

Roald Amundsen

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No polar explorer can lay claim to as many major accomplishments as Roald Amundsen. Amundsen was the first to navigate a Northwest Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the first to reach the South Pole, and the first to lay an undisputed claim to reaching the North Pole. He also sailed the Northeast Passage, reached a farthest north by air, and made the first crossing of the Arctic Ocean. Amundsen also was an astute and respectful ethnographer of the Netsilik Inuits, leaving valuable records and pictures of a two-year stay in northern Canada. Yet he appears to have been plagued with a public relations problem, regarded with suspicion by many as the man who stole the South Pole from Robert F. Scott, constantly having to fight off creditors, and never receiving the same adulation as his fellow Norwegian and sometime mentor, Fridtjof Nansen.

Roald Engelbregt Gravning Amundsen was born July 16, 1872 in Borge, Norway, the youngest of four brothers. He grew up in Oslo and at a young age was fascinated by the outdoors and tales of arctic exploration. He trained himself for a life of exploration by taking extended hiking and ski trips in Norway's mountains and by learning seamanship and navigation. At age 25, he signed on as first mate for the *Belgica* expedition, which became the first to winter in the south polar region. Amundsen would form a lifelong respect for the *Belgica's* physician, Frederick Cook, for Cook's resourcefulness in combating scurvy and freeing the ship from the ice.

In 1903 Amundsen set sail in the *Gjoa* on his first expedition, to navigate the Northwest Passage. Amundsen inferred that previous expeditions had suffered from the divided objectives and commands of the expedition leader, ship captain, and scientific leader. He resolved to avoid this problem by personally assuming all three roles. He obtained his ship's captain license and spent time in 1900 learning about the theory and measurement of the earth's magnetism. He pitched his expedition, in part, as an investigation of whether the earth's north magnetic pole was stationary.

Amundsen obtained the backing of Fridtjof Nansen, Norway's other great polar hero, but still had difficulty obtaining sufficient funds for his expedition. He slipped out of Oslo in the middle of the night of June 16, 1903, a step ahead of his creditors.

Unlike many previous explorers who attempted to navigate the Northwest Passage, Amundsen used a small ship that helped him maneuver the shallow passages through the Canadian archipelago just north of the Canadian mainland. His crew consisted of just six men beside himself.

The passage to the Pacific was ice-free that year, but Amundsen stopped near the south shore of King William Island on September 12, 1903 to perform the magnetic observations he had promised his scientific sponsors. This is noteworthy because it belies a claim commonly made about Amundsen, that his exploratory successes came at the expense of his scientific work. The *Gjoa* and its crew spent two years anchored at this spot, during which time they befriended the local Netsilik Inuit natives. In contrast to many other arctic explorers, Amundsen's writing about the Inuits displays an appreciation and willingness to learn that appeals to modern sensitivities. It was here that he became schooled in the art of dogsledding, a skill that would enable him to breeze to victory in the race to the South Pole.

Amundsen completed the navigation of the Northwest Passage in 1905, and cabled news of his accomplishment to supporters in Oslo. He had intended to sell exclusive rights to his story to help offset his debts. But a telegraph operator along the way leaked the story to the American press before it got to Norway, spoiling Amundsen's hopes for a financial return on his story.

Amundsen next intended to reach the North Pole. News that Robert E. Peary claimed to reach the Pole in 1909, however, caused him to turn south instead. This put him in direct competition with Robert Falcon Scott, who by then had embarked on his second expedition to Antarctica. Fearing that a public admission of his new objective would undermine support from Nansen and others, Amundsen kept his South Pole objective a secret until his ship left Norway. This secretiveness earned him a reputation, especially in the English and American press, as being slightly devious.

Amundsen established a base camp on the Ross Antarctic Ice Shelf 60 miles closer to the South Pole than Scott's camp. Although he started closer to the Pole than

Scott, Amundsen had to pioneer a new route over uncharted territory, whereas Scott had the benefit of following a route pioneered previously by Earnest Shackleton. Nevertheless, Amundsen's superior planning and knowledge of dogsledding, skiing, cold-weather clothing, and snow shelters enabled him easily to beat Scott to the Pole. Scott and four companions suffered miserably and died upon their return from the Pole. The most significant injury suffered by Amundsen's men, in contrast, was a toothache. The trip was executed with such a large margin of safety that his men actually gained weight during their excursion to the Pole.

Amundsen's third expedition sought to utilize an idea first developed by Nansen, to intentionally get a ship stuck in the arctic ice and float his way to the North Pole. He departed from Norway in 1918 aboard the *Maud*. In the ensuing year, however, Amundsen suffered three accidents, including an attack from a polar bear and carbon monoxide poisoning aboard ship. The *Maud* completed the Northeast Passage in 1920, but never succeeded in entering the arctic icepack. It reached a highest latitude of only 76 degrees north.

Thereafter, Amundsen set his sights on air travel. A fortuitous meeting in 1924 with Lincoln Ellsworth, the scion of a wealthy U.S. industrialist, provided the funding Amundsen sought. Amundsen and Ellsworth, along with four crewmates, planned to fly two Dornier-Wahl flying boats north from Spitsbergen, land at the North Pole to make scientific measurements, abandon one plane at the Pole, and fly the remaining one to Alaska. They took off successfully on May 21, 1925, but crash-landed 136 miles south of the pole. With one plane damaged beyond repair, the six crew worked for almost three weeks to repair the other damaged plane and create a runway that barely was sufficient to allow them to take off and return safely to Spitsbergen.

Amundsen teamed with Ellsworth again in 1926 and contracted with Italian airship pioneer Umberto Nobile to build a 348-foot dirigible. Christened the *Norge*, the airship left Spitsbergen on May 10, 1926 with a crew of 16 and successfully reached the North Pole on May 12, 1926 before landing in Alaska 70 hours after takeoff. Richard E. Byrd and Floyd Bennett had flown north from Spitsbergen in a Fokker monoplane only the day before the *Norge* took off. Recent reports, however, cast doubt on Byrd's claim to have reached the North Pole. Combined with growing skepticism over Robert Peary's

claim to have reached the Pole in 1909, a plausible argument can be made that Amundsen's *Norge* crew was the first ever to reach the North Pole. This would grant Amundsen the claims of three of the greatest prizes in polar exploration: the Northwest Passage, the South Pole, *and* the North Pole.

Unfortunately, a disagreement emerged between Amundsen and Nobile over the credit to be granted for the *Norge's* success. Nobile asserted that he was, in effect, the expedition leader. Amundsen regarded Nobile essentially as a hired pilot, and a not particularly good one at that. This disagreement was one of several public relations problems that dogged Amundsen throughout his career. His creditors hounded him over unpaid bills. He beat Robert F. Scott to the South Pole, but in death Scott took much more glory. Although an effective leader in the field who inspired intense loyalty from his crews, Amundsen was taciturn in public life and did not make friends easily.

(There is an important exception to Amundsen's record as an exceptional leader: Hjalmar Johansen, an skilled but troubled explorer, was forced by Nansen onto Amundsen's South Pole expedition. Johansen criticized some of Amundsen's decisions – with some justification – was left off the team that actually traveled to the South Pole, and returned to Norway despondent. Escape into alcoholism proved inadequate to salve his demons, and Johansen killed himself in 1913.)

Amundsen died in 1928. His plane disappeared while on his way to try to rescue Nobile, his former foe whose dirigible had crashed landed on the Arctic Ocean ice. Earlier, Amundsen had said that, "When death comes to me, may it do so while I'm busy at my life's work, while I'm doing something good and useful." He appears to have gotten his wish.

Further reading:

Amundsen, Roald. *The Amundsen Photographs* (ed. by Roland Huntford). New York:

Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987.

Berton, Pierre. *The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the Northwest Passage and the North*

Pole, 1818-1909. New York: Penguin Books, 1988.

Fisher, David E. *Across the Top of the World*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1992.

Huntford, Roland. *The Last Place on Earth*. New York: The Modern Library, 1999.

Brief biography:

Roald Engelbregt Gravning Amundsen was born on 16 July 1872 in Borge, Norway. He studied medicine until, after his mother's death, he sold his medical books to devote his life to exploration. He served as first mate on the *Belgica* expedition from 1898-99, and afterwards obtained his skippers license. He embarked on five major expeditions: (i) aboard the *Gjoa*, in which he sailed the Northwest Passage from 1903-06; (ii) aboard the *Fram* to Antarctica from 1911-12, during which time Amundsen discovered the South Pole; aboard the *Maud* from 1918-22, during which he sailed the Northeast Passage but failed to approach the North Pole; (iv) a failed attempt to fly to the North Pole in 1925; and (v) the successful trip in 1926 from Spitsbergen to Alaska via the North Pole, aboard the dirigible *Norge*. Amundsen published an autobiography, *My Life as an Explorer* (Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1928). Amundsen never married and had no children. He died approximately on 8 June 1928 after taking off in a plane from Tromsø, Norway bound for Spitsbergen, in an attempt to rescue the crew of the *Italia* airship.