



R Y M I L L  
COONAWARRA

## RYMILL'S EXPEDITION

*"Here was all this strange grandeur around us, and we were the first to see it since the world began."*

Expedition Leader John Rymill, 1936



**John Riddoch Rymill**, the grandson of John Riddoch, was born on 13 March 1905 in Penola, and grew up self-reliantly in the Australian bush. After an expedition to northern Canada, he learnt his polar skills from the Eskimo people during an expedition to Greenland, the command of which he assumed when its leader was killed in a hunting kayak.

Rymill's major achievement was to lead the British Graham Land Expedition (1934-1937) to the Antarctic, far to the south of Cape Horn, into the last region on the earth's surface still to defy human discovery. His sixteen-man team combined traditional techniques of the heroic age of Antarctic exploration, such as a sailing ship and husky-powered sledges, with the modern technology of radio and aircraft.



*"...we could have walked to Antarctica more swiftly than we sailed..."*

Biologist Colin Bertram, 1985

Although not noted for her speed, the 103 ft (31m) Research Yacht **Penola**, named after John Rymill's birthplace, sailed over 43,000km during the three-year expedition. She was also warm, dry and vermin-free (see Lummo the cat, below).

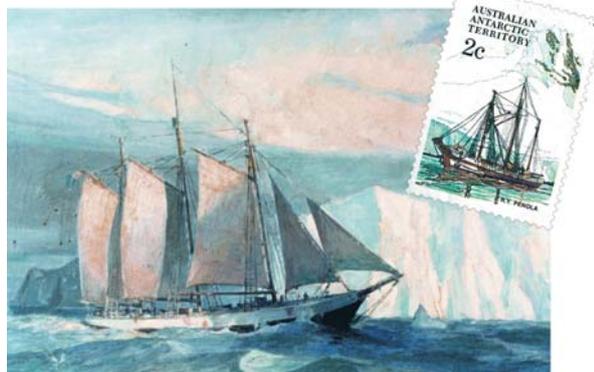
The official account of the British Graham Land Expedition can be read in *Southern Lights*, written by John Rymill and other members of his team, in 1938.



*"Ours was the first ever successful use of a light aircraft in Antarctica for local reconnaissance, flying alternatively off ice and water."*

The 130hp De Havilland **Fox Moth** was ideal for aerial reconnaissance, photography, survey and dropping supplies to sledging parties. To land on distant sea-ice, "flags weighted with steel points were dropped to act as wind indicators and landing marks" However if they disappeared straight through the ice, the landing was usually aborted.

Pilot Wilfred Hampton, 1984



*"After shortening the masts and changing the sails in the Falkland Islands, the Penola "proceeded down that rock-strewn and uncharted coast [of Antarctica]...running aground on some seven or more occasions before establishing two base stations."*

Captain RED Ryder VC, 1984

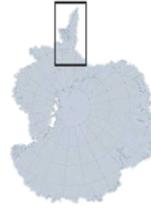
*"When one thinks of the many thousands of miles covered under sail, the visits to uncharted waters and unsafe harbours, and many gales of wind, I think all will agree that it has been a fine display of reliance, of seamanship, and of determination."*

Admiral Sir William Goodenough, 1937



*“Rymill’s men managed to explore nearly 2,000km of previously unexplored coast...”*

Stephen Martin, 1996



The existence of the **Antarctic Peninsula** was established, and found to be of a similar length to the coastline of NSW. Its 3,000 metre mountains were crossed for the first time, and King George VI Sound was discovered and named.

The work of the scientists identified the early effects of global warming, led to the discovery of the depletion in the ozone layer and provided early evidence of continental drift. Biology and ornithology were also important – the expedition ate 555 seals and 1,200 penguin eggs.



## The Expedition

*“John Rymill, born in Penola, organised an expedition which revolutionised Antarctic exploration...”*

Stephen Martin,  
A History of Antarctica, 1996

*“There was a large territory of the Antarctic... which had never been explored... We have heard a fine story of triumph over initial difficulties and eventual great success.”*

Royal Geographical Society,  
Founder’s Medal citation, 1938

*“[Rymill] mounted a prolonged meticulous survey of the Peninsula... in which aerial and ground surveys complemented each other with prodigious success.”*

Stephen J Pyne,  
The Ice, 1987

*“The survey work of this expedition constitutes probably the largest contribution to accurate detailed surveys of the Antarctic continent made by any expedition.”*

American Geographical Society,  
Gold Medal citation, 1939

*“...Rymill and his men changed the face of Antarctica.”*

Valerie Sitters,  
Geonews, 1995

## John Rymill

*“Rymill was a giant of a man, 6ft 4in [193cm] in height and enormously broad shouldered... He was calm and methodical, as befitted his huge build, and utterly reliable.”*

Meteorologist Quintin Riley,  
The Polar Record, 1969

*“That it was a happy expedition was a tribute to his style of command...”*

Jonathan Walton,  
Southern Lights, 1986

*“It was his superb leadership and technical excellence on the broken ice that saved us all. Had he failed all would have been lost...”*

Biologist Colin Bertram,  
The Polar Record, 1996

*“I found him to be both inspiring and impressively competent... I felt prepared to follow him to the end of the world...”*

Captain of RY Penola, Red Ryder VC,  
The Polar Record, 1996.

*“They were five workers and admirable companions...”*

Surveyor Alfred Stephenson, 1936



With 98 huskies broken to harness, Rymill’s was the “most dog-oriented expedition ever.” They pulled their sledges over 13,000km, which was 50% farther than Amundsen.

*“How could one forget the exuberant noisy welcome one received from one’s team on emerging from the tent after perhaps a night of blizzard...”*

Dr Edward Bingham  
(with Wolf), 1984

*“...we did have a cat, the first ever known to survive an Antarctic expedition.”*

Biologist Colin Bertram, 1985

Along with Lummo the cat, the sixteen men were also the first of any major polar expedition to suffer neither accidental death nor subsequent suicide.



*“We were indeed a family, and a happy one at that...”*

Colin Bertram, 1985



John Rymill, Alfred Stephenson, Wilfred Hampton, Edward Bingham and Quintin Riley, who had all previously been together on a Greenland expedition, were the first explorers ever to be awarded **Polar Medals** with both Arctic and Antarctic silver bars.