

Northern News Services

Northern News Service – August 1997

Searching for Franklin's lost ships by Stacey Campbell

NNSL (Aug 11/97) - When the frozen remains of Sir John Franklin's crew were unearthed five years ago from shallow graves on the tundra, much was learned of the fate of the lost expedition of 1848.

Cold, hunger, and possibly lead poisoning from badly canned food had killed the men in a desperate trek south across the islands and ice floes of the High Arctic after failing to find a northwest passage for their two ships. But why and where they abandoned the *Erebus* and *Terror* remains a mystery. Now, a Halifax-based documentary crew specializing in shipwrecks hopes to settle the ships' fates. Divers, photographers and other technicians for Eco-Nova have rendezvoused with a coast guard icebreaker at Cambridge Bay to seek those answers. "We'll be searching this year and if necessary next year, too, for the wreckage of Franklin's ships," says Rick Haupt, co-owner of the company with fellow underwater explorer John Davis. The pair hopes to find them and produce a TV film for international distribution in 1998 to mark the 50th anniversary of the expedition's disappearance. When Franklin and the 129 sailors and scientists under his command left England on May 19, 1845, they embodied the British Empire's spirit of technical, scientific and imperial expansion. Their converted Royal Navy warships, the *Erebus* and *Terror*, were responsible for the "rocket's red glare" that bombarded American fortifications in 1812 and is sung about in the American national anthem. The Arctic elements proved more of a challenge, and the ships disappeared late in the summer of 1845 as they approached Lancaster Sound. Inuit folklore tells of seeing them a year later, frozen into the ice northwest of King William Island. Over the next two years, 24 men and Franklin are thought to have died from cold and hunger as they struggled to keep their ships afloat and make progress. The remaining men apparently abandoned ship in the spring of 1848 and headed for Fort Reliance, 1,500 kilometers away. None made it. Repeated searches by the British government and private teams never found the men. Only in recent times were the bones and dried-out bodies of a few, showing the marks of cannibalism, discovered. Eco-Nova, co-operating with the Canadian Coast Guard, the Department of National Defense, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the Canadian Hydrographic Service, the Geological Survey of Canada, and Parks Canada, hopes to fill in the historical gaps. The coast guard icebreaker *Sir Wilfrid Laurier* left Vancouver early this summer carrying up-to-date equipment to complete the search. The crew expected to begin their search this week, after filming around the Cambridge Bay. The *Erebus* is believed to have broken up in Victoria Strait and the *Terror* may be a little further south. "We've borrowed equipment from the government, including side-scan sonar and a magnetometer," says Haupt. "The sonar will allow us to look for the shadow of anything laying on the ocean floor." Haupt admits that 150 years of grinding pack ice may have left little trace of the ships. On the other hand, cold water has been known to preserve old wrecks. "The *Erebus* and *Terror* were each equipped with 15-tonne cast-iron steam engines as well as their sails and the magnetometer may detect that metal," he notes. Haupt and Davis are also determined not to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors, who relied only on their technology and ignored the knowledge of the Inuit. "I feel strongly that you have to respect and work with the people of an area in which you are filming," he says. "We've hired local guides and are also relying on the people's history." An elder at the turn of the century reported that as a young boy he had seen the masts of a ship sticking above the ice near King Kirkwall Island. The expedition will also be focusing on Victoria Island. and Queen Maud Sound.

Respect for the present and future will also figure largely in their actions. Permits from Ottawa and the GNWT will allow only filming of whatever is found. "We won't be disturbing any wrecks we find by going inside," says Haupt. Eco-Nova originally started as a diving operation leading European and other adventure tourists to Nova Scotia wrecks. The company branched out into filmmaking when it found videos of the dives are profitable. Haupt and Davis say they suspect worldwide exposure of the Arctic and its wrecks on television could provide a boost to the economy by promoting its tourism possibilities on land as well as undersea. The company's first came north last year to capture images of the wrecks of the Albany and Discovery, which sank at Marble Island during 1719 in Hudson Bay. Eco-Nova has already produced a film of that expedition and their search for the Erebus and Terror could be seen as early as next year as "The Last Mystery" program, part of the Oceans of Mystery series, seen in Canada on the Discovery Channel.