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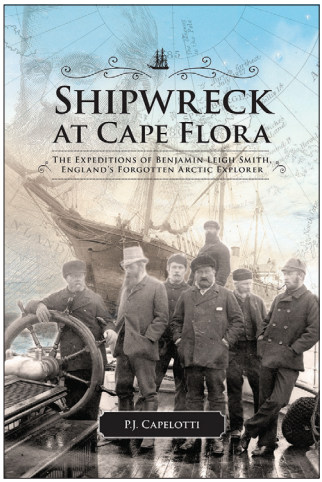

SHIPWRECK AT CAPE FLORA:
THE EXPEDITIONS OF BENJAMIN LEIGH SMITH, ENGLAND'S FORGOTTEN ARCTIC EXPLORER
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8

BENJAMIN LEIGH SMITH AND HIS TIMES, 1883–1913

A telegram from Leigh Smith in Aberdeen arrived in East Sussex on August 21st and the news of his safe return spread instantly around his family. His niece Milicent in her diary writes: "What do you think? We got a telegram from Uncle Ben! He is all right, he says, I think, 'Got back all safe but *Eira* is awa' or something like that."[1] For what it's worth, Milicent also received a different story about the doomed Tibs than the one relayed by Robertson. "When they started from Flora Cottage they were obliged to drown the cat because the sailors said they would never get home (I suppose) safely if they had a cat on board."[2]

However Tibs met his end, that story never made the papers. *The Times* welcomed Leigh Smith and his crew back heartily, since there "had been much reason to fear that the crew of the *Eira* had met with the fate as overtook most of the crew of the unfortunate *Jeannette*.… Mr. Smith's theory of Arctic navigation was pretty well known to the experts in such matters. It is that an explorer should cruise summer by summer in the Arctic seas ready to seize any opening which the break-up of the ice, the winds, or the currents offer to carry him northwards. This was the maxim on which he had conducted his previous voyages; but it was naturally feared that he might have pushed his theory too far."[3]

One gets a sense of the anxiety felt over Leigh Smith's fate – and the joy at his return – from a letter written by Isabella Blythe, the partner of Leigh Smith's sister Nannie. She records the response of David Gray as he witnessed Allen Young's *Hope* bypassing Peterhead on its return from Novaya Zemlya: "Capt Grey [*sic*] saw the *Hope* steaming past & put off in a steam tug after her & the moment he was near enough he shouted 'What

news of the *Eira*?' Sir Allen Young 'Gone to the bottom' – Capt Grey 'And the Crew?' Sir A Young 'Here on board' Capt Grey 'and Mr Smith?' Sir A Young 'Safe on board' Capt Grey 'Stop, let me up; I *must* see him I *must* hear his voice.…'"[4]

Leigh Smith's geographic successes, signified by his gold medal from the RSG in 1881 and magnified in the public mind by his miraculous emergence from a Franz Josef Land winter in 1882, were now solidified. It was the irony of his life that he gained the two things he most despised – fame and recognition – at the very moment he lost the magnificent *Eira*, which was perhaps the one thing he had always desired more than any other in his life.

So, too, within the bedrock stratigraphy of Victorian England, his honors would only go so far. Whether from his own illegitimacy or his family's long history of dissent or his sibling's problematic natures, somewhere in his mind Leigh Smith had to know that any and all of these would forever keep him at arm's length from royal Britain. Unlike his world-famous cousin Florence Nightingale, whose nursing work in the Crimea earned her the first Royal Red Cross from Queen Victoria, the exploration of Svalbard and Franz Josef Land would not lead to any royal honors. There would never be a Sir Benjamin Leigh Smith.

Even as he shied away from public acclaim, there is still the conundrum of Leigh Smith's domineering of his family. His triumphant return and justly earned fame did nothing to loosen his iron control over them. With Amy banished from his affections as a result of her marriage to Norman Moore ("I am very glad I am not your father," he had venomously written to his one-time favorite after her engagement[5]), Leigh Smith returned to his estate at Glottenham and the chance to reward his other nieces for their affections. Fourteen-year-old Milicent writes in her diary that just a month after his arrival from Aberdeen, Leigh Smith was back in Scotland, exploring Loch Lomond with his new favorite niece, her sister Mabel.

Both girls would soon come under his direct supervision. The General, who had provided so many details of Leigh Smith's life across two decades, passed away at the age of eighty-one on November 30th, 1882. Following Bella's death eight years earlier, the three surviving children, Mabel, Milicent, and Harry, were now orphaned and Leigh Smith took

Fig. 46. The estate at Glottenham, ca. 1890 (courtesy Hancox Archive).

them under his care. Less than two years later, Harry died at the age of twenty-two while returning from a journey to India.

The succession of funerals, the necessity of managing the estates and seeing to the upbringing of his nieces, to say nothing of the loss of the *Eira*, all provide indications as to why Leigh Smith did not immediately return to the Arctic. Still, as a public figure, he was expected to contribute in other ways. *The Times*, in an extended editorial on the upcoming International Polar Year, all but demanded that Leigh Smith sit down and write an account of his expeditions, "since the opinions of such a competent authority cannot fail to be of permanent importance. His last two voyages materially strengthen the arguments which have already been brought forward in favour of Franz Josef Land as a basis for further exploration towards the Pole.…"[6]

No such account was ever forthcoming from the halls at Glottenham. The closest *The Times* would get to an exposition on Franz Josef Land by Leigh Smith came two weeks later, when Dr. Neale read a paper on the 1881–82 expedition at the February 12th meeting of the RGS. The hall at the University of London "was filled and several distinguished Arctic explorers," including McClintock and Nares.[7]

The man of the hour himself, survivor and leader of one of the great escapes in the history of polar exploration, stayed at home with a cold. *The Times* again implored Leigh Smith to go north in an editorial in April, with the same result.[8] Leigh Smith did take part in an International Fisheries Conference presided over by the Prince of Wales in London in June, 1883, and was made an honorary fellow of his old college at Cambridge, but otherwise remained out of public view.[9]

At the end of 1886, Milicent, now 18, began to study for her college examinations. Her tutor had an attractive younger sister by the name of Charlotte Sellers, who was also 18, a woman without means of her own and a strict Roman Catholic into the bargain. Leigh Smith, forty years her senior and now gray and balding, took notice. "To everyone's amazement and most people's dismay," as Charlotte Moore writes, Leigh Smith proposed the following June and was accepted.[10]

Charlotte Moore also uncovered, tucked away in one of Norman Moore's many scrapbooks, a series of bitter quatrains composed on the occasion of The Explorer's engagement to her namesake Aunt Charlotte:

"Benjamin Leigh Smith"

My name is Ben and I can hate
In love I'm no adept
To die of want once seemed my fate
Unmoved mid bears I slept.

I lived upon the wild beasts' blood
Tenderer were they than I
And miles around the frozen flood
Wearied my dauntless eye.

I neither cared for God nor man
For sister nor for friend
Yet love such as I have I can
Give you till my life's end.

Though years have passed since I was young
I feel my frame is tough
And when my passing-bell is rung
I'll leave you wealth enough.

I'm grey & old & have no heart
But offer you my hand
And gold & store [or stone?] I can impart
And well with men I stand.

I have shown constancy in hate
And that I can in love
If you will trust me with your fate
You may yet live to prove.[11]

One wonders if these lines returned to Norman Moore when, two decades later, he was called in to judge Leigh Smith's competency. Whatever the truth of the poetry, two sons followed the marriage, Benjamin Valentine in 1888 and Philip in 1892, the latter in the year that Leigh Smith turned sixty-four. The family heard whispers that The Explorer was looking into a new vessel and another trip to the north in 1890, but any thoughts of a return to active exploration were now the daydreams of a new father living inside the body of an old man.

By the 1890s, Leigh Smith's Arctic explorations were confined to commenting on the expeditions of others. When a young British artist, photographer, and traveler named Frederick W. W. Howell submitted a manuscript for RGS's *Proceedings* on his travels in Iceland, it was rejected for publication after a review by "B. Leigh Smith, Esq.," who found "little that is new in the paper."[12] Now a gray eminence, Leigh Smith could cast the same critical eye on the neophyte expeditions of others that twenty years earlier had been thrown his way.

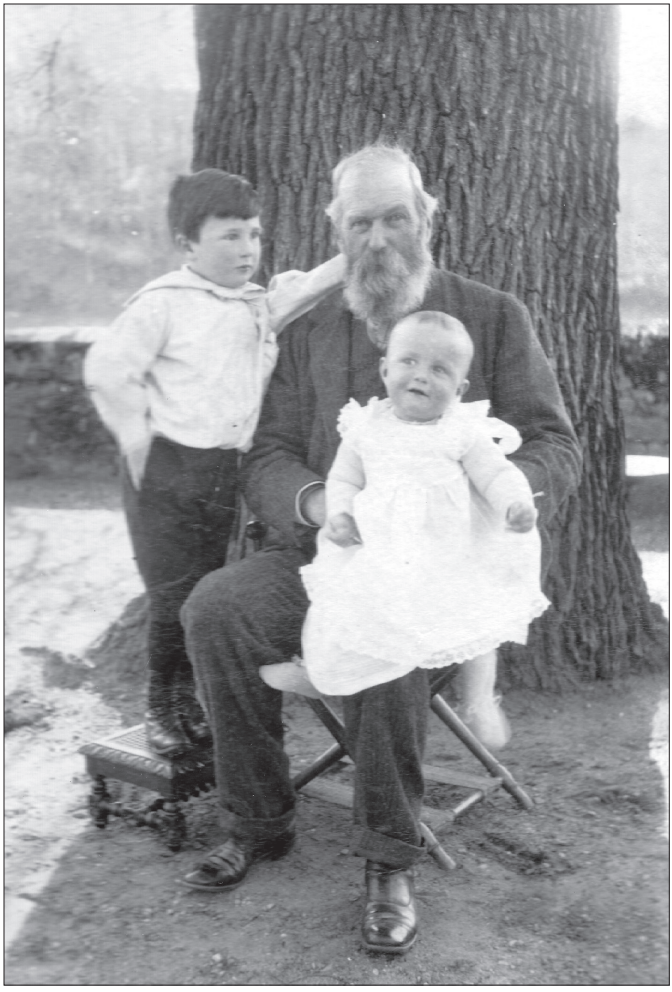

Fig. 47. Leigh Smith and his young sons at Scalands, early 1890s (courtesy Hancox Archive).

Fig. 48. Charlotte Leigh Smith at Scalands, 1898 (courtesy Hancox Archive).

Fig. 49. A hunting party at Scalands (Charlotte sitting in front of Leigh Smith; Richard Potter on right) (courtesy Hancox Archive).

Credland has noted that Leigh Smith took "particular pride" in the temperature recordings he made in the waters around Svalbard, while Jones claims that it "was one of his regrets that fuller credit was never given to this oceanographical work."[13] Indeed, by the time his place had been secured in the first comprehensive history of oceanographic research, published in 1912, Leigh Smith was in an advanced state of dementia and just months from his death just after New Year's Eve 1913.[14]

On this first Arctic cruise, Leigh Smith had combined a bit of daring with the good fortune of beginner's luck. Ice conditions north and east of Svalbard, which looked so forbidding in August, 1871, suddenly cleared in early September. It was during this bold flying expedition eastwards during the first two weeks of September when most of the geographic features associated with Leigh Smith's Svalbard expeditions would be scouted. Eventually, this quick foray would lead to thirty-three new place names in northeast Svalbard, including twenty-two new islands. It was also in this moment when he would reach his personal farthest north, on a quick dash north of Rossøya.

August Petermann, who did not lightly pass out exclamation points in his *Mittheilungen*, had thrilled to Leigh Smith's collection of new islands and his expansion of the limits of Svalbard. "After the observations and measurements of the Smyth-Ulve' [*sic*] expedition, we now know that northeast Spitzbergen has a width of 10.5 degrees of longitude instead of, as on the best past maps, only 7.5!"[15] Leigh Smith had shown as well that new islands could be found north of this newly expanded Svalbard, so Giles Land might still be discovered somewhere east-northeast of Nordaustlandet. Equally, Leigh Smith's observations of open water east of Nordaustlandet and north of Rossøya, along with his ocean temperature recordings with their suggestion of potential inversion layers of warmer polar waters, were seized upon to support Petermann's notion that an open polar sea might surround the North Pole.

The turning of the northeast limits of Svalbard at what became Kapp Leigh Smith, along with the location and definition of Brochøya, Foynøya, Schübelerøya, and thirty other new Svalbard place names, these together would have made the expedition a success. When combined with the geographic work at Tumlingodden on Wilhelmøya, the bathymetric survey at Vestfjorden, and Leigh Smith's pioneering deep-sea temperature

recordings and scientific approach to solving the ice and ocean current dilemmas presented by Svalbard's unique geography and location, the 1871 *Sampson* cruise comprised a considerable triumph by a neophyte explorer. Leigh Smith himself would not enjoy such success again until his 1880 expedition to Franz Josef Land.

While Leigh Smith kept a journal of his 1871 voyage to Svalbard, and asked others to keep journals of his other voyages, to the end he avoided any publication of his own. When he left such work to others, the results were uneven at best. Markham's accounts of the Franz Josef Land voyages are detailed and written with precision, but Wells's account of the 1872 expedition was hastily written for a general audience and offers constant and nonsensical shifts in time and place, randomly tacks on accounts of other expeditions, and mixes the chronology of the 1872 expedition with little regard for continuity. His 350-page volume agrees roughly with the chronology contained in Chermside's three-page summary of the expedition, but events and places are frequently confused. This is perhaps not surprising given the state of knowledge of the geography of Svalbard in the nineteenth century, but it did Leigh Smith no favors.

For his 1873 campaign in Svalbard, Leigh Smith had had the discerning eye to choose the highly intelligent, well-adapted and adaptable twenty-three-year-old military officer Herbert C. Chermside as his expedition chronicler. The 1873 expedition marked the conclusion of Leigh Smith's extensive explorations around Svalbard, during which he had gained vast experience with high latitude sailing, ice navigation, deep-ocean scientific research, and the infinitely complex geography and geographic nomenclature of Svalbard. He had added dozens of new names to the gazetteer of the islands, discovered several new islands and delineated the eastern extent of the archipelago. He had come to the rescue of Nordenskiöld's major Swedish expedition and in the process gained a first-hand sense of the requirements for surviving an overwintering in the north. This invaluable knowledge would be put to the test during his own forced overwintering in Franz Josef Land.

Even with the largely unheralded results from his three expeditions to Svalbard and the enduring notoriety of his overwintering and escape from Cape Flora in 1881–82, it was his spectacularly successful reconnaissance of Franz Josef Land in 1880 for which he will be justly famed. In just two

weeks in August, 1880, between the time he sighted and anchored off May Island, to his departure from Gray Bay, Leigh Smith defined the southern coast of Franz Josef Land from Cape Tegetthoff to Cape Lofley. From the point of land the Dutch had named Barents Hook in 1879 to the point where *Eira* was stopped by ice, Leigh Smith charted 110 nautical miles along a previously unknown Arctic coastline. What remained trended off to the northwest, toward the eastern limits of Svalbard, which he had defined in 1871. Leigh Smith had made clear both the western reaches of Franz Josef Land and the eastern extent of Svalbard; what were left were details.

Leigh Smith's nimbleness in adapting his plans to changing conditions was in marked contrast to the overweening government-sponsored expeditions of the era. As Jonathan Karpoff notes, in the nineteenth century, "government expeditions fared poorly. They made fewer major discoveries, introduced fewer technological innovations, were subject to higher rates of scurvy, lost more ships, and had more explorers die."[16]

In this sense, Leigh Smith can be seen to have initiated private oceanographic, biological, and geographic research in polar and sub-Arctic waters, work that would be continued in the twentieth century with, among others, Amundsen's Northwest Passage expedition in *Gjøa*, Albert I of Monaco's early century expeditions to Svalbard in the *Princess Alice*, Alexander Forbes's explorations of the Labrador coast in *Ramah* in the 1930s and even Jacques-Yves Cousteau's Antarctic expedition in *Calypso* in the 1970s. It is easy to imagine Leigh Smith going to the Arctic in the late twentieth century with his vessel carrying a small helicopter and matching submersible. Unlike the similarly equipped modern yachts of the super-rich, however, Leigh Smith would not have sailed without a detailed scientific research program.

Even as his own possibilities to return to the Arctic receded and as a new generation of polar explorers, led by the incomparable Nansen, were successfully exploring the polar mystery, Leigh Smith still clung to the notion of a return to Franz Josef Land, even of being the first to the northern end of the Earth. "I hope we shall have a try at Franz Josef Land, there is much to be done there. From Eira Harbour with a good dog sledge 85° might be reached or as much farther as the land goes. Before talking of going to the Pole, Franz Josef Land should be explored. I don't want

Fig. 50. Professor Julian A. Dowdeswell, PhD, Director of the Scott Polar Research Institute, in his rooms at Jesus College, Leigh Smith's alma mater at Cambridge University. A portrait of Leigh Smith, as painted by J.L. Reilly after a Stephen Pearce portrait, is in the background (courtesy Julian Dowdeswell).

Nansen to attempt this as I think he would do it, and it ought to be done by an Englishman."[17]

Though he was an enthusiastic supporter of other British explorers and adventurers (he advised one that "4000 fur seal skins would pay the cost of a hunting expedition to Antarctica for whales [and] seals"[18]), there is very little in his note about Nansen to suggest that Leigh Smith thought that he shouldn't be the Englishman who stood first at the North Pole, with good reason. Without the national budgets and pressures of pole-seeking and without scores of seemingly expendable sailors, Leigh Smith had nevertheless pioneered a method to collect scientific data by allowing ice and weather conditions to dictate his areas of operations.

There are only two surviving memorials to him.[19] One is a plain cement marker on the exterior of his East Sussex estate at Glottenham. It is

affixed in the exterior wall just above the balcony doors of what may have been his study. It says, simply, *BLS 1890*. Appropriately, given the manner of his demise, Glottenham today is an elder home, a munificently peaceful spot from which to transition from this life to whatever comes next. The other surviving memorial to Leigh Smith is the great storehouse erected at Eira Harbour in Franz Josef Land, a lasting tribute not only to The Explorer but to the men of the Stephen & Forbes yard in Peterhead who built the prefabricated structure and the crew of *Eira* who assembled it at that impossibly remote shoreline in 1880.

By the time of his note about Nansen, whether he recognized it or not, Leigh Smith's moment to seize the polar grail had already passed. Another accident with a cab in 1890 had left him seriously injured once again, even as he was learning his circuitous way as the father of first one, then two small boys. When he regained some of his old form he traveled to Egypt, where he "should have done some excavations but could not get the necessary permit in time."[20]

A British polar expedition under Frederick George Jackson, with Leigh Smith's support, was preparing to use his old overwintering base at Cape Flora on Northbrook Island in Franz Josef Land to launch a new attempt on the North Pole. Nansen's transpolar drift expedition in the *Fram* departed the Norwegian capital of Christiania a year ahead of Jackson.

When Jackson, a man half Leigh Smith's age and an archetype of the new era who required both publicity and money, arrived at Cape Flora, he entered through the frozen door of Leigh Smith's winter hut as an archaeologist might enter a prehistoric tomb in search of icons. He would recover items from Leigh Smith's last expedition as if they were the relics of a lost civilization, which in fact they assuredly were. Jackson would build a series of new structures at Cape Flora and relegate Leigh Smith's stone hut to the status of a shrine to British polar exploration. It stood for more than a century until the treacherous cliff on which it was built collapsed and the hut crumbled into the same polar sea that had claimed *Eira*.

Though he wrote several articles and one very long book about his three-year expedition, Jackson failed to best the progress north made by Leigh Smith twenty years earlier. The greatest result of the Jackson expedition in the public mind was, not the three years of patient and painstaking geographic work in the immensely complex archipelago, but

the spectacular and dramatic meeting with Nansen and his companion Hjalmar Johansen as the Norwegians made their miraculous way south through the islands in the spring of 1896. Nansen had not reached the pole but, as Leigh Smith had feared, he got closer than anyone before him.

As these energetic expressions of nationalism and scientific exploration gave way to a catastrophically noisy half-century of polar celebrity that followed the conclusion of Nansen's transpolar drift, Benjamin Leigh Smith was managing his fortune and trailing two energetic sons around his estates in the rolling green pastures and orchards of the East Sussex countryside. His marriage inevitably became strained and distant, and given Leigh Smith's preferences in women this was probably not the result of his wife being too young but rather her growing too old to interest him anymore.

He eventually reconciled with Amy, just before her death from tuberculosis at the age of forty-two. She had been very sick for some time and her frailty finally softened him. He would write to her with light questions about how to manage a household or to offer an unminced comment on the opposition to the new station on the local railway to London. The "natives do not seem to care about having a good station or to understand how to lay it out. They are stupid, stupid, stupid as Barbara used to say."[21]

His form of geographic exploration, discrete, patient, even gentile, would have precious few equivalents in the twentieth century. The new century was seized by those explorers who could combine dramatic geographic goals with clever mass communications strategies, and it very soon became difficult to discern which was the more important. A boisterous American journalist named Walter Wellman loudly and proudly attempted to reach the pole in 1894 along the route north of Svalbard that Leigh Smith had charted in 1871. Like Frederick Jackson, Wellman would not get nearly as far north or east as had the nimble Leigh Smith, but he would generate considerably more publicity.

A Swedish engineer and dreamer named Salomon August Andrée launched a balloon towards the pole from Svalbard in 1897, in an elegant and, perhaps, quasi-suicidal attempt to evade the requisite punishment of an over-ice sledging expedition. When his frozen body and those of his two companions were finally discovered alongside the glacial dome of Kvitøya in the late summer of 1930, complete with intact diaries and

Fig. 51. Summer, 2009. Polar historian Huw Lewis-Jones with Leigh Smith descendant and novelist Charlotte Moore, near the whale jaw brought from the Arctic to Scalands by the explorer (photo by the author).

undeveloped photographic film, the resulting media spectacle was immediate, enervated, international, and profound, as had been the initial launch thirty-three years earlier. Andrée generated more publicity just in the month of July, 1896, when he could not even get his balloon off the ground amid contrary winds blowing against the north shore of Danskøya, than Benjamin Leigh Smith did in twelve years of determined and creative polar exploration.

Walter Wellman ventured into the second of Leigh Smith's Arctic patches in 1898, when he removed one of Jackson's buildings at Cape Flora and relocated it to an open expanse of shoreline at Cape Tegetthoff on Hall Island. There Wellman created his own polar base camp for an expedition that was remarkable for its manifest ineffectiveness. His published chart of the expedition shows one large island and three small islets he discovered, along with four other islands he thought he had discovered that turned out later to be mirages. It was the mistake of a man beholden to publicity, one who had not attained the North Pole that he had promised his financial patrons, and who now had to distract them with something other than the polar grail, in the hopes they would write him another check.

Benjamin Leigh Smith, who wrote all his own checks, never experienced the need or the pressure to produce such imaginary results, and certainly not data he could falsify while still in the field with just a little extra effort. Yet, within a decade, while attempting unsuccessfully to fly a dirigible to the North Pole, it was Walter Wellman who would be sending wireless messages from the Arctic to the president of the United States. It was a triumph of public style over scientific substance at the start of a long century of such victories. But, for all his publicity, Wellman would not get any further north in his airship than he had in a plain Norwegian steamer in 1894, nor match Leigh Smith's farthest north in the small Norwegian schooner *Sampson* in 1871.

Such instant communications technologies like wireless, and the balloons and dirigibles, aeroplanes and submarines that carried them, all would come to dominate polar exploration. They would become as famous if not more so than the explorers who employed them. And the idea that polar experiences could be written in the form of cliff-hanging episodes to be fed to newspapers to be consumed in turn by a rapacious public is

one that would have appalled Leigh Smith. It is impossible to imagine Leigh Smith representing himself as a polar hero by donning sealskins and standing amid stuffed Arctic fauna for a posed photograph in a London studio.

Benjamin Leigh Smith approached polar exploration from the perspective of a carefully opportunistic gatherer of data, not a seeker after a predetermined grail. He would cruise about in search of a momentary opening in the ice of the polar seas, one that might lead to a new station from which to take deep-ocean soundings. If a crack in the polar pack suddenly yawned open and offered a gateway to the pole, well that was just the good luck one enjoyed as a result of careful planning combined with a lot of patience.

It was more likely that he would be content to step ashore on a stretch of rocky Arctic beach never before seen by human eyes. He would pause, and then perhaps name the place after any one of dozens of esteemed scientific explorers or favored relations. He would arrange for photographs to be taken, engage in some hunting, and then share stories over a well-cooked meal of a guillemot enjoyed with a glass of wine. Or a doughboy drowned in butter and washed down with half a gill of rum. And even in shipwreck, he and his colleagues and his crew would all return home alive.