

The Red Tent

By Fernando R. Arroyo, EA4BB / D2BB

Not long ago I came across a book by the title of *Wings Over the Pole*, written by one of the most important airmen of our century, the Italian general Umberto Nobile. This book is about the conquest of the North Pole by air, probably less a known chapter for most of the public than that of the overlanding exploration of the Arctic regions. I have found in this book many references to the Art of Ham Radio, so I have thought that its story could be interesting for all those hams that feel some attraction for the history of geographical discovery.

It is generally accepted that the conquest of the North Pole by air started back in July 1897 with the Swedish expedition of Andrée on board of the balloon *Ornen*. This particular try marked an ill fate in Arctic exploration, for the *Ornen* fell down not long after starting its course, at about 82 degrees north. The survivors started then a perilous march towards Cape Flora, in Franz Joseph Land, during which they perished due to harsh weather conditions.

Eleven years later, in April 1909, Robert Peary conquered the North Pole, after a difficult overland expedition financed by the National Geographic Society and a group of American millionaires. A great controversy was raised already in those days, whether Peary had reached or not the actual point, 90 degrees north. Nobile echoed this polemic in his book, arguing himself that Peary had failed to get there by a few miles. Recent investigations conducted by the National Geographic Society suggest that this theory might be right, thus giving the Norwegian Roald Amundsen the privilege of being the first at the Pole.



Robert E. Peary

In the following years there were various unsuccessful attempts to fly over the Arctic regions. But in July 1914 Ivan Nagurskii, lieutenant of the Russian imperial army, flew without any incident over the 82nd parallel on board of a Farman biplane flying boat equipped with a 50HP engine. The aim of this flight was to find any trace of the Russian expeditions lost not long before in the Arctic, while trying to find the so called Northwest Passage, a path among the Arctic ices that would link Europe with the northernmost American coasts.

The first great flight over the Arctic took place in May, 1925, when the Norwegian Roald Amundsen (conqueror of the South Pole in 1911) flew beyond 87 degrees north on board a Dornier WAL, the same type of seaplane later used by the Spanish Franco, Rada and Ruiz de Alda in their famous Plus Ultra transatlantic flight between Spain and Argentina in 1926. The Amundsen expedition went through no little difficulties, mainly due to extreme weather conditions and mechanical failure of the aircraft. However, it was so proved that aviation could be successfully incorporated to Polar exploration.

The most fascinating part of this story, and the most dramatic too, starts back in 1926. In the summer of that year two important expeditions had settled their tents in King's Bay (Spitzbergen Islands). One of them was that of the American explorer Richard Byrd and his pilot, Bennet. On board of a Fokker seaplane, the *Josephine Ford*, they circumnavigated the Pole in an exhausting 14 hours flight. This was a great achievement in behalf of Science, as a large part of the region could thus be mapped. The other expedition at

King's Bay was a joint venture commanded by Amundsen, the American Ellsworth and the Italian Umberto Nobile.

Nobile had designed and built a dirigible airship baptised with the name of Norge (the Norwegian word for Norway). With this airship the expeditioners travelled more than 3400 miles in the Arctic latitudes, going through no little mechanical problems and proving an outstanding endurance. They conducted major scientific research during this flight and, on May the 12th, at about 11:30 AM they flew over the pole, on which they laid the national colours of Norway, Italy and the United States.

This success led Nobile to try his luck again in 1928, with an airship twin to the Norge, which this time he called Italia. Nobile had scheduled a variety of geophysical and geographical investigations for this second expedition, so he didn't find too many problems when convincing the Italian government to fund the endeavour. The Italia landed on King's Bay on May the 5th, 1928, and on the 23rd started a trip bound to the North Pole from which she was never to return.



A dirigible of the early 1930s, very similar to the Italia

QST (monthly magazine of the American Radio Relay League) calls the American amateurs on its May 1928 issue to listen and report the radio signals transmitted by the Italia and its supporting team. This was a common practice for radio amateurs worldwide on those days. Little our amateur ancestors knew that on the 25th, by reasons still not clearly explained (it has been suggested that gas escaped through holes accidentally made in the canvas while removing the snow accumulated over it), the Italia crashed on the Arctic ices.

When such devastating news were known, the world rapidly lost any hope of finding any survivors. Despite that, some rescue expeditions were launched, but those couldn't find any bit of the airship. Slowly, but steadily, rescue efforts decreased in number until they were completely abandoned. Everyone was convinced that all the crew had perished in the moment of the accident or, had there been any survivor, he would have met his death already due to the extreme cold in the area. Anyway, finding the remains of crew or ship with the means available at the time would have been like finding a needle in a hay barn.

Nobody then could guess that some of the expeditioners had actually survived. One of the mechanics died at the moment of the crash, and Nobile had a broken arm and leg. He and eight other members of the crew had been ejected out of the Italia when she hit the ground, while the remaining six were dragged by the remains of the airship in the middle of a hurricane-like wind, thus being lost forever.

The survivors set then a small red waterproof canvas tent found among the remains of the wreck scattered on the snow. This would be the beginning of a long story of hardship and suffering.

The most important find in the debris, by all means, was a wooden box containing a small short wave radiotelegraphy station, which, apparently, had not suffered major damages...

One can imagine the strong emotion in which the ship wrecked airmen gathered around that box which contained the devices that would decide whether they would die or live to tell their story.

From the beginning of the 1920s the use of radio on board aircrafts had spread widely, as it had happened before on the sea. A long wave telegraphy station fitted with Philips TB 04/10 and 10/1250 tubes had been installed on board the Italia, meant to establish two-way communication with Città di Milano, the support ship that the Italian navy had assigned to the expedition. This ship was anchored in King's Bay. The last contact between the Italia and the Città di Milano took place on May the 25th, at 10:25 AM. The dirigible fell later over the ice at a tremendous speed, so no distress call could be sent at the moment of the accident. For some reason people thought that Biagi, the radio operator, had been very likely beheaded by the propeller of the radio's dynamotor.

But Biagi counted among the survivors, and soon started to assemble the different parts that composed the station, so the receiver section was working few hours later. But let's Nobile himself tell us with his own words about those first thrilling moments:

"Biagi applied himself to put together the receiver. A few hours after the crash it was ready to work. Suddenly, on the 55th minute of one of the hours in which the Città di Milano was supposed to call us on short wave, Biagi heard Pedretti's voice (the other radio man, who had stayed aboard the ship), who said: <<What happens? Why don't you come back to me? If you have a problem in the long wave transmitter, use the emergency shortwave station. Standing by for you. K.>>. As the readers will know, the character "K" means "Go ahead" in the Morse code radio slang. But there was a fault in the transmitter of the Red Tent, which had to be dismantled and checked part by part by Biagi, who, with no little skill, eventually managed to make it work again. But it was too late. The Città di Milano had stopped calling them, and had started a hectic, never ending traffic of radiotelegrams being sent to the mass media and the families of the expedition members. Nobile, in his despair, counted no less than four hundred of these radiograms in just one of the days that followed the first fatal date.

The airship had fallen on an iceberg near Charles XII Island,. The crust was drifting quite fast eastwards, that is, towards Franz Joseph land, and each meter of drift certainly diminished their hopes of coming alive out of that situation. Meanwhile, the small transmitter couldn't make itself heard in the Italian navy ship. Perhaps the propagation was poor when the telegram traffic stopped or, perhaps, the signal was just too weak. All the communication attempts proved barren, while Nobile and his comrades had to endure the tortures of cold and hunger.



The Red Tent

Three of the survivors decided then to abandon the camp and try a desperate expedition to the coast of Spitzbergen, before the drift of the iceberg would make the idea unfeasible. When this decision was taken they were already east of Foyn Island, very far away from Charles XII. So the Italian commanding officers Zappi and Mariano and the Swedish scientist Malmgren left the camp and started their terrifying march to salvation, in the direction of North Cape.

In the meantime the ice block continued its inevitable drift southeastwards. By June the 5th Broch island got out of sight, while Foyn continued getting further and further away. Despite the poor morale of the group, Nobile always insisted in sending his distress calls on schedule with the shortwave station. It was agreed that these calls would be specially sent around 08:00 GMT, for that was the time when the French station "Paris Tour Eiffel" broadcasted its famous signals in a wavelength of 32 meters. Those readers familiar with the history of our hobby know that the tuning of those signals was one of the targets of short wave listeners in the early days of Amateur Radio. "Paris Tour Eiffel" worked for them as a beacon, so they could test the idoneity of antennas and the sensitivity of their receivers. For the shipwrecked it made sense then that their chances of being heard by anybody would increase at that particular time.

Finally one day all those countless efforts gave a result. And it was a Radio Amateur, the Russian Nikolai Schmidt, AS-RA-03, who saved the life of the unfortunate airmen.

Schmidt had a small radio station at home, in the tiny village of Wosnessenie Wochma, province of Archangelsk. On June the 3rd, at 9:30 he heard by chance on 32m a fragment of the SOS sent by Nobile and his team: "SOS Italia, Nobile. On the ice, near Foyn island, northeast of Spitzberg, latitude 80°73'N, longitude 26°50'E. Stacked because lack of sledges. Two men injured. Dirigible airship lost. Reply via IDO

32". IDO was the callsign of the San Pablo coastal station, near Rome, and 32 indicated the listening wavelength. I can imagine Schmidt's nervousness that morning listening at that message. He soon relayed the news the world had lost the hope to get, and he did that through fellow amateurs in Portland, Oregon, and San Francisco, California, so those news stroke like a lightning the American newspapers that day. There were survivors from the wreck of the Italia. This moment, as many others in that odyssey was portrayed in the memorable film "The red Tent" (Mikhail Kalatozov, 1971).

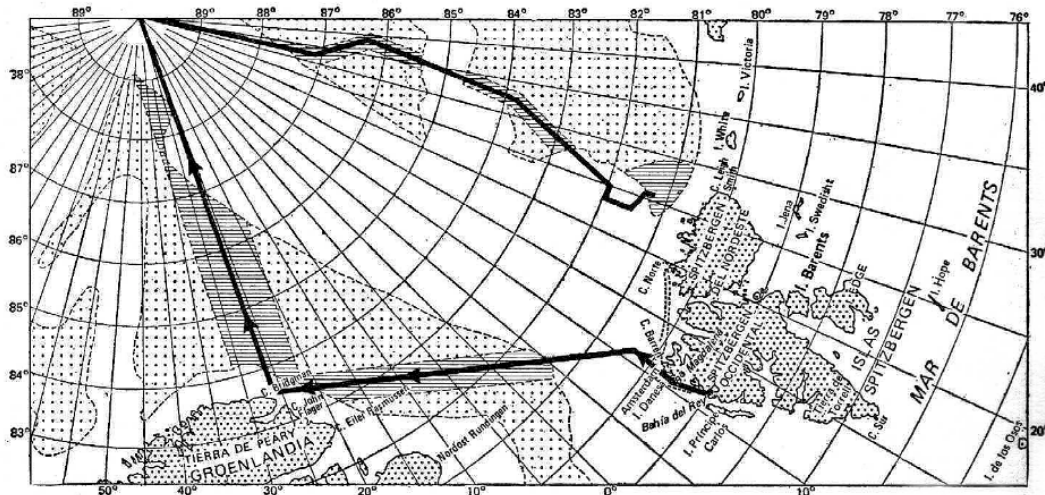
Imagine now what those men felt when, listening as usual with religious respect the news bulletin of Radio San Pablo (IDO) on the evening of June the 6th, 1928, heard the following: "The Embassy of the Soviets has informed to the Italian government that some radiotelegraphy distress signals have been heard in the north of Russia. Those signals surely come from the Nobile expedition to the North Pole. The signals were heard by the young soviet radio amateur Nikolaj Schmidt in Wosnessenie Wochma, oblast of Archangelsk, who immediately relayed to the authorities".

They had saved their lives.

Immediately orders were sent to the Città di Milano to install three other extra stations aimed at the reception of any radio signals coming from the Red Tent. The press radiotelegrams traffic that so much had tortured Nobile and his men ceased immediately. All the operators concentrated on listening.

On June the 8th Biagi was heard at long last on the Città di Milano, and the exact position of the survivors was finally copied. This had been only partially received by Schmidt.

Two-way communications were then established with the shipwrecked, and a long series of rescue expeditions started again. Because of weather conditions and the technical limitations of aviation in those days the group could not be rescued until June the 23rd, although they were supplied with food and other items from the air



The routing of the Italia

For sure, the most famous and tragic of all the rescue expeditions organised for the relief of the survivors was that conducted by Roald Amundsen who, as we said above, had commanded the flight of the dirigible Norge two years before. Misfortune reached too this humanitarian enterprise, for Amundsen disappeared during one of the prospection flights on board of a Latham 47 French seaplane, together with the other 5 crewmembers. Last contact with the aircraft was recorded on June the 18th at 16:48 GMT, when Amundsen called LWP (weather station in Bear island, Spitzbergen) to ask for the latest forecast. The seaplane was never seen again, having probably crashed somewhere in the Barents Sea. Thus the life of that great Norwegian explorer was melted with the Arctic regions, those mighty worlds he had loved so much and had devoted his career to.



Roald Amundsen

On June the 23rd lieutenant Lundborg, of the Royal Swedish Navy, landed with his little Fokker on the ice, besides the Red Tent. Nobile was the first to be evacuated, despite his protest. The rescue of the rest of the group had to wait much more, till July the 12th, and was achieved thanks to the intervention of the Russian icebreaker *Krassin*, that got to the iceberg after a very difficult journey. In the meantime, Ludborg had crashed near the tent with his aeroplane when trying to rescue the other airmen. Nearly by miracle he escaped the accident uninjured, and had to wait with the others until the Russian ship showed up.

On that very July the 12th the news shocked once again everyone. The group of Mariano, Zappi and Malmgren had been spotted from the Junkers 3-engined aeroplane belonging to the Russian icebreaker. Mariano and Zappi were rescued alive. Malmgren had died out of cold and exhaustion on June the 14th.

The survivors arrived in the Città di Milano to the Norwegian seaport of Narvik on July the 26th. From there they started their way back to Rome, where they were received as heroes by thousands of Italians. Nobile did not enjoy long this glory, for his military career got stained after an investigation conducted by the Italian Admiralty. They wanted to find out more about Nobile's controversial behaviour during the nightmare of the Red Tent.

Whatever it was, Nobile rendered a warm homage to Amateur Radio through his books. In one of them he says:

"Nikolai Schmidt: that is a name to remember, for only thanks to him part of the expedition is still alive today."

Who among us has not spent at least an evening in the intimacy of the radio shack, tinkering and soldering, with the crackling sound of the shortwave on the background, as meaningless music, without any specific aim? I believe that the story of Nobile, regardless of its interest in the chronicle of Arctic exploration, will suggest to the attentive reader that turning unadvertedly the tuning knob could be, unexpectedly, a very transcendental thing.

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If you want to know more...

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