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Should we be tipping dive crews and instructors?

Update on Erebus

How did the 2018 marine archaeology research season pan out for one of the world's most elusive shipwrecks?

WORDS BY JOSEPH FREY



Parks Canada's Underwater Archeology Team getting ready for a dive on the wreck of HMS Erebus



A community event in Gjoa Haven, Nunavut



Parks Canada Underwater Archeology Team diver on the wreck



Showcasing artefacts to the mayor and elders from Cambridge Bay, Nunavut

Just as the ice-clogged waters of the North West Passage doomed Sir John Franklin's 1845 British Arctic Expedition, this past summer it played havoc with both commercial shipping and the Parks Canada Erebus 2018 marine archaeology expedition.

I was fortunate enough to have been part of the Parks Canada-led 2014 expedition that discovered the wreck of Franklin's flagship, HMS Erebus, and I was looking forward to retracing the route taken by Franklin's ill-fated expedition to the Erebus site aboard Adventure Canada's *Ocean Endeavour* in 2018.

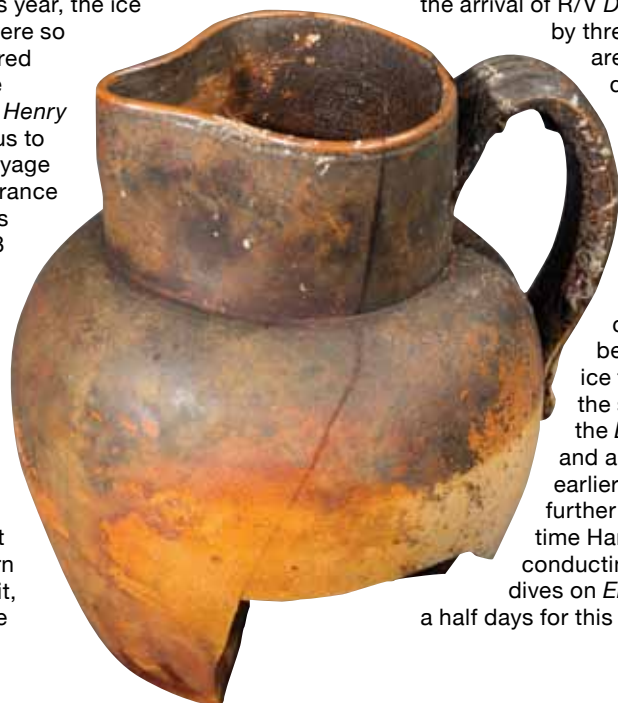
Inauspicious start

Departing from the stunning fiord of Kangerlussuaq, Greenland, we cruised north to iceberg filled Disko Bay, where we passed the Whalefish Islands. It's here that the crews of HMS Erebus and HMS Terror took on final supplies and sent letters back to Great Britain for the last time. Knowing what happened to the crews left a haunting feeling as we sailed past

these islands.

Steaming across Baffin Bay into Lancaster Sound, ice diverted us into Prince Regent Inlet instead of the planned Peel Sound and Franklin Strait route, and we were forced to head for Bellot Strait, our route during the 2014 expedition. As throughout the entire North West Passage this year, the ice conditions here were so bad that we required the support of the icebreaker CCGS *Henry Larson* to escort us to for most of our voyage to the eastern entrance of Bellot Strait. It's here that our 2018 cruise to the Erebus site came to an end; the ice conditions in Bellot Strait were so severe that only three vessels made it through this year, and an Argentinean yacht sank at the eastern end of Bellot Strait, crushed by ice the

Above: RV *David Thompson* in front of Yahtse Glacier in Icy Bay. Below: jug recovered from HMS Erebus



day before we arrived in the area. To our west, the Parks Canada R/V *David Thompson* encountered heavy ice on its way to the Erebus site to deliver its team of marine archaeologists led by Ryan Harris. In fact, persistent ice was so heavy along the north Alaskan and Yukon coasts that it delayed the arrival of R/V *David Thompson* by three weeks, in an area where the dive season is only six. And, because the ice never fully cleared in Peel Sound and Bellot Strait and R/V *David Thompson* could not risk being trapped by ice for the winter, the ship departed the Erebus site one and a half weeks earlier than planned, further reducing the time Harris's team spent conducting scientific dives on Erebus to one and a half days for this field season.

Dive conditions

Later, when both Ryan and I had returned from the Canadian Arctic, I had the opportunity to interview him about the dive conditions on Erebus and what they've seen so far. "We've been fairly cautious; we observed in 2015 that sections of the upper deck that were still intact could heave up and down with the sea swell. So we have always been a bit concerned about putting divers on scuba inside the wreck given the potential risk of collapse," said Ryan. "Diving with umbilicals, one of our immediate intentions is to explore deeper down into the hidden recesses, the bowels of the ship, which will be extremely interesting. There is easy access down the forward hatchway into the holds. There are large areas within the ship that we have not yet laid eyes upon, including the engine room."

"The farther down you go into the Erebus the deck, beams get more robust, the structures preserve more of their integrity, and are more stable compared to the upper deck. The main deck in particular has gigantic deck beams, which were conceived to withstand the



tremendous crushing force of the ice on the sides of the ship. The main deck is quite intact. As we work our way down deeper into the ship, it is exciting to contemplate the sort of things and materials that we expect to encounter."

While scientific dive time on Erebus was only 1.5 days this field season, a number of archaeological and operational infrastructural objectives were met, including the deployment of two 4,600 lbs (2,100 kg) mooring anchors on the north side of Erebus that will permit a

As we work our way down deeper into the ship it is exciting to contemplate the sort of things we expect to encounter

Above: After hundreds of years underwater, this piece was recovered, recorded, and photographed and is now being studied

dive support barge to moor over the excavation site. The Parks Canada team also managed to survey a sheltered navigation corridor, which will improve their ability to tow the support barge at the beginning and end of each field season between the Erebus site and Gjoa Haven. This was also the first season that the Inuit guardian program, which provides security observers by the Erebus and Terror sites, was in full swing. Overall, many concepts for future marine archaeological field seasons were proven and anticipation of future achievements is high. []

Mystery Unravelled

Joseph Frey talks to our favourite Python...

At the end of your book you make reference for your desire to scuba dive on *Erebus*. Do you dive?

I do, yes. I am not hugely experienced but I learned to dive on one of my trips around the world, in the Philippines. I love diving and I wouldn't make a fool of myself. Although I would be worried about putting my foot in the wrong place on *Erebus* and destroying 170 years of history.

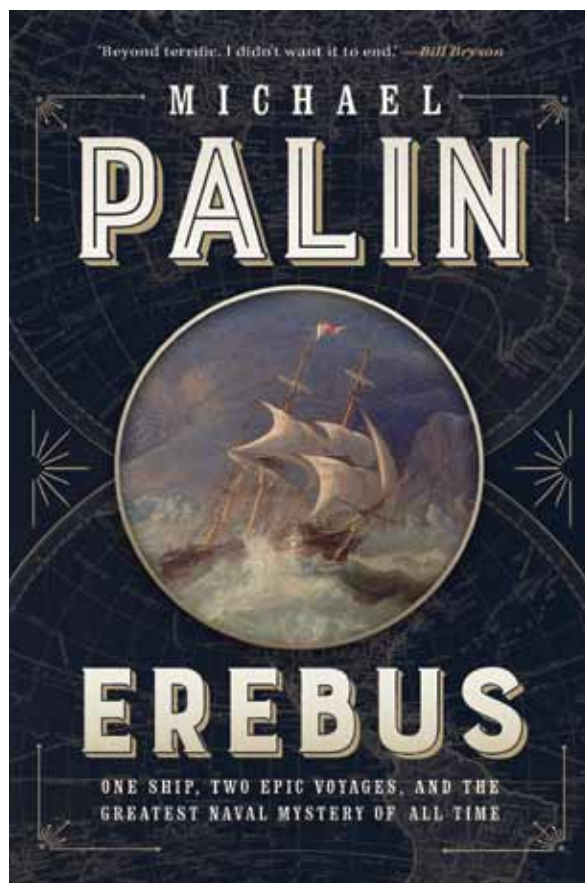
What sparked your interest in writing a book about *Erebus*?

I was doing some research on Joseph Hooker, the great botanist of the Victorian period, and I found out that he had signed on as an assistant surgeon, at the age of 22, on the ship called HMS *Erebus* which I knew nothing about. I was just amazed, the more I read it the more fascinated I became by the fact that *Erebus* had travelled so far in such difficult waters, just under sail, and had achieved so much. The first to identify and confirm that there was an Antarctic continent, that in itself was a huge achievement. And then to discover

the ice wall which later is named the Ross Ice Shelf, in addition to carrying out scientific studies in magnetism, oceanography, botany, and ornithology. It also discovered the volcanoes on Ross Island and charted Antarctic coastline. So the more I read, the more I thought that this is a story that I don't know and I'm British and it's a British ship, it's not part of the history that I've ever learnt. And then to find that she was chosen to be the flagship of the Franklin expedition, which was the complete opposite to a success, it was a total disaster. I thought that there is a story here, there is a narrative, the ship itself is the story. And then I decided to go ahead and write this book when I heard that *Erebus* had been discovered in September 2014, as I thought that the ship is still there, it can still be touched if you are lucky.

One of the things that I found interesting in your book is how you point out the differences in which the officers and crew saw the two polar expeditions through their letters.

Well, the officer's letters that I have seen are official as they are to be read by the Admiralty afterwards. They follow a formal path describing what they have seen, what is going on, and what the weather is. The letters written by the crew, there are fewer of them for a start, and they much less well written as these are people without much education, but what you draw from them is much more detail and much more unguarded statements as to what lies ahead. There is a letter from Stromness which I quote when they are heading off for Greenland



Above: Palin's new bestseller.

Below: Joseph Frey and Michael Palin. Joe is Chair of the Fellows Committee for the Royal Canadian Geographical Society (and DIVER contributor); Michael is an RCGS Gold Medal recipient and legendary Monthly Python member

and the officers are all saying that we are all fine and we will see you in Hawaii in a year's time. And there is one letter from a carpenter on HMS *Terror* to his wife that states this is a dangerous voyage and we may not make it, take care of our children. It is a very moving letter, it shows that the crew really had the instinct to what was going on. The crew show doubts and fears which the officers – as leaders – try not to show because that is their position; they are in control, they are the ones in charge of it; it's got to be seen as going well.

What sets your book on *Erebus* apart from the others?

I don't think that anybody has ever put the two voyages together. They have either written about the Antarctic, and there's not much written about the Antarctic, or they've written about the Franklin expedition. I've put it all together, including a third voyage because *Erebus* actually did a tour of the Mediterranean as a warship during the 1830s. I've managed to put an awful lot of information about explorations into one subject, which is the ship, so you get your money's worth! []

Erebus: One Ship, Two Epic Voyages, and the Greatest Naval Mystery of All Time

ISBN: 0735274274
Available now from
Random House.



Photo courtesy: Joseph Frey