

David Woodman is built like an athlete. He's got broad shoulders, a wide gait and a narrow-eyed, quiet intensity. A former Navyman and sport diver, he works for BC Ferries and lives in a condo in Port Coquitlam with his wife. They just got back from Barbados, a trip to celebrate their anniversary. Woodman, although you wouldn't know it to look at him, is also one of the world's top experts on Franklin. He's a step ahead of the rest of the Franklin Mafia - Parks Canada's Harris says Woodman is by far the most credible of the private searchers, and the government frequently consults him.

A self-made historian and the author of one of the most respected books on the expedition, Woodman broke ground when he became the first author to seriously consider the role of Inuit testimony in helping to piece together the mystery. He's embarked on 10 different expeditions, from 1992 to 2004, using magnetometers and sonar imaging to try to find remains. "All wreck divers want to find a virgin wreck with a skeleton at the wheel," he says. "But it's like trying to find two school buses in Vancouver with your eyes closed, going around padding the pavement. It's going to be tough."

It's odd to think that the answer to the biggest unsolved Arctic mystery could be pieced together by a Franklin fanatic who's spent much of his life working away in his garage, tapping on a keyboard resting on top of a freezer. "Ninety-nine per cent of finding any shipwreck is done in a library," he says.

Where most historians have been dismissive of Inuit testimony, Woodman still believes that's what will lead seekers to the buried treasure. He's got his own theories: that Franklin's men lived longer than we think, and will be found far further south than most people have been looking. On each of his expeditions, he's found dozens of anomalies - but none panned out. Yet he's still hoping.

He's glib about what compels him. "I actually thought this was going to be fairly easy. I'm a pretty lazy guy," he says. "I thought I'd have to read about 10 books and maybe two or three years of half-hearted effort to try to find these ships." He's not slated to go on any expeditions in the near future, but cheers the work of others. Technology is getting better and cheaper, and the search area is being narrowed every year. He says the discoveries are only a matter of time. "I want them to be found before I die."

Around 2004, he says, Parks got worried. Higher-ups in the agency were concerned private searches were generating enough publicity that a treasure-hunter was going to find the ships. The Nunavut government cracked down. But Woodman says he values the history behind the discovery and is really just in it for the chase. "I'm not there to steal a piece of it and put it in my basement or something. I'm Navy. They're war graves to me," he says.