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NEWS STORY

A lost ship calls from the deep
An Ottawa scientist believes he's uncovered one of marine archeology's gems: A ship from the Franklin Expedition. Randy Boswell reports.

Randy Boswell
The Ottawa Citizen

Saturday, October 19, 2002

At this point, it's still just "anomalous squiggles" on a computer screen in the office of Brad Nelson, a federal scientist stationed at a defence research lab near the Ottawa airport.

But when the Arctic Ocean ice melts next August near King William Island in Nunavut, a joint expedition of Canadian and Irish adventurers will beeline toward a target labelled "Pattern 4, Priority 1" on the belief the squiggles represent the culmination of a 150-year quest and the discovery of the Holy Grail of marine archeology: one of the long-lost ships from the famously doomed Franklin Expedition.

Dozens of search teams in three different centuries have tried and failed -- sometimes tragically -- to find HMS Terror or HMS Erebus, the vessels that carried legendary 19th-century explorer Sir John Franklin and his 129 crew



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Brigitte Bouvier, The Ottawa Citizen DND physicist Brad Nelson spent the summer analysing and interpreting raw magnetometer data collected in May from the Arctic seabed, pinpointing one particular site that looks extremely promising to be the wreckage of Sir John Franklin's ships, the HMS Terror and HMS Erebus, which sunk in an 1840s voyage to find a Northwest passage.

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members to their deaths during an ill-fated voyage in the 1840s to discover the Northwest Passage.

The disappearance of Franklin and his men caused a sensation around the world, and rescue ships were dispatched from Britain throughout the 1840s and 1850s. The Terror and Erebus were never found, but the tragic fate of the expedition was eventually confirmed with the discovery of the frozen bodies of several sailors and a single page from a log book placed in a cairn at a site called Victory Point.

The log recorded Franklin's death aboard the Erebus in 1847 and the abandonment of the two ships, which had become stranded in the ice near King William Island a year later.

The rescue missions of the 19th century gave way to archeological expeditions in the 20th, none of which yielded the ultimate treasure: the lost ships.

But improvements in the technology and applications of magnetometry are now helping the Irish-Canadian team conduct unprecedented scans of the Arctic seabed for signs of metal consistent with the 14-tonne iron steam engines and masses of steel cladding that covered the hulls of Franklin's wooden sailing ships.

And it was an arduous, three-week data-gathering trip in May -- during which a snowmobile was driven across the frozen surface of the ocean with a magnetometer dragged behind on a sledge -- that finally yielded Mr. Nelson's tantalizing concentration of squiggles.

He spent the summer analysing and interpreting the raw magnetometer data. Several sites are worth a closer look, he says, but there was "one really good one" that will be the first stop during the open-water phase of the expedition in August.

"I'm very hopeful that this is the one," says Mr. Nelson, a physicist who develops submarine detection systems for the Department of National Defence's research arm. "It has the correct shape from all the angles we've looked at, it's at the right depth, it has the right magnetic qualities."

Mr. Nelson has been crunching magnetometer data from the Arctic for more than a decade. The work is part of a project involving Defence Research and Development Canada and the National Research Council to create a baseline map of subsurface magnetism to help Canada's defence forces detect the presence of submarines cruising the country's northern waters.

Then David Woodman -- a 46-year-old Prince Rupert, B.C., author, adventurer and Franklin expert who has spent much of his adult life in search of the lost ships -- teamed with Mr. Nelson in 1992 to begin analysing the data collected by the government's airborne magnetometers for signs of the Terror or Erebus.



Sir John Franklin's sunken ships have been designated a Canadian national historic site, although nobody knows exactly where they are.

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Mr. Woodman has since begun using snowmobile-drawn magnetometers on his missions to the North, which permit closer scrutiny of the seabed. This year, in partnership with two adventurous Irishmen -- filmmaker John Murray and businessman Kevin Cronin -- the team continued an intensive survey of a 700-square-kilometre section of ocean between the southwestern coast of King William Island and the northwestern tip of the Adelaide Peninsula on mainland Nunavut. The search area lies about 160 kilometres southwest of the Inuit community of Gjoa Haven.

A key clue as to the whereabouts of the Franklin ships is oral history among the region's Inuit that an ice-bound ship had once been seen just off the coast of King William Island, close to a smaller islet the aboriginal people had named Umiartalik -- "Big Boat Island."

According to accounts from witnesses, the ship sank in such shallow water that the top of the mast could be seen for some time until the vessel finally came to rest on its side. It's believed the ship was the Terror.

"The way I look at it is we started with a deck of 52 cards in 1992 and now we're down to about five cards," says Mr. Woodman. He's hopeful the team is about to "turn up the ace of spades," but recognizes the possibility that "somebody put a joker in the deck."

He says the group -- formally known as the Irish-Canadian Franklin Search Expedition -- has been "really relying on Brad's expertise" to interpret the magnetometer data and narrow the search to a handful of priority sites.

Eight sites in all, including the "Pattern 4, Priority 1" target identified by Mr. Nelson, will be closely examined in August using a boat loaded with sonar equipment, an underwater camera and -- in the event of a historic discovery -- Mr. Woodman's scuba gear.

"It's the only officially designated national historic site in Canada that nobody knows where it is," notes Mr. Woodman. He says he's fuelled by the dream of "standing on the quarter-deck" of a sunken Franklin ship in his diving suit.

"I think Dave was quite excited when I said, 'Look at this one,' " adds Mr. Nelson.

Mr. Woodman, chastened by previous disappointments, is holding his excitement in check: "I've had lots of gut feelings in the past, and they've all turned out to be wrong."

But fate did smile on Mr. Woodman and Mr. Nelson in a bizarre way last year. They were facing a shortage of funds to continue their search when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center.

"I got stranded on Sept. 11 at Gjoa Haven, so I had some time to kill," recalls Mr. Murray, who had been filming a voyage through the Northwest Passage for an upcoming television documentary. "So I went around and wanted to interview the various people who had been searching for Franklin remains and I ended up going to Prince Rupert to see David, on a whim."

The whim led to a commitment from Mr. Cronin to raise funds for the next phase of the search. "We're excited by the thought of it," says Mr. Murray. "Television is thick with films about searching for shipwrecks, usually with the most tenuous connections to some sort of story related to a few sticks sticking out of the seabed," he adds.

"In this case, you've got an amazing story, you have the possibility of a very intact wreck, and the possibility of records on board -- there's all sorts of interesting potential. But even just to find it in any sort of condition would be amazing, given that they were never seen and there was such a fuss about them at the time."

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