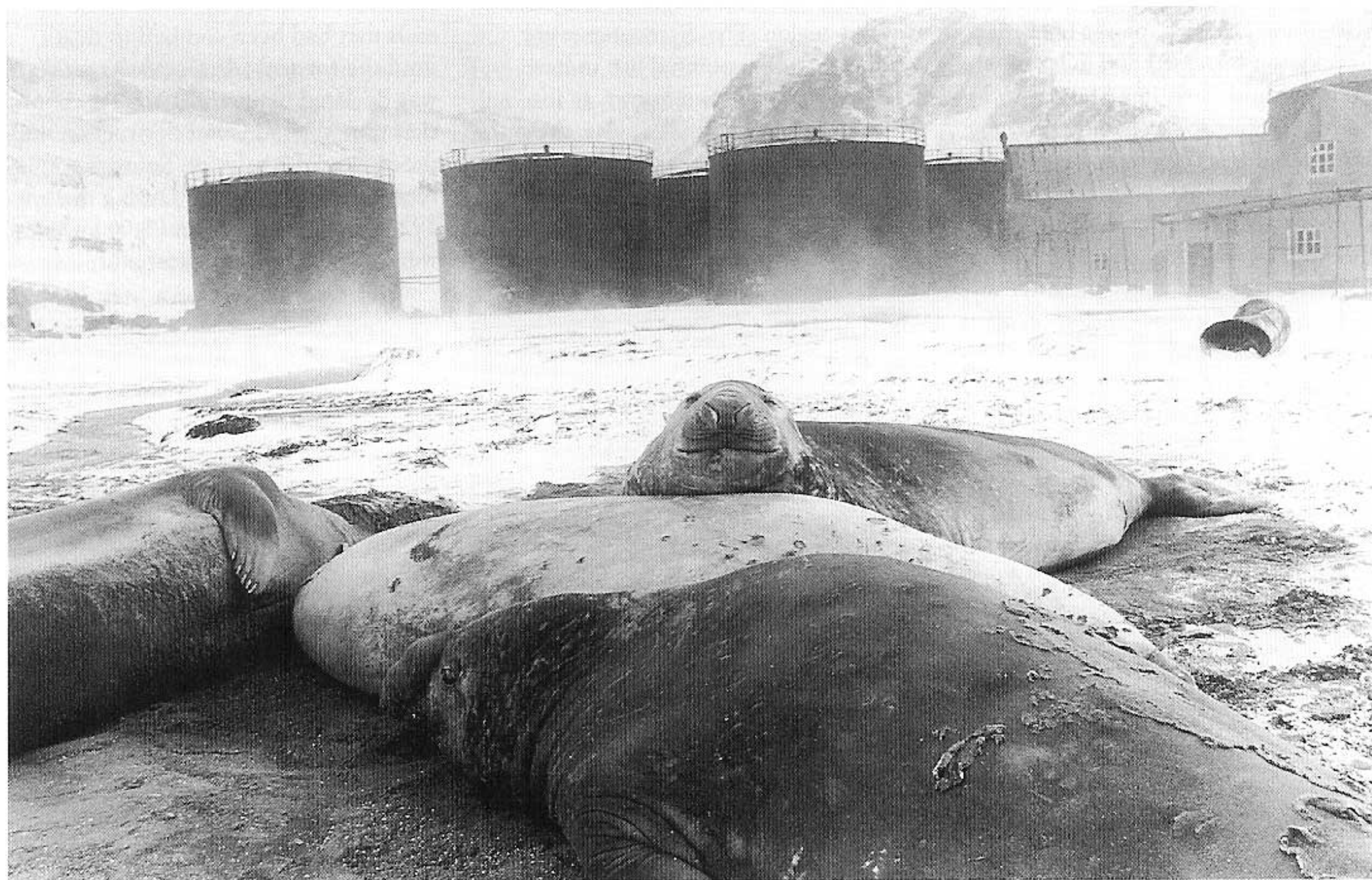
THE ISLAND OF South Georgia lies between the 53<sup>rd</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> longitude, 2,150 kilometers east of Cabo Virgenes at the eastern mouth of the Strait of Magellan, the nearest point on the South American mainland. It is the second-largest of the many sub-Antarctic islands which ring the icy continent. South Georgia – the jagged spinal comb of a long-sunken dragon – is about 170 kilometers long, between two and 30 kilometers wide, and its highest point, Mount Paget, rises to an altitude of 2,934 meters (c. 9,626 ft.) above sea level. From the island's interior, mighty glaciers flow into the many fjords of the

northern coast, which is more accessible than the wilder southern coast facing Antarctica. South Georgia looks as if a Swiss mountain chain had been sawed off horizontally at an altitude of about 2,000 meters and set down on the sea; 56% of its surface is covered with snow or ice.

The island's climate is raw, but not as extreme as on the Antarctic continent. Average annual temperature is 2° Celsius (just over 35° Fahrenheit), but the thermometer can rise as high as 20 °C. (68 °F.), especially when a warm föhn wind blows (like that often encountered in Alpine regions). The day after our arrival, the föhn had already cleaned away most of the new snow. At the other end of the scale, the thermometer rarely falls below minus 15 °C. (5 °F.). Occasionally in winter the island is ice-bound by Antarctic pack ice. The last

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**Southern sea elephants at rest before the abandoned whaling station at Husvik: The animals have learned to take shelter in the empty factory buildings in very bad weather.**





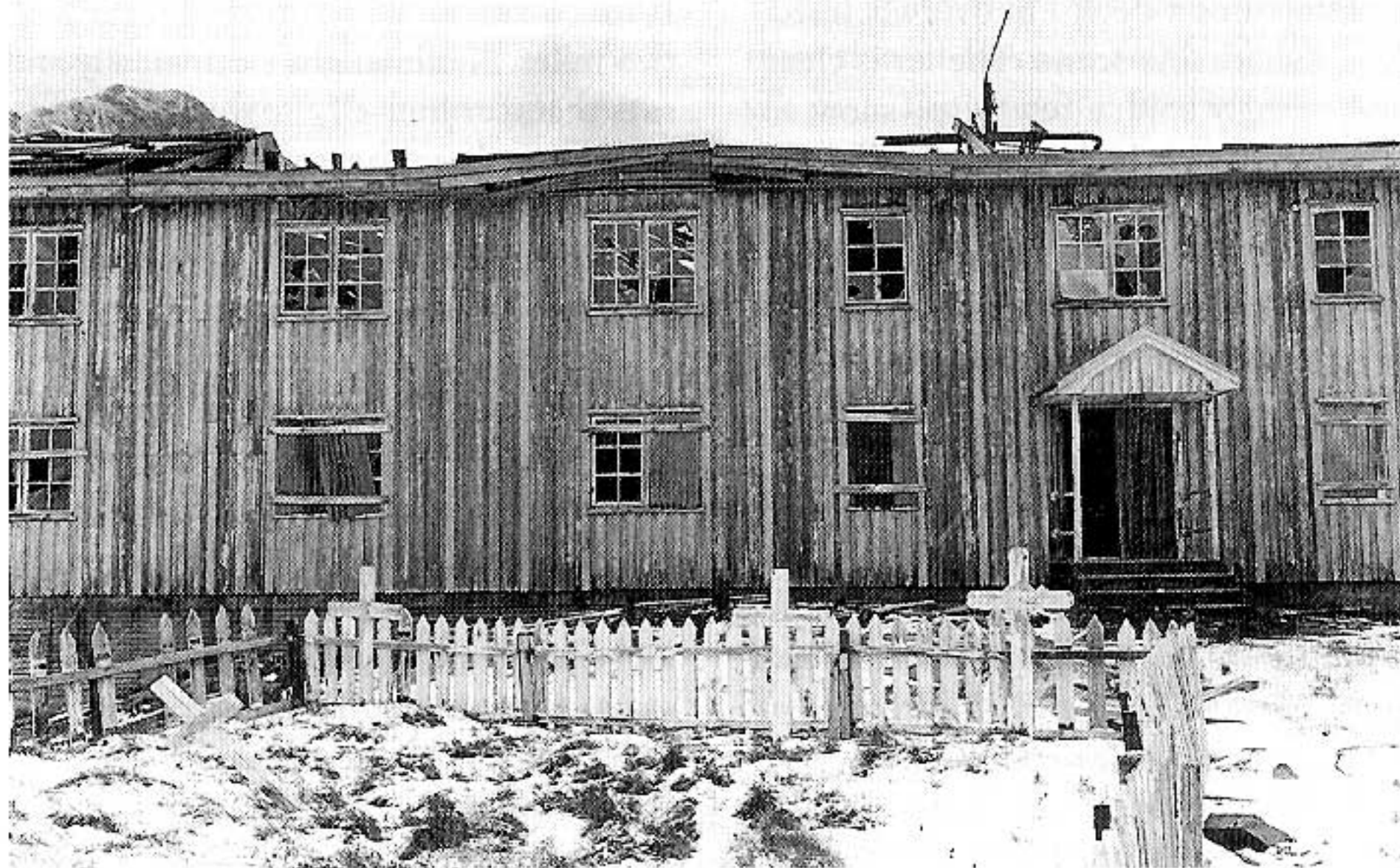
such occurrence was in 1980, when pack ice came up as far as 300 kilometers north of South Georgia. The weather is windy and changeable, and can run the entire gamut within a single day. South Georgia lies within the Antarctic Convergence, and thus within the cool Antarctic waters with their rich reserves of plankton and krill. Millions of fish, birds, whales and other marine mammals live from that nourishment. No tree grows on this island, yet its north coast appears green. That is due to the tussock grass (*Parodiochloa flabellata*) which grows as high as two meters, in solitary clumps. In their colonies, the fur seals and the southern sea elephants trample the tussock grass flat, leaving only root stems, which provide, among other things, an ideal nesting place for albatross. The grass is also the basic food of the reindeer herds, which were brought to the island by its first settlers at the beginning of this century.

THERE IS NO piece of land on jagged South Georgia flat enough for an airstrip. So the island is still accessible, happily, only by ship. In a famous 1916 adventure, British explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton traversed 800 miles of wild South Atlantic seas in a lifeboat to South Georgia to get help in rescuing his comrades stranded on Elephant Island. Landing on the island's southern coast, he and his five companions became the first men to cross South Georgia's icy mountains and after three days reached the whaling station at Stroemness. They were received by a whaler who doubted their sanity when they reported what they had been through.

Today there is a giant buoy in the Bay of Grytviken at which large vessels, including ocean liners, can make fast. Elegant Atlantic cruise ships sometimes put in here, and their guests are treated to a barbecue in the station's deserted factory buildings. Captain James Cook and his crew were the first to set foot on the island in 1775, and immediately

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**"Cleaning up" in Leith Harbour:**  
Abandoned stocks of heating fuel and whale oil are burned off.

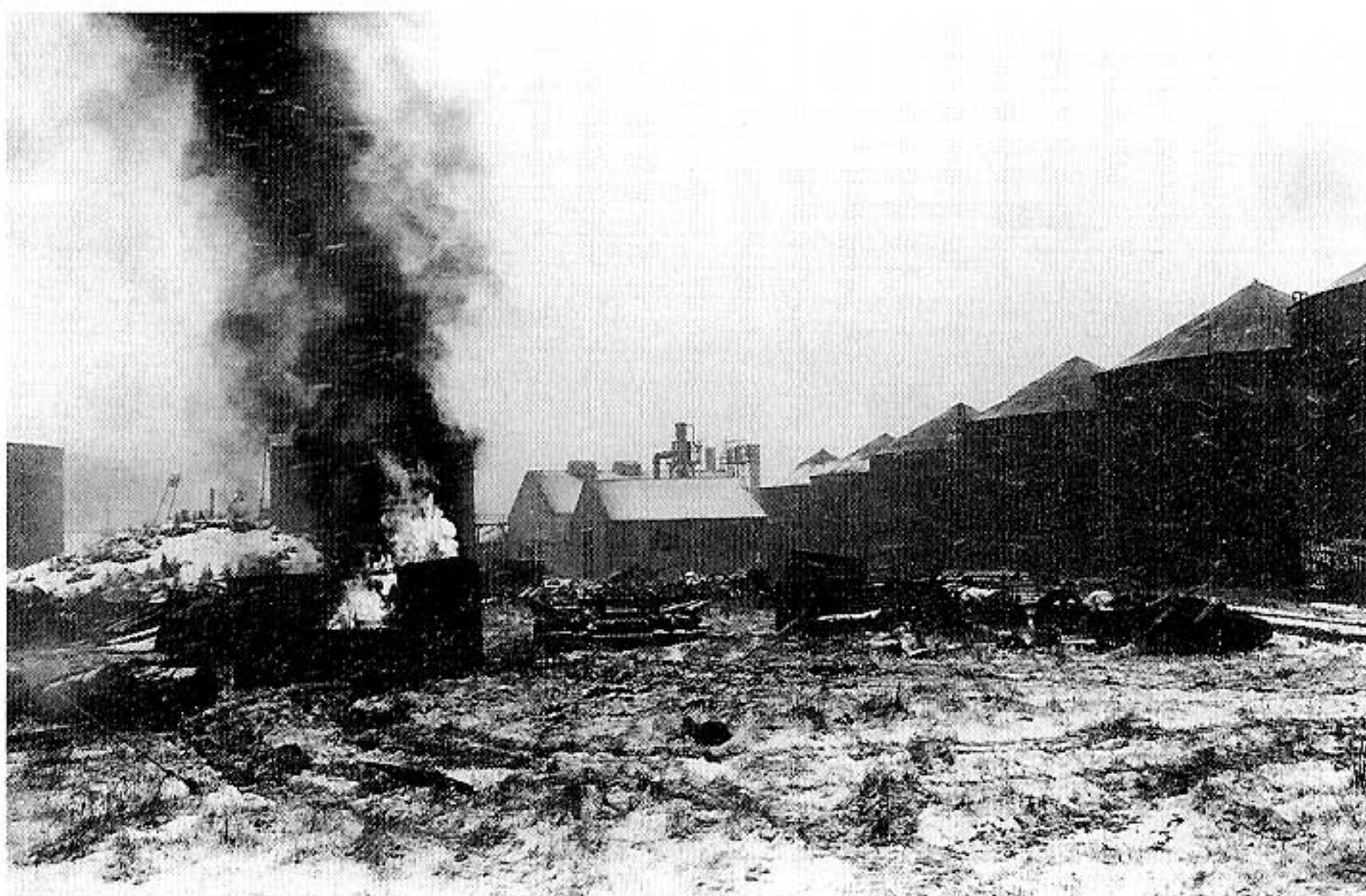


**Old barracks and a graveyard mark the former habitation at the old Leith Harbour whaling station.**

fired off a salvo of muskets to claim the land for King George III. Reasonably enough, Cook dubbed the landing site Possession Bay. His published journals and those of his officers contain references to the wealth of seals and whales in this region. The discoverers were somewhat disappointed not to have found what was then known as the Southern Continent: "... alas, these pleasing dreams are reduced to a small isle, and a very poor one, too..." But even back then another officer made an astonishingly modern and inevitable-

seeming observation about the area's economic potential: "If the northern ocean should ever be cleared of whales by our annual fisheries, we might then visit the other hemisphere, where those animals are known to be numerous."

Only 11 years after Cook's visit, the first run on South Georgia's seal pelts began, and it was to last for 150 years. Millions of skins were taken from animals that had been clubbed to death, until the fur seal (*Arctocephalus gazella*) was declared extinct in 1928. At about that time the industrial destruction and processing of whales on South Georgia reached its first climax. During the 1920s, between 5,000 and 8,000 whales were slaughtered each year and





Marines of Britain's Royal Navy practice house-to-house combat in the ruins of Grytviken – one of their sole defenses against boredom.

processed into train oil. The whaling business was riding high. . . .

WHEN WE ARRIVE at our destination in Grytviken one night, it is snowing again and birds literally drop from the sky. Apparently drawn by our shipboard spotlights, they fly blindly into our masts and shrouds and then fall stunned to the deck. Soon there are dozens of them lying about. I pick one up and try throwing it into the air; it flies away. And that is how we rescue most of the beasties confused by our arrival. After midnight, we tie up at the Grytviken pier. Like snowy ghosts, abandoned industrial buildings stand along the waterfront and fade into the darkness. No sign of a soul. Uncanny.

We begin the next day by taking care of a few formalities. The commandant of the British garrison – who, in the name of the Queen, also serves manifold other functions, such as deputy postmaster, immigration officer, collector of customs, harbor master, etc. – stamps our passports and collects the port fee from our captain. Extremely courteous, that gentleman expresses a willingness to omit stamping our passports if we anticipate any trouble with the Argentinians. He then calls our attention to certain areas which are restricted because of military target practice – and invites us all to dinner. Only then are we permitted to leave our ship.

The industrial facilities at the former whaling station at Grytviken turn out to be considerably larger than my reading had led me to expect. As with every whaling station on land, the flaying platform is the center of the whole thing. Here, whales were winched onto the land and cut into parts. At the start of the Antarctic whaling industry, only the whale's blubber (fat), meat and a few glands were processed. The remainder was tossed into the sea, with the result that surrounding beaches were literally buried in whale bones. Later, the British



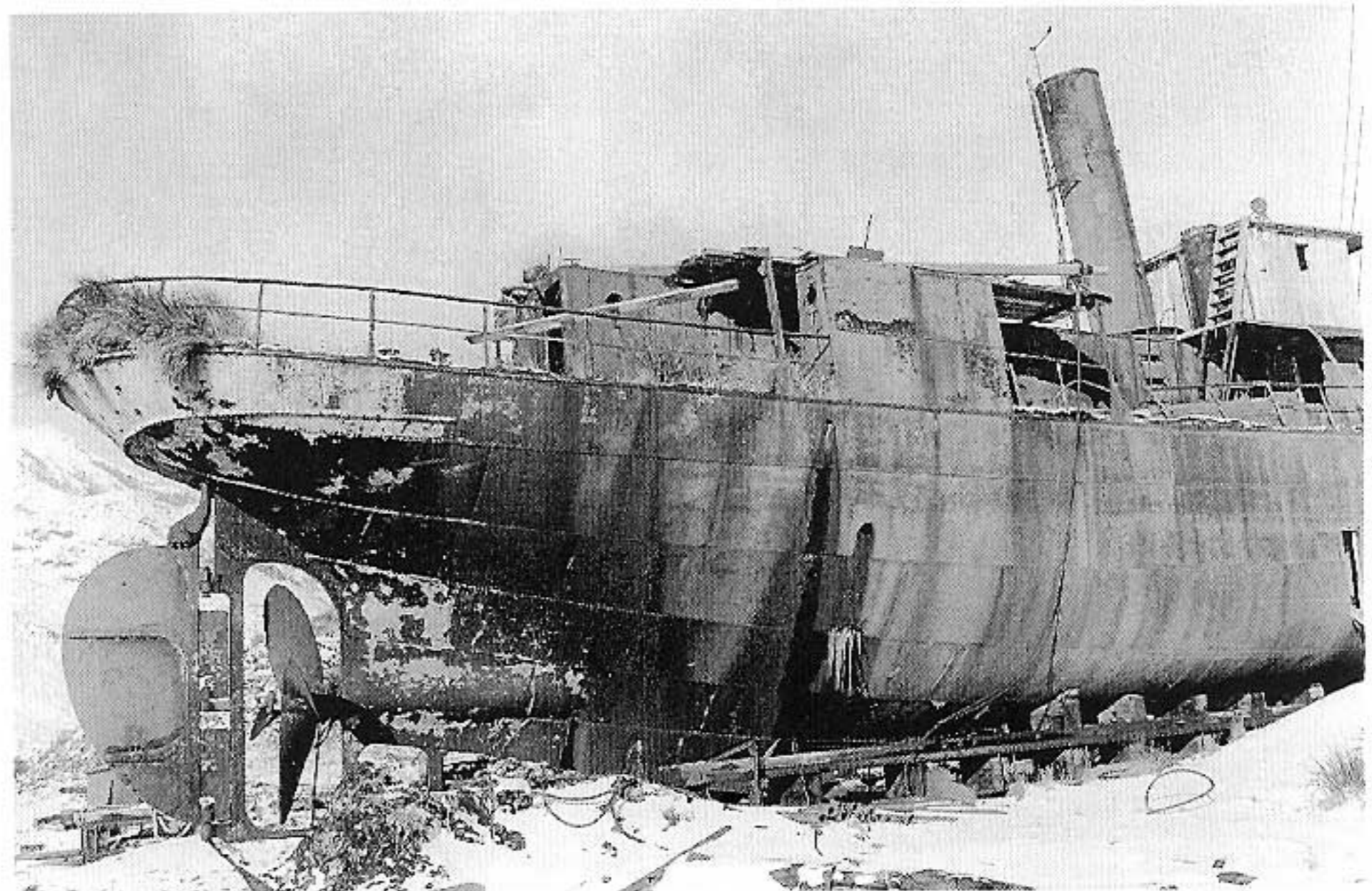
government prescribed the processing of the entire animal. Consequently, highly complex industrial facilities sprang up around the flaying platform: boiling vats, reduction ovens, centrifuges, tanks, and huge guano ovens that reduced the boiled whale bones to fertilizer.

The enormous requirements for steam heat were met by large boilers which required extensive transport facilities for coal in the early days, and later tanks for oil. In Grytviken, the power to run the machinery was produced by a

hydroelectric plant; in other stations it came from diesel generators.

IN 1904, THE Norwegian Carl Anton Larsen used Argentinian capital and a British license to launch the profitable business of whale processing in Grytviken. He was soon emulated, and in short order six land-based whaling stations were operating on South Georgia, including those at Stroemness, Leith Harbour, Husvik and Prince Olav Harbour. The operation in Grytviken was halted in 1965. After 60 years, the waters of South Georgia had been "cleared of whales," as Captain Cook's officer expressed it. The equipment was treated so that it could be used again at

Built in 1912, the 31-meter whaling ship "Karrakatta" lies rusting in drydock at Husvik.





a later time, but even this God-forsaken spot was not safe from looters and vandals. The former plundered the copper tubing, brass valves and electrical fittings, while the vandals smashed whatever they could, including laboratory containers with highly toxic substances.

Left behind were ghost settlements, where wind blows through factory halls with their lathes, drills, stamping and rolling presses, corrugated metal flaps in the swirling air, doors creak and pipes emit eerie flute-like tones. The hulls of sunken ships dot the harbors. The old whaler "Karrakatta" sits in drydock at Husvik, as if it had just been under repairs by shipyard workers; but its stern is eaten away by rust and tussock grass grows on the deck. Ordinary things like an abandoned cinema, a dilapidated ski jump, a washroom for crew members, strike me most power-

fully. The cemeteries also bear mute witness to the fact that people actually once worked in South Georgia's whale factories – almost a thousand people at the high point of the industry.

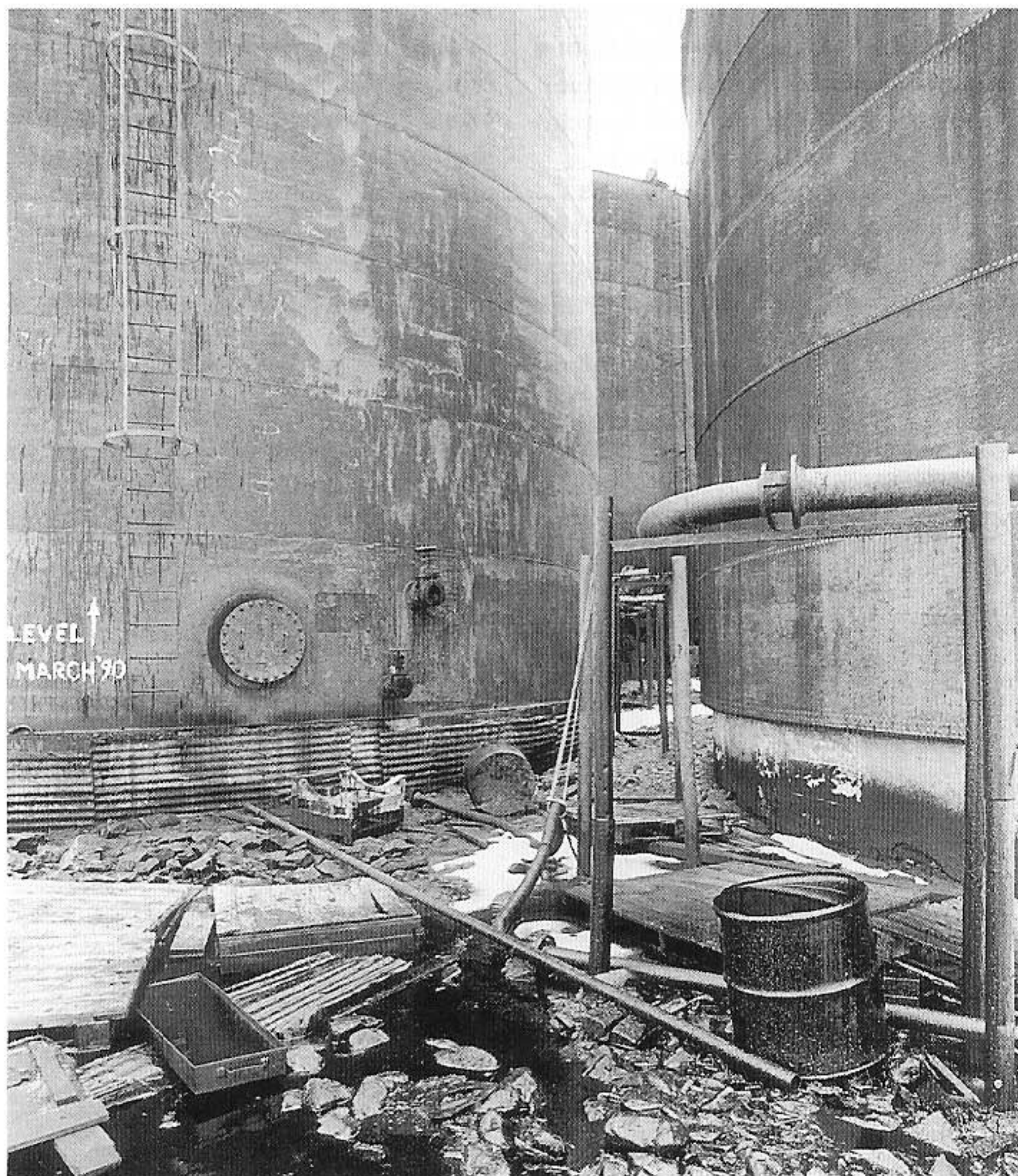
These days, British marines practice house-to-house combat in the ruins of Grytviken, and seeing them reminds me of one of the most absurd aspects of whaling: Except for such mundane things as liver oil and corset stays, shoe grease and dog food, whales were used mostly in the manufacture of nitroglycerine. So humans killed whales and then, and from the layer of fat which protects the giant mammals from the cold of the seas, they produced the explosives with which they killed one another in two world wars – a truly depressing cycle. Thus my viewing of the rusty remnants of South Georgia's whaling stations becomes a gloomy pilgrimage to a dead world, and at the

same time provides a very timely paradigm for our behavior toward our natural environment and toward our fellow humans.

UNTIL 1982, THE settlement at King Edward Point, just a rifle shot away from Grytviken, served as a scientific station of the British Antarctic Survey, and as a post office that has become famous among philatelists for issuing its own stamps. Only a few soldiers marked the presence of the English crown. After the decline of the whaling industry, no more than 25 people lived in the small settlement.

In the spring of 1982, Argentinian marines attacked the station and took both military and civilian prisoners. That was the opening gun of the Falklands War, which – aside from its chauvinist motives – may also be interpreted as a strategic war over access to the Antarctic. The Falkland (or Malvinas) Islands and South Georgia are advanced bridgeheads to that part of Antarctica contested by Argentina, Chile and Britain.

After the end of the Falkland conflict, the scientific station was transferred to Bird Island off the western tip of South Georgia and King Edward Point was converted into a garrison for a roughly 60-man unit of the Royal Marines. The base is supplied by ship, and by air via parachutes dropped from Hercules transport planes. The troops have a limited action radius, since all they have are small gunboats. As a result, aside from their military exercises their life is rather boring. During our dinner with the officers, enlisted men in the adjacent lounge grumblingly amuse themselves with a horror film. I am seated next to the unit's doctor. His greatest fear is that he may be called upon to perform an operation here one day – something he has never done, and for which the facilities are extremely rudimentary. But the commandant assures us that he likes being here, though he'll be glad to go home again.



Leaky oil tanks in Grytviken: When it is worthwhile, the oil is pumped out of these tanks and shipped to South America for sale.





AS WE SAIL into the bay at Husvik, we can scarcely believe our eyes. Huge columns of smoke rise from the settlement, like those we recall from the TV coverage of the Gulf War. Later we learn that a clean-up squad is in the process of eliminating a long-standing situation (in its own inimitable fashion). The settlement's extensive tank fields, as well as hundreds of barrels and vats scattered around, had been left full of heating fuel and whale oil. Britain had been repeatedly urged by the other signatory states to the Antarctic Treaty to clean up the tanks and vats, many of which had been leaking. And that is what the squad was now doing. (In all fairness, it should be noted that large quantities of heating oil had been pumped out into a tanker and sent off to South America to be sold.)

Another burden on South Georgia's former whaling stations – now being handled in much the same way – is tons of asbestos which had been used to insulate steam vats and pipelines. There are, though, also happier things to

report from South Georgia. Somewhere a few fur seals must have survived the former massacres committed against their species, for today there are once again hundreds of thousands of them in these waters. Indeed, along with the penguins and sea elephants they have reconquered the abandoned whaling stations. Young fur seals romp and penguins nest among the rusty vats, barrels and chains. And the sea elephants (or elephant seals) have discovered the uses of factory buildings that can protect them from the wilder winds.

It is uncertain, however, whether the whales – especially the larger species, such as fin and blue whales – will ever recover from the massacres in the Antarctic waters and around South Georgia. Moreover, the huge seal and penguin colonies observable today may deceive observers about the dangers they may face in the future. Russian and Japanese fishing fleets are systematically exploiting the wealth of fish and squid in the region, which are an integral part of the food chain in Antarctic waters.

**Pieces of paradise remain: Fur seals play on the rocks in the Bay of Stroemness.**

And dozens of albatross are lost through the use of the long-liner technique to catch tuna, which the Japanese employ and which involves trolling with hundreds of large hooks. The birds go after the bait, get stuck on the hooks and drown. A reduction in the number of these regal flyers, many of which nest on South Georgia, has been clearly shown.

And so South Georgia, an island at the end of the world, may be seen as a symbol of the untrammelled greed of humankind – a greed which affects not only our fellow creatures, but ourselves as well: perhaps only emotionally at first, but physically too, in the long run. ■

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The author of this article is a film director and traveled to South Georgia with his crew to shoot the movie "The Congress of the Penguins."