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Front Page

Russia's Claim Under Polar Ice Irks American  
By WILLIAM J. BROAD

Last August, a team of Russian scientists and legislators trekked to the North Pole and plunged through the ice pack into the abyss, descending more than two miles through inky darkness to the bottom of the ocean.

There, explorers planted Russia's flag and, upon surfacing, declared that the feat had strengthened Moscow's claims to nearly half the Arctic seabed. The ensuing global headlines fueled debate over polar territorial claims.

But that wasn't the whole story. The heroes of the moment did not mention that the dive had American origins.

Alfred S. McLaren, 75, a retired Navy submariner, would like to set the record straight and, as he puts it, "acquaint the Kremlin with the realities" of recent history and international law.

A major figure of Arctic science and exploration who spent nearly a year in operations under the ice, Dr. McLaren says he developed the polar dive plan and repeatedly shared his labors with the Russians and their partners — a claim he supports with numerous e-mail messages and documents.

The Russians, for their part, acknowledge that Dr. McLaren played a central role in the dive's origins. But they say he took no part in substantive planning and logistics.

Dr. McLaren's plan drew on federal polar data and recommended specific sensors and methods to ensure a safe return.

"I wrote the procedures for the dive," he said in an interview. The Russians, he added, "went for the territorial claim."

Don Walsh, a pioneer of deep ocean diving who worked on the Arctic plan with the Russians, backed the account.

The divers, Dr. Walsh wrote in an e-mail message, "did not develop the original idea, the operational plan and they did not pay for it" because wealthy tourists picked up the bill.

"I am sure," he added, "that this example of how to steal your way to fame will become a legend in the history of exploration."

The Russians say they took little or nothing. "Talk is cheap," Anatoly M. Sagalevitch, the

expedition's chief scientist, said in an interview. "But real operation, this is different."

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has made the most of the divers' feat, personally greeting them upon their return and announcing last month that Dr. Sagalevitch and two other team members would be named Heroes of Russian Federation, the nation's highest honorary title.

Dr. McLaren first got to know the Russians through the lens of a periscope. As a submariner, he conducted more than 20 secret missions during the cold war, mainly in nuclear attack submarines.

Three of his voyages ventured beneath the Northern ice pack, gauging its thickness, probing the dark waters below and bouncing sound waves off the bottom to map the craggy seabed. An important goal was to find safe submarine routes near the Soviet Union in case the cold war turned hot. Over all, he spent nearly a year under the polar ice.

In 1972, he won the Distinguished Service Medal, the military's highest peacetime award.

He left the Navy in 1981 and earned a Ph.D. in polar studies from the University of Colorado in 1986.

After the cold war, Dr. McLaren began working with his former enemies, lecturing aboard Russian icebreakers that carried tourists to the North Pole. He did so repeatedly while president of the Explorers Club, a post he held from 1996 to 2000.

The idea for a polar dive arose in early 1997 when a television journalist, Jack McDonald, had dinner with Dr. McLaren and asked if anyone had ever gone to the bottom. The two decided to explore the possibility.

"We spent a lot time on it," recalled Mr. McDonald, who planned to make a documentary.

The team envisioned going down in a submersible — a small craft with a super-strong personnel sphere that typically carries a pilot and two observers. Tiny portholes designed to withstand crushing pressures let the occupants peer out. A dive is typically an all-day affair, requiring hours to go down to the bottom and back up.

Later in 1997, Dr. McLaren attracted the interest of Mike McDowell, an adventure tour operator who organized the polar voyages. The next year, Dr. Sagalevitch, who runs Moscow's twin Mir submersibles, came aboard.

In 1999, the three men began diving in the Mirs to visit the deteriorating remains of the Titanic and the Bismarck. The dives were seen as practice runs for the polar plunge. All told, Dr. McLaren dived in the cramped submersibles five times.

In 2001, Dr. McLaren wrote a polar dive plan for Dr. Sagalevitch in Moscow. Drawing on decades of federal polar data, it gave information like mean ice thickness (about 8 feet), water depth (about 2.6 miles) and salinity near the bottom (34 to 36 parts per thousand).

“Jagged underwater projections and spurs,” the plan warned, could endanger a submersible.

The document, seven pages long, paid special attention to making sure the returning Mirs could find the hole through which they had entered the Arctic Ocean and not become trapped beneath the thick surface ice. It called for special upward-looking sensors.

“Thank you for your recommendations,” Dr. Sagalevitch wrote in an e-mail message after receiving the plan.

For several years the Explorers Club, based in New York City, marketed North Pole dives to adventure tourists.

A cabin would be \$16,000, a suite \$21,000. The actual dive beneath the pole: \$50,000 extra. Despite a flurry of interest, the spectacle did not materialize.

By 2005, the plan collapsed. In a bitter e-mail exchange, Dr. McLaren accused Mr. McDowell, the tour operator, of abruptly removing him from the polar dive roster and evading commitments that would have aided fund-raising.

“You did not bother to answer any of my messages,” he wrote.

Mr. McDowell in turn accused Dr. McLaren of failing to recruit dive sponsors and defended his removal as necessary because of rising costs and the need to attract more paying tourists.

“I do all the work and take all the financial risk,” he added.

Dr. Walsh, who worked with both men, laid the rupture to personality conflicts. “We were top-heavy in chiefs and needed more braves,” he said.

Another factor was the Kremlin, which was seeking new displays of geopolitical muscle. It seized control of the project. On Aug. 2, 2007, Dr. Sagalevitch and Mr. McDowell descended to the bottom, taking along two Moscow legislators.

The polar dive was part publicity stunt and part symbolic move to enhance the Kremlin’s disputed claim to nearly half the Arctic seabed. It made global headlines, with much comment on Moscow’s new swagger. Time magazine’s cover article asked, “Who Owns the Arctic?”

After the dive, many nations sharpened their claims. Denmark mapped icy regions. The

United States mounted a polar expedition. And Canada unveiled plans for an Arctic military base.

“The first principle of Arctic sovereignty,” Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada said in a much quoted statement, “is use it or lose it.”

Dr. McLaren grew livid as the dive’s impact spread. He now ridicules the Russian territorial claims as not only empty but duplicitous because of his unacknowledged contribution. He said, however, that he harbored no hard feelings against the Mir team.

For his part, Mr. McDowell vigorously denied any fault and said any aid from Dr. McLaren was immaterial to the Russian feat.

“What he’s saying is complete rubbish,” Mr. McDowell said from Australia, where he lives. “He’s all bent out of shape because he wanted to be first to the pole. Well, it just didn’t work out that way.”

Dr. Sagalevitch confirmed that the original idea for the polar dive arose with the Westerners but said that he and his team had developed it exclusive of Dr. McLaren’s advice since 1998.

“Fred was so far from any dive plan,” he said. “He doesn’t understand the technical side of the operation. He doesn’t understand the submersible.”

If there are fireworks, they may erupt March 15, when the Explorers Club will hold its annual dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria. All the dive planners and doers are to be there, with Dr. Sagalevitch getting an award for excellence in ocean science.

It will be a bittersweet moment for Dr. McLaren, who helped Dr. Sagalevitch and Mr. McDowell become members when he was club president.

At the dinner, the Russian dive team is to complete a triumph: returning a club flag that it carried to the polar seabed.

Dr. McLaren said he planned to go to the dinner but might excuse himself from the room when the flag was returned.

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Association of Russian Polar Explorers, via Associated Press  
A Russian flag stood planted into the seabed below the North Pole last Aug. 2, after a team of scientists and legislators descended below the icecap. Russia claims nearly half the Arctic seabed.



Stephen Collector for The New York Times

Alfred S. McLaren, a retired Navy submariner, says he developed the expedition plan.