

Real History

Umberto Nobile and the Airships Italia

Umberto Nobile (January 21, 1885 – July 30, 1978) was an Italian aeronautical engineer and Arctic explorer. Nobile was a developer and promoter of semi-rigid airships during the Golden Age of Aviation between the two World Wars. He is primarily remembered for designing and piloting the airship Norge, which may have been the first aircraft to reach the North Pole, and which was indisputably the first to fly across the polar ice cap from Europe to America. Nobile also designed and flew the Italia, a second polar airship; this second expedition ended in a deadly crash and provoked an international rescue effort.

Airship Norge

In autumn 1925 Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen sought out Nobile to collaborate on a flight to the North Pole - still at that time an unreach goal for aviators - using one of Nobile's craft. Amundsen had previously in spring 1925 flown to within 150 nautical miles (280 km) of the North Pole, in a pair of Italian-built Dornier Wal flying boats along with the American millionaire-adventurer Lincoln Ellsworth, the pilot Hjalmar Riiser-Larsen, but their planes were forced to land near 88 degrees North and the six men were trapped on the ice for 30 days.

The Italian State Airship Factory, which had built Nobile's N-1, made it available for the expedition March 29, 1926. Amundsen insisted in the contract that Nobile should be the pilot and that five of the crew should be Italian; Amundsen named the airship Norge (Norway). On April 14 the airship left Italy for Leningrad (now renamed Saint Petersburg] in Russia with stops at Pulham (England) and Oslo. On its way towards its Arctic jumping-off point, Ny-Ålesund (Kings Bay) at Vestspitsbergen, Svalbard (belonging to Norway) it also made a stop at the airship mast at Vadsoe (Northern Norway).

On 29 April Amundsen was dismayed at the arrival of Richard E. Byrd's American expedition which also aimed to reach the Pole. On May 9, after Byrd and Floyd Bennett departed in their Fokker F-VII and returned less than 16 hours later claiming to have overflown the Pole, Amundsen was one of the first to congratulate them. The Norge crew pressed ahead with their flight. Byrd's co-pilot Bennett is said later to have admitted that they faked their flight to the Pole.

On May 11, 1926, the Norge expedition left Svalbard. Fifteen and a half hours later the ship flew over the Pole and landed two days later in Teller, Alaska; strong winds had made the planned landing at Nome, Alaska impossible. In retrospect, the Norge crew may actually have achieved their aim of being the first to overfly the Pole: Byrd's May 9 flight, acclaimed for decades as the prestigious first Polar flyover, has since been subjected to several credible challenges, and it was never proven that Byrd and Bennett successfully reached the Pole first, as Byrd claimed.

The Norge "Rome to Nome" flight was acclaimed as another great milestone in flight, but disagreement soon erupted between Nobile (designer and pilot), and Amundsen (expd. leader, observer and passenger) on the flight, as to who deserved greater credit for the expedition. The controversy was exacerbated by Mussolini's government, which trumpeted the genius of Italian engineering and ordered Nobile on a speaking tour of the U.S., further alienating Amundsen and the Norwegians.

Airships Italia

Despite the controversy, Nobile continued to maintain good relations with other polar scientists, and he started planning a new expedition, this time fully under Italian control. Nobile's company managed to sell an N-class airship to Japan; however, relations between Nobile and his competitors in the fascist government were hostile, and he and his staff were subjected to threats and intimidation. Nobile's popularity with the public meant he was, for the moment, safe from direct attack. When the plans for his next expedition were announced, Italo Balbo is said to have commented, "Let him go, for he cannot possibly come back to bother us anymore."

The N-class airship Italia was slowly completed and equipped for Polar flight during 1927-28. Part of the difficulty was in raising private funding to cover the costs of the expedition, which finally was financed by the city of Milan; the Italian government limited its direct participation to providing the airship and sending the aging steamer Città di Milano as a support vessel to Svalbard, under the command of Giuseppe Romagna.

This time the airship used a German hangar at Stolp (now Slupsk in Poland) en route to Svalbard and the mast at Vadsoe (Northern Norway). On May 23, 1928, after an outstanding 69 hour long flight to the Siberian group of Arctic islands, the Italia commenced its flight to the North Pole with Nobile as both pilot and expedition leader. On May 24, the ship reached the Pole and had already turned back toward Svalbard when it ran into a storm. On May 25, the Italia crashed onto the pack ice less than 30 kilometres north of Nordaustlandet (Eastern part of Svalbard). Of the 16 men in the crew, ten were thrown onto the ice; the remaining six crewmen were trapped as the lightened ship swept the intact gondola skyward; the ship might have then exploded later, but the fate of the six men was never resolved. One of the ten men on the ice died from the impact; Nobile suffered both a broken arm and a broken leg, and two others respectively a broken leg (Cecioni) and a sprained shoulder (Malmgren).. The crew managed to salvage several items from the crashed airship, including a radio transceiver, a tent which they later painted red for maximum visibility, and, critically, packages of food which quick-witted engineer Ettore Arduino had managed to throw onto the ice before he and his five companions were carried off to their deaths by the lifting airship wreck. As the days passed, the drifting sea ice took the survivors towards Foyn and Broch islands. A few days after the crash the Swedish meteorologist Malmgren and Nobile's second and third in command Mariano and Zappi decided to leave the immobile group and march towards land. Malmgren gave up en route and asked his two Italian companions to

continue without him, these two were several weeks later picked up by the Soviet icebreaker "Krasin".

Controversial search and rescue

In the wake of the crash, a collection of nations, including Soviet Russia, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Italy, launched the first polar air and sea rescue effort. Also privately owned ships which had been chartered by polar scientists and explorers also participated. Even Roald Amundsen put aside his past differences with Nobile and boarded a French seaplane and headed for the rescue headquarters; this plane disappeared between Tromsø and Svalbard, and though a pontoon from the craft was later found, neither Amundsen's body nor those of the five others on board were.

After a month of privation for the Italia survivors, the first rescue plane, a Swedish airforce Fokker ski plane, piloted by Lieutenant Einar Lundborg and with Lieutenant Schyberg as observer landed near the crash site. Nobile had prepared a detailed evacuation plan, with the most seriously wounded man (the heavy built mechanic Cecioni) at the top of the list and himself as number 4, with the navigator (Vigliani) and the radio operator (Biagi) as respectively no. 5 and 6. However Lundborg refused to take anyone but Nobile. He argued that the plane could only take one survivor and the other seriously injured man was so heavy Lundborg was unsure he could take off. Nobile was airlifted to Ryss Island, base camp of Swedish and Finnish air rescue efforts. When Lundborg returned alone to pick up a second survivor he crashed his plane on landing, and was trapped with the other five.

Eventually, Nobile reached the Città di Milano where, he later said, he was dismayed at the incompetence he found. His attempts to help co-ordinate the international rescue effort were blocked, and when he threatened to leave he was placed under virtual arrest by Captain Romagna. His telegrams to the survivors still on the ice, as well as to various people involved in the rescue, were heavily censored, and he was wrongly described in Fascist Italian newspapers that his own evacuation was an obvious sign of cowardice. Eventually the last five men of his crew after 48 days on the ice-floe were rescued by the Soviet icebreaker Krasin. Nobile insisted that he wanted to continue the search for six crew who were swept away by the airship when it disintegrated, but he was ordered back to Rome with the others.

Invented Story

Umberto Nobile has never stopped looking for his friends and Lara during a journey in Italy finds the diary of the Italian aeronautical engineer. She reads that Nobile found the proofs that his friends aren't dead. The airship Italia with the survivors was forced to land in a lost city founded by Vikings. Nobile writes that he will leave for the purpose of looking for his friends but he was old and tired and has never returned. Lara also finds in the diary a map and decides to leave....