

Nobile's drama and Amundsen's end

Christian Hug 24. April 2021 | [Arctic](#), [Guest article](#)



Umberto Nobile was born on January 21, 1885, in Lauro near Naples. Nobile was an Italian airship pioneer and general. He became especially famous for the polar voyages with his two airships “Norge” and “Italia.” Umberto Nobile died on July 30, 1978 in Rome.

It could have all turned out very differently. But vanity and craving for recognition turned offed heroes into tragic losers, and a glorious triumph in the race for the North Pole turned into the greatest disaster in the history of the Arctic. With 21 planes, 16 ships and dog sleds on rescue missions. And with 18 dead.

The protagonists in this tragedy: Umberto Nobile, an Italian airship engineer with the rank of general, and Roald Amundsen, Norwegian explorer and the first man at the South Pole in 1911.

In other roles: an Italian president, a Russian radio operator, a Swedish pilot, an American millionaire, a British ghost and a dog with a fear of flying. Plus more than 1,500 rescue workers from six countries.

Prelude I: The Ship, August 1921, Seattle, USA

For three years Roald Amundsen remained with his ship “Maud” in the ice drift of the Northeast Passage in the hope that the drift would take him to the North Pole. The operation should have lasted until 1925, but when Amundsen realizes that he will not reach his goal, he cancels the exercise and takes the ship to Seattle.



In 1925 Amundsen almost reached the North Pole with two flying boats *N24* and *N25*. However, they had to make an emergency landing on the ice 200 km from the Pole. Amundsen and his crew survived after spending 30 days trying to create a landing strip on the pack ice before finally taking off again.

Prelude II: The planes, May 1925, Ny Ålesund, Spitsbergen

Roald Amundsen is pretty broke. That's why he teamed up with German aircraft builder Dornier and American surveyor, millionaire and sponsor Lincoln Ellsworth for another push from Spitsbergen to the North Pole. This time with two Dornier aircraft. The operation fails because the planes land too early, 200 kilometres from the North Pole, in a water channel and freeze. The team remains missing on the ice for 26 days. Everyone survives. Roald Amundsen is pretty pissed. The North Pole has been considered conquered since 1909, when Robert Peary and Frederick Cook both claimed to have been there first. But there is still a lot of fame and glory to be won at the North Pole for a daring explorer like Amundsen, and that is exactly what the old Norwegian craves. It was he, after all, who in 1911 was the first man to conquer the other "end" of the earth, the South Pole. Now Amundsen wants to go to the North Pole by hook or by crook.

He has long dreamed of discovering new land somewhere in the vastness of the Arctic, which would then be named Roald-Amundsen-Land in his honour.

Prelude III: The Offer, September 1925, Rome, Italy

Roald Amundsen is bankrupt. Contemporary witnesses describe him as sullen, bossy and egomaniacal. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Norwegian travels with little enthusiasm to the very first meeting with the Italian engineer, lecturer and mathematician Umberto Nobile. Amundsen comes as a supplicant.

Nobile is a world-class airship builder. When Italy entered World War I in 1915, Nobile had applied to join the military but was rejected because of his small, slight stature. On his third attempt he succeeded: he entered the service of the military airship workshop in Rome, became its director in 1919 and received the airship patent in 1923 with the rank of lieutenant colonel. Meanwhile Nobile develops airships himself.

The Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini offered Amundsen an airship constructed by Nobile for a flight to the North Pole – under the condition that the builder would also fly with him, as leader of the expedition. Of course, that doesn't suit Amundsen. But he agrees. The Norwegian Aero Club and the sponsor Lincoln Ellsworth buy the airship N1 (N stands for the builder Nobile, 1 for his first own construction) from the state of Italy and rename the airship “Norge” (Norge means Norway in Norwegian).



The airship “Norge” lies at anchor in Ny Alesund on Spitsbergen – ready for the flight to the North Pole.

Act One: The Quarrel, May 12, 1926, 02:20, North Pole.

After 16 hours and 40 minutes of brisk sailing from Spitsbergen, the “Norge” reaches the North Pole and circles the point of longing. At a mild minus 11 degrees outside temperature the Norwegian, the American and the Italian flag are dropped. Amundsen thinks the Norwegian flag flew most beautifully. Expedition Leader Nobile's Italy flag is the largest of them all. Ellsworth is happy because today is his 46th birthday. Nobile's mongrel dog Titina, who is also on board, barks happily despite his fear of flying. The “Norge” continues over the Arctic and lands safely in Teller near Nome after a total of over 70 hours of flight time. The world rejoices. Umberto Nobile is the hero of the hour. Benito Mussolini, by now Italy's dictator, promoted him to general. Flowers will be presented to Nobile at the victory parade in Seattle. Amundsen didn't. Amundsen thinks this is unfair, he is offended. As he later wrote in his memoirs, he felt that the glory belonged to him alone, Amundsen. Now the dispute is escalating. Amundsen says publicly that he thinks Nobile is technically unqualified. Nobile counters that Amundsen behaved like a demigod in the “Norge,” did not take part in the work in the cabin and merely looked for new territory.

To which Amundsen clamors that Nobile was only an employee on the “Norge” and that the airship looked “like a circus wagon in the sky” with the Italian flag.

Which, in turn, Nobile won't stand for. He decides to build a new airship and fly to the North Pole once again, without Amundsen and without Norwegian support. He builds a new airship, the N4, called “Italia”: 104 meters long, 18'500 cubic meters volume, three 245 hp Maybach engines, top speed 117 km/h.



The crew of the “Norge” celebrates in Seattle: Umberto Nobile (with dog), right beside him Lincoln Ellsworth and Roald Amundsen (with moustache).

Act Two: Victory and Drama, May 24, 1928, 00:20, North Pole.

We did it! The airship “Italia” reaches the North Pole on its third attempt from Spitsbergen in rather bad weather. Nobile throws the Italian flag out of the booth for the second time – plus a massive wooden crucifix given to him by Pope Pius XI.

Because, in addition to the 14 Italians on board, a Swede and a Czechoslovakian are also part of the team, they are both allowed to drop their national flags as well. The communist anthem “Giovinezza” and local hits in the style of Bella Italia resound loudly.

Nobile showed the whole world: Bella Italia can also do without Amundsen! Dog Titina is also there, the only dog in the world that has been to the North Pole twice. However, because the weather is increasingly stormy, Nobile is unable to drop some scientists at the pole for research as planned. Instead, he orbits the North Pole for two hours and finally gives the command to return towards Kings Bay in Spitsbergen.

Soon a thick fog bank piled up in front of them. Nobile climbs to an altitude of 1,000 meters, where visibility is still miserable, and orients himself according to the magnetic compass. That’s nothing out of the ordinary. But the headwinds are getting fierce. It’s hailing grains of ice. Some stick to the hull of the “Italia.” Others are accelerated by the air of the turbines and sift through the hull of the airship. Because of all the ice, the airship is getting heavier and heavier. And finally ice jams the pitch elevator.

It is May 25, 1928, 7 o’clock in the morning, position about 180 kilometres north of the north coast of Spitsbergen. Now everything happens very fast: The “Italia” sinks within seconds – hits the pack ice with its rear end – from the force of the impact the nacelle at the rear engine breaks off – because the airship thus weighs hundreds of kilos less, now the front part crashes onto the pack ice – the front nacelle also breaks off – ten men are thrown onto the ice – “lightened” by another nacelle, the airship rises again – inside the airship are six mechanics – the airship drifts off into the distance, pilotless and rudderless.

A first damage assessment is sobering: The airship has disappeared together with the six men, probably caught fire and sank into the sea. The mechanic Vincenzo Pomella was killed when the front nacelle broke off. The technician Natale Ceccione has broken both legs. Commander Umberto Nobile is also badly injured, one arm and one leg broken. The remaining seven men in comparison are only slightly injured. The bitch Titina is nervous, but unharmed.

Luck of the draw: the broken-off rear gondola contains everything the crew needs to survive on the ice: Provisions, a tent, clothes, weapons, batteries, matches and a shortwave emergency radio set that Nobile spontaneously had brought on board at the last minute before departure. Immediately, radio operator Giuseppe Biagi starts sending SOS. But all he gets to hear in response are the latest sports reports and the latest hit songs. Misfortune in misfortune: The world knows nothing of their crash for days.



The only tent offered shelter to all survivors, provisions and materials the men had enough. It was red.

Act Three: The Search, June 3, 1928, 7:30 p.m., Vosnessenje, Russia

The “Italia” has been missing for ten days. No one knows if Nobile and his men are still alive. On the supply airship “Città di Milano,” which is stationed in Spitsbergen at the starting point of the expedition, an SOS radio was picked up in fragments, but ignored as a radio operator’s error.

Meanwhile, the survivors on the ice killed a polar bear. Four days ago, three men set out as a sort of strike force to make it ashore and get help: the two naval officers Adalberto Mariano and Filippo Zappi, and the Swedish meteorologist Finn Malmgren.

3,000 kilometres away in the Russian village of Vosnessenje near Archangelsk, amateur radio operator Nikolaj Schmidt picks up an SOS call which he attributes to the airship “Italia.” There are survivors! Schmidt’s discovery makes the world press. On June 6, the radio operator of the “Città di Milano” succeeds in making contact with Giuseppe Biagi on the ice. What is about to begin will turn into the largest rescue operation ever undertaken in the Arctic. Famous aviator pilots, the new heroes of the skies, take off on exploratory flights. Sled dog teams swarm out. Ships set sail. By the time the rescue is completed, there will be 21 aircraft and 16 ships from six nations, with more than 1,500 rescue workers deployed.

The whole world is boundlessly excited. Except for one: Roald Amundsen.



At 4:05 p.m. on June 18, the heavily loaded Latham-47 and its crew of six left Tromsø, Norway, to fly over the Barents Sea to Spitsbergen. Fog and the midnight sun made navigation difficult, but not impossible.

Act Four: The Defeat, June 18, 1928, 4:05 p.m., Tromsø, Norway

Amundsen wants to go down in history as the greatest explorer of all time. After all, he won the race to the South Pole against the Briton Robert Falcon Scott! But he also knows: Dead heroes live longer. Robert Scott died a hero's death on his way back from the South Pole and thus went down in history on a par with Amundsen.

Now Amundsen wants to prevent the same thing from happening to Umberto Nobile at all costs. In Amundsen's logic, it is better to save Nobile than to risk Nobile dying and thus becoming a hero forever. More than that, should he, Amundsen, save Nobile, Amundsen becomes the über-hero.

So Amundsen makes an approach to the Italians. But the dictator himself, Benito Mussolini, does not want Amundsen to be supported in his venture.

The French government steps into the breach and provides Amundsen with a seaplane, a Latham 47, together with a crew of four. Of course Amundsen accepts.

The plane is flown from France to Tromsø, Amundsen urges to continue the flight the next day – although the Latham 47 is in poor condition and the weather is critical. With Amundsen and other men on board, as well as 2,500 litres of fuel, the plane is extremely heavy and only manages to lift off the water on the fifth attempt.

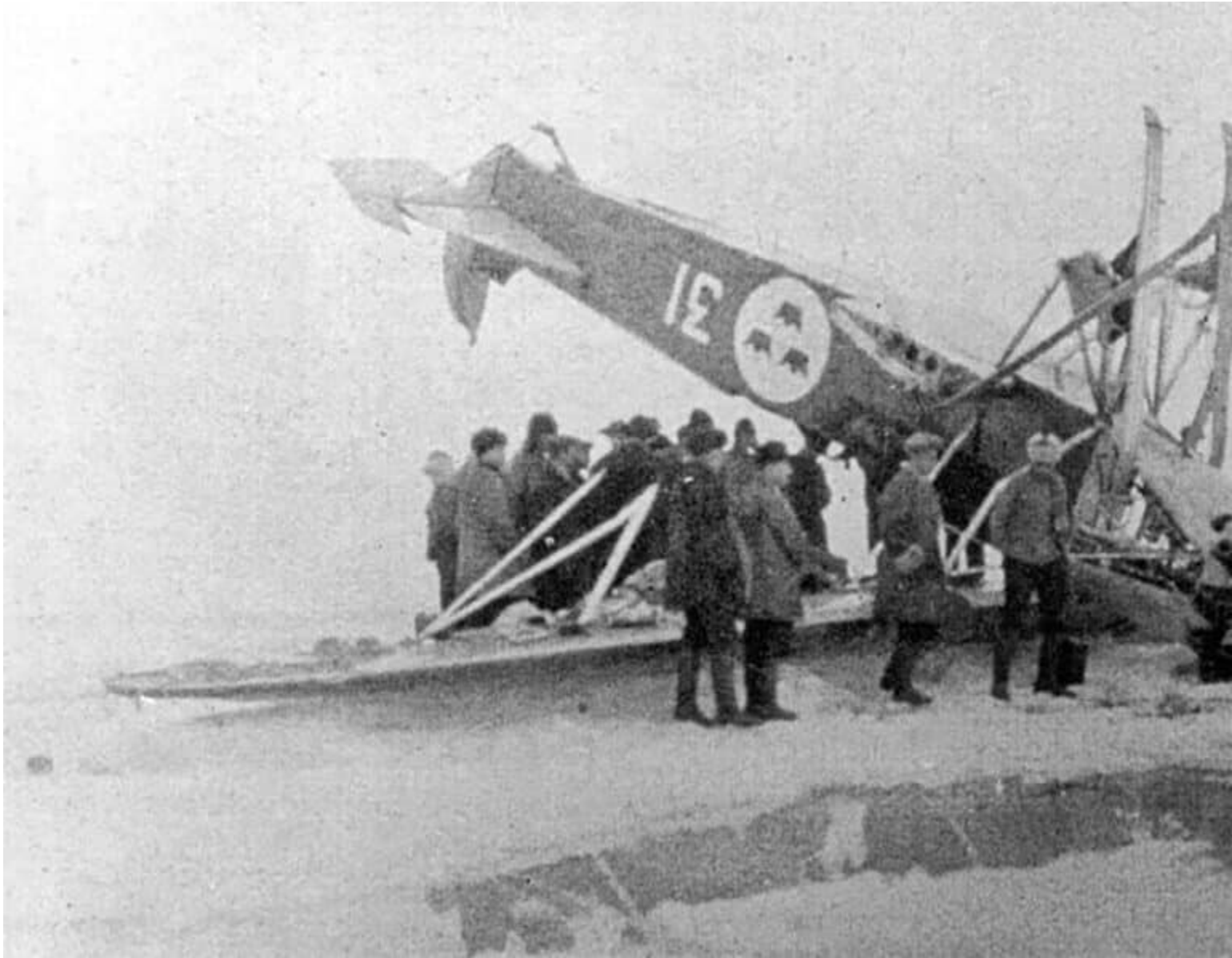
At 6:45 p.m., the last radio message is sent. Then the contact breaks off. The plane crashes into the sea. Amundsen and his companions remain lost without trace to this day.

Two and a half months later, on August 31, a Norwegian trawler will pick a Latham 47 hydrofoil out of the water. It would probably have comforted Amundsen to know that Nobile would come out of this story alive, but not a hero either.

Act Five: The Pilot, June 24, 1928, on the Ice

The Swedish flight lieutenant Einar Lundborg lands with his observation plane in a daring maneuver at the crash site. Four days earlier, an Italian pilot finally spotted the red tent in the pack ice and dropped provisions. Now Lundborg even manages to land the plane. There is only one seat available in his three-seater Fokker CV. Lundborg insists on flying out the captain first, i.e. Umberto Nobile. Nobile is to coordinate the gigantic international rescue operation at the base in Spitsbergen.

That is his strict order, says Lundborg, who knows that a captain is actually the last to leave his sinking ship. So the Italian lets himself be flown out – together with his dog Titina. Lundborg takes Nobile to Spitsbergen and flies off again immediately to get more people off the ice. But during the new landing the airplane overturns and goes to break. Lundborg survives slightly injured, but is now trapped in the pack ice himself.



Einar Lundborg crash lands his Fokker CV, survives and is now trapped in the ice himself.

Act Six: The Rescue, July 12, 1928, on the Ice

Giuseppe Biagi radios to the “Città di Milano”: “Sights Krassin, about ten kilometers south-west.” The crew is saved! 27 days ago the Russian ship “Krassin,” at that time the most powerful icebreaker in the world, had set sail from Leningrad to rescue Umberto Nobile and his crew. So after 49 days, the drama has at least come to a semi-happy end.

Because only one day before, on July 11, the “Krassin” happened to come across the completely exhausted Adalberto Mariano and Filippo Zappi – two of the three men who had set off from the crash site to fetch help. The third man of the assault team, Finn Malmgren, did not survive the march. Mariano later has a frostbitten foot amputated on board the “Città di Milano.”

The result: half of the 16-member crew of the airship “Italia” survived. Plus the dog.



Finally: After 49 days on the ice, the survivors are rescued by the Russian icebreaker “Krassin.”

Epilogue I: The Others, July 13, 1928 to Today, Europe

- Even without a country named after him, **Roald Amundsen is the most successful Arctic and Antarctic explorer of all time. A two-week search operation by the Norwegian Navy in 2009 for the wreckage of the crash plane remains unsuccessful.**
- **Einar Lundborg dies in a plane crash three years after the “Italia” disaster. He is celebrated as a national hero in Sweden today.**
- **Benito Mussolini gives Einar Lundborg a watch as a thank you gift in 1929. Later he has little success with his fascism. He is shot by partisans on April 28, 1945.**
- **Nikolaj Schmidt probably died in 1942. Sources still disagree as to whether he was a cinema projectionist, teacher or farmer. Maybe he was everything.**

- Soon after the rescue, Adalberto Mariano and Filippo Zappi are accused of having eaten their Swedish colleague Finn Malmgren during their march through the pack ice. The suspicion of cannibalism is never conclusively resolved.
- Giuseppe Biagi becomes a partner in a petrol station in the capital of Italy. He died in Rome in 1965.
- Hjalmar Riiser-Larsen has not been mentioned at all so far. The Norwegian aviation pioneer and Amundsen confidant was one of the two Dornier pilots of Amundsen's flight attempt (Prelude II), was aboard the "Norge" (Act I) and participated in the search for the survivors of the "Italia" (Act III). The latter was one of the reasons why Amundsen boarded the plane in which he had his fatal accident: he wanted to get ahead of his former companion. Riiser-Larsen died in Copenhagen on June 3, 1965.
- The icebreaker "Krassin" is now a museum ship in St. Petersburg.
- In 1929, Funk-Stunde Berlin very successfully broadcasts the radio play "SOS ... rao rao ... Foyn ... Krassin saves Italia." Today it is the oldest completely preserved radio play in the German language.

Epilogue II: Nobile, 13 July 1928 to 30 July 1978, Italy

Nobile's rescue is celebrated by the whole world – except by Italy: because Nobile was the first captain to be rescued, he falls out of favour as a bad example of fascism and is dishonourably dismissed from the army by Mussolini. Other sources say he resigned voluntarily.

Nobile goes to Russia and works there as an airship builder. He later became an aeronautics lecturer in America, spent a few years in Spain and finally returned to Italy. In 1945 he was rehabilitated. In 1961, he leads a libel case against former military officers and politicians, Nobile sees himself as a victim of intrigue. But the trial won't bring back his honor either. Umberto Nobile spends the last years of his life in seclusion in Rome. He dies on July 30, 1978, almost completely blind and confined to a wheelchair. In his apartment you can find dozens of souvenirs from his great time – and the stuffed dog Titina.

The dog is now on display at the Italian Aviation Museum in Bracciano.

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