



## From the Annals of the World History

### Roald Amundsen

-- 16 July 1872 - 18 June 1928



Roald Amundsen was born on July 16, 1872 in Borge, Norway. He was the first explorer to reach the South Pole. He was the first to take a ship voyage through the Northwest Passage. He was also one of the first to cross the Arctic by air. In 1897 Roald sailed on the Belgica, a Belgian expedition that was the first to be in the Antarctic during the winter. In 1903 he was the first to sail through the Northwest Passage and around the northern Canadian coast. The journey ended at Herschel Island in the Yukon in 1905.

Amundsen wanted to be the first man to go to the North Pole. However, American Robert Peary got there first in 1909. When Amundsen found out that he could not be first, he decided to be the first man to reach the South Pole. He left Norway in June, 1910. He set up his base sixty miles closer to the Pole than explorer Robert Falcon Scott, who was also trying to be the first to reach the South Pole. Amundsen, with 4 companions, 52 dogs, and 4 sledges, set out on October 19, 1911. They reached the South Pole on December 14, 1911, before Scott and his team.

In 1926 Amundsen went on a flight with a 14 other explorers. They were the first to fly over the North Pole from Europe to Alaska. In 1928, Roald Amundsen lost his life flying to rescue an engineer named Umberto Nobile. Nobile had built the plane that Amundsen flew over the North Pole. Amundsen's rescue plane crashed and was never found.

#### Early Life

Amundsen was born to a family of Norwegian ship owners and captains in Borge, between the towns Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg. His father was Jens Amundsen. He was the fourth son in the family. His mother chose to keep him out of the maritime industry of the family and pressured him to become a doctor, a promise that Amundsen kept until his mother died when he was aged 21, whereupon he quit university for a life at sea.

#### Polar Treks

##### Belgian Antarctic Expedition (1897-99)

He was a member of the Belgian Antarctic Expedition (1897-99) as first mate. This expedition, led by Adrien de Gerlache using the ship the Belgica, became the first expedition to winter in Antarctica. The Belgica, whether by mistake or design, became locked in the sea ice at 70°30'S off Alexander Island, west of the Antarctic Peninsula. The crew then endured a winter for which the expedition was poorly prepared. By Amundsen's own estimation, the doctor for the expedition, American Frederick Cook, probably saved the crew from scurvy by hunting for animals and feeding the crew fresh meat, an important lesson for Amundsen's future expeditions.

##### Northwest Passage (1903-1906)

In 1903, Amundsen led the first expedition to successfully traverse Canada's Northwest Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (something explorers had been attempting since the days of Christopher Columbus, John Cabot, Jacques Cartier, and Henry Hudson), with six others in a 45-ton fishing vessel, Gjøa. Amundsen had the ship outfitted with a small gasoline engine. They travelled via Baffin Bay, Lancaster and Peel Sounds, and James Ross, Simpson and Rae Straits and spent two winters near King William Island in what is today Gjoa Haven, Nunavut, Canada.

During this time Amundsen learned from the local Netsilik people about Arctic survival skills that would later

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prove useful. For example, he learned to use sled dogs and to wear animal skins in lieu of heavy, woolen parkas. After a third winter trapped in the ice, Amundsen was able to navigate a passage into the Beaufort Sea after which he cleared into the Bering Strait, thus having successfully navigated the Northwest Passage. Continuing to the south of Victoria Island, the ship cleared the Canadian Arctic Archipelago on 17 August 1905, but had to stop for the winter before going on to Nome on the Alaska District's Pacific coast. Five hundred miles (800 km) away, Eagle City, Alaska, had a telegraph station; Amundsen travelled there (and back) overland to wire a success message (collect) on 5 December 1905. Nome was reached in 1906. It was at this time that Amundsen received news that Norway had formally become independent of Sweden and had a new king. Amundsen sent the new King Haakon VII news that it "was a great achievement for Norway". He said he hoped to do more and signed it "Your loyal subject, Roald Amundsen."

### **South Pole Expedition (1910-12)**

After crossing the Northwest Passage, Amundsen made plans to go to the North Pole and explore the North Polar Basin. Amundsen had problems and hesitation raising funds for the departure and upon hearing in 1909 that first Frederick Cook and then Robert Peary claimed the Pole, he decided to reroute to Antarctica. Using the ship Fram ("Forward"), earlier used by Fridtjof Nansen, he left Norway for the south, leaving Oslo on 3 June 1910. At Madeira, Amundsen alerted his men that they would be heading to Antarctica. The expedition arrived at the eastern edge of the Ross Ice Shelf (then known as "the Great Ice Barrier") at a large inlet called the Bay of Whales on 14 January 1911, where Amundsen located his base camp and named it Framheim. Further, Amundsen eschewed the heavy wool clothing worn on earlier Antarctic attempts in favour of Eskimo-style skins.



**Roald Amundsen and his crew looking at the Norwegian flag at the South Pole, 1911**

Using skis and dog sleds for transportation, Amundsen and his men created supply depots at 80°, 81° and 82° South on the Barrier, along a line directly south to the Pole. Amundsen also planned to kill some of his dogs on the way and use them as a source for fresh meat. A premature attempt, which included Hjalmar Johansen, Kristian Prestrud and Jørgen Stubberud, set out on 8 September 1911, but had to be abandoned due to extreme temperatures. The painful retreat caused a tempering quarrel within the group, with the result that Johansen and others were sent to explore King Edward VII Land.

A second attempt with a team, consisting of Olav Bjaaland, Helmer Hanssen, Sverre Hassel, Oscar Wisting, and Amundsen himself, departed on 19 October 1911. They took four sledges and 52 dogs. Using a route along the previously unknown Axel Heiberg Glacier, they arrived at the edge of the Polar Plateau on 21 November after a four-day climb. On 14 December 1911, the team of five, with 16 dogs, arrived at the Pole (90° 0' S). They arrived 33-34 days before Scott's group. Amundsen named their South Pole camp Polheim, "Home on the Pole." Amundsen renamed the Antarctic Plateau as King Haakon VII's Plateau. They left a small tent and letter stating their accomplishment, in case they did not return safely to Framheim. The team returned to Framheim on 25 January 1912, with 11 dogs. Amundsen's success was publicly announced on 7 March 1912, when he arrived at Hobart, Australia. Amundsen's expedition benefited from careful preparation, good equipment, appropriate clothing, a simple primary task, an understanding of dogs and their handling, and the effective use of skis.



**Amundsen at the South Pole**

### **Northeast Passage (1918-1920)**

In 1918, Amundsen began an expedition with a new ship Maud, which was to last until 1925. Maud sailed west to East through the Northeast Passage, now called the Northern Route (1918-1920). With him on this expedition were Oscar Wisting and Helmer Hanssen, both of whom had accompanied Amundsen to the South

Pole. In addition, Henrik Lindstrøm was included as a cook, but he suffered a stroke and was so physically reduced that he could not participate.

The aim of the expedition was to explore the unknown areas of the Arctic Ocean, strongly inspired by Fridtjof Nansen's expedition earlier with Fram. The plan was to sail along the coast of Siberia and go into the ice farther to the north and east than Nansen had. In contrast to Amundsen's earlier expeditions, this expedition had a clear academic profile, with geophysicist Harald Sverdrup on board. The voyage was to the northeasterly direction over the Kara Sea. Amundsen planned to freeze the Maud into the polar ice cap and drift towards the North Pole (as Nansen had done with the Fram), and he did so off Cape Chelyuskin. Unfortunately, the ice became so thick that the ship was unable to break free, even though the ship was designed specifically for such a journey. In September 1919, the ship came loose from the ice, but froze again after a mere eleven days somewhere between the New Siberian Islands and Wrangel Island.

During this time, Amundsen participated little in the work outdoors, such as sleigh rides and hunting, because he had been subjected to numerous accidents. He had a broken arm and had been attacked by polar bears. Hanssen and Wisting, along with two others, embarked on an expedition by dog sled to Nome, Alaska, despite its being over one thousand kilometres away. But the ice was not frozen solid in the Bering Strait and it could not be crossed. They were, at the very least, able to send a telegram from Anadyr.

After two winters frozen in the ice without having achieved the goal of drifting over the North Pole, Amundsen decided to go to Nome himself to repair the ship and buy provisions. There was several of the crew ashore there, including Hanssen, who had not returned to the ship. Amundsen considered him to be in breach of contract, and as such, dismissed him from the crew. The third winter saw Maud frozen in the western Bering Strait, before finally reaching Seattle for repairs in 1921. Amundsen now returned to Norway, spurred by a need to put his finances in order. He brought with him two indigenous girls, the adopted four-year-old Kakonita and her companion Camilla. When he went bankrupt two years later, however, they were dispatched to Camilla's father in Russia.

### Aerial Expeditions

Amundsen returned to Maud, which now lay in Nome, in June 1922. He moved the focus from naval expeditions to aerial expeditions, and therefore arranged to get a plane. The expedition was divided into two: one part was to survive the winter to get ready for an attempt to fly over the pole. This part was led by Amundsen. Maud, under the command of Wisting, was to resume the original plan to drift over the North Pole in the ice. The ship drifted in the ice for three years east of the New Siberian Islands, before it was finally seized by Amundsen's creditors as collateral for the debt he had incurred.

The attempt to fly over the Pole failed, too. Amundsen and Oskar Omdal, of the Royal Norwegian Navy, attempted to fly from Wainwright, Alaska, to Spitsbergen across the North Pole. Their aircraft was damaged, and they abandoned the journey. To raise additional funds, Amundsen travelled around the United States in 1924 on a lecture tour. Although he was unable to reach the North Pole, the scientific results of the expedition, mainly the work of Sverdrup, were of considerable value. Many of these carefully collected scientific data had been lost during the ill-fated journey of Peter Tessem and Paul Knutsen, two crew members sent on a mission by Amundsen, but they were later retrieved by Russian scientist Nikolay Urvantsev as they lay abandoned on the Kara Sea shores.

### Reaching the North Pole

In 1925, accompanied by Lincoln Ellsworth, pilot Hjalmar Riiser-Larsen, and three other team members, Amundsen took two Dornier Do J flying boats, the N-24 and N-25 to 87° 44' north. It was the northernmost latitude reached by plane up to that time. The aircraft landed a few miles apart without radio contact, yet the crews managed to reunite. One, the N-24 was damaged. Amundsen and his crew worked for over three weeks to clean up an airstrip to take off from ice. They shoveled 600 tons of ice while consuming only one pound (400 g) of daily food rations.

In the end, six crew members were packed into the N-25. In a remarkable feat, Riiser-Larsen took off, and they barely became airborne over the cracking ice. They returned triumphant when everyone thought they had been lost forever.

In 1926, Amundsen and 15 other men (including Ellsworth, Riiser-Larsen, Oscar Wisting, and the Italian air crew led by aeronautical engineer Umberto Nobile) made the first crossing of the Arctic in the airship Norge designed by Nobile. They left Spitzbergen on 11 May 1926, and they landed in Alaska two days later.

### Disappearance and Death

Amundsen disappeared on 18 June 1928 while flying on a rescue mission with Norwegian pilot Leif Dietrichson, French pilot René Guilbaud, and three more Frenchmen, looking for missing members of Nobile's crew, whose new airship Italia had crashed while returning from the North Pole. Afterwards, a wing-float and bottom gasoline tank from the French Latham 47 flying boat he was in, improvised into a replacement wing-float, was found near the Tromsø coast.

It is believed that the plane crashed in fog in the Barents Sea, and that Amundsen was killed in the crash, or died shortly afterwards. His body was never found. The search for Amundsen was called off in September by the Norwegian Government. In 2003 it was suggested that the plane went down northwest of Bear Island. In 2004 and in late August 2009 unsuccessful searches were made by the Royal Norwegian Navy for the wreckage of Amundsen's plane, using the unmanned submarine Hugin 1000. The searches focused on a 40-square-mile (100 km<sup>2</sup>) area of the sea floor, and were documented by the German production company Context TV.

### Legacy

A number of places have been named after him:

**The Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station is named jointly with his rival**

**Amundsen Sea, off the coast of Antarctica**

**Amundsen Glacier, in Antarctica**

**Amundsen Bay, in Antarctica**

Mount Amundsen, in Antarctica

Amundsen Gulf, in the Arctic Ocean, off the coast of the Northwest Territories in Canada  
(separating Banks Island and the western parts of Victoria Island from the mainland)

A large crater covering the Moon's south pole is named Amundsen