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Adventurer plots arctic rendezvous with sunken sub

BY NICHOLAS SPANGLER

Stewart B. Nelson, Deerwood Apartments resident and world adventurer, dropped a note about his next voyage:

Next month I will go to the bottom of the fjord at Bergen, Norway (1,138 feet below the surface) on the two-person JAGO submersible to explore the historic Arctic submarine Nautilus, scuttled in 1931. . . . It is a worthwhile story idea and I hope to hear from you.

A visit was arranged, and Nelson entertained in his study. The room was dominated by a map of the world's oceans and tall bookshelves stuffed tight with files on his various interests, which are obscure. One shelf held Estonia, Sharks, Atlantis and Camels in America.

Nelson is a thickset man, 68 and utterly bald. He has done oceanographic work for the U.S. Navy and lectured on cruise ships and in university halls, but has no apparent means of support now.

His expedition was not, he explained, to the Nautilus that actually surfaced from under the ice at the North Pole in 1958.

No, his Nautilus never came close to subnavigating the polar cap and almost killed its entire crew. Nelson's own writings, and the journals of Arthur Blumberg, the vessel's chief electrician, provide ample evidence of this point.

The man behind the ill-fated voyage was Sir Hubert Wilkins, 13th child of an Australian sheep farmer, an alleged gun-runner who became a fighter pilot in World War I, later a professional polar explorer knighted by England's queen, later still an employee of the Office of Strategic Services, predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Convinced that a submarine voyage to the pole would offer unparalleled scientific opportunities -- to say nothing of the sheer glory of accomplishing what Peary and Amundsen never even attempted -- Wilkins plotted a route from the United States to Norway, and from there north to the pole.

Wilkins leased a retired U.S. Navy O-class sub for \$1 a year, with the understanding that he would scuttle it or return it stateside after the mission.

A superstitious man, he turned down an O-13 and chose instead a 175-foot O-12 that had been rusting for years.

He befriended millionaire sponsors, including newspaper baron William Hearst, who secured exclusive print rights in exchange for a \$25,000 donation, and began an expensive overhaul.

He insulated The Nautilus with cork and outfitted it with an icebreaking bowsprit, a collapsible periscope and iron sledge runners that would, he hoped, allow his vessel to

glide along the underside of the icecap. And -- because the icecap was hundreds of miles across, and his vessel's primitive batteries powered only 50 miles' travel before they needed recharging from the diesel engines -- he invested in three ice drills. Two would vent the engines, and one would make an escape tunnel, should the vessel get stuck.

ROUGH BEGINNING

A young crewman fell off and drowned before the vessel left her shipyard. When she finally sailed out of the Brooklyn Navy Yard -- two months behind schedule -- she hit heavy weather in the Atlantic, lost both engines and had to be towed across by a training ship from the U.S. Naval Academy.

Ice formed inside the hull as The Nautilus entered the polar zone. On warmer days the ice melted, dousing the men and equipment inside. She developed a permanent list. The expensive ice drills would not work in the cold.

Maybe it was not, after all that, such a disappointment when The Nautilus finally reached the polar ice cap and it was discovered that the dive rudder was broken. Without it, Wilkins' plan to navigate a course to the pole was physically impossible.

Nelson suspects the crew sabotaged their own vessel. 'They probably realized `Hey, this is ridiculous. How did we get talked into this?' And you know, it's probably a good thing. Because they would have died. I have no question about that.'

A GLIMPSE

In the end, The Nautilus got at least a glimpse under the ice, by filling its forward ballast tanks and nudging its way underneath. Pictures were taken, as well as some samples of mud in the interest of science.

So the voyage was, if not a success, not a total failure.

Wilkins chose, wisely, to scuttle his vessel rather than attempt another transatlantic crossing. His reputation was sufficiently intact to embark on four more polar expeditions.

The Nautilus was forgotten, over time.

Which brings us back to Nelson and his upcoming fjord dive. Aren't some things better left in the dustbin of history?

"Well, they didn't make it," Nelson said. ``But nobody had done it before. Nobody had even tried. They didn't know what it would be like. That's boldness, daring . . . they should not be forgotten."

BOTTOM OF THE FJORD

He raised \$150,000 to pay for the submersible that will take him to the bottom of the Bergen fjord during the week of Sept. 12.

It has powerful halogen lights and a camera. He hopes to make a documentary with his footage, or at least show it to some museums, proof that the wreck is there and should be recognized as a historic site.

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