

Disaster Hits the North Pole: Umberto Nobile's 1928 Expedition

Preface

This excerpt was taken from a tape-recorded interview conducted by Mr. Kenneth W. Leish of the Oral History Research Office with Umberto Nobile in 1960. The unabridged transcript of this oral-history interview is housed at the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University.

Excerpt of a 1960 Interview With Umberto Nobile

Umberto Nobile: The third flight in my program was this: to go from Spitsbergen, westward, to the Northern Coast of Greenland because there was this region, which never had been explored before. Perhaps we could have found some things there. Then, from the northern coast of Greenland--this means from Cape Dickleman--following exactly the meridian, we would get to the North Pole.

It was not a matter just to reach the North Pole--just to fly again on the North Pole. This was not the purpose of the flight. But the purpose of our flight was to descend at the North Pole, to land there. For this, we prepared all the devices of landing with great care. Everything was prepared for this descent on the ice. The purpose of the descent was to make some oceanographic observations: the depth of the sea and so forth; the measuring of the temperature of the water under the ice; and magnetical observations--observations of what there was around that would be a contribution.

Two scientists and naval officers--perhaps I, myself, if I could leave the ship. Everything was prepared for this descent, but also--in order to secure the 3 people--the possibility of staying there for many weeks, in case the ship found it impossible to stay there. It was also a great responsibility to take people down and get them back that I, myself--I had to prevent their being lost. We had supplies in case of emergency, including a small--

Question: Small what? Small shortwave radio?

Nobile: First of all, a small short wave radio for use from the ice, if we had to go ahead with our ship. Besides this, I had two bags--two large bags. Inside of these bags I had put a tent for camping, and foods--condensed food--matches, a pistol--a Colt pistol, which was suggested to me by the Italian Queen, the Queen of Italy. She told me, "Take some Colt pistols, they will be very useful," so I got several Colt pistols and put one Colt pistol in each bag, and ammunitions--all this sort of thing in the bags, and full.

And these two bags--one I put inside the hull another one I put inside of the control cabin where I was staying, and the officers. We had no course, this was just food and arms prepared for 3 people. We had provisions, arms, for all possible sorts of things: skis, shoes--all kinds of things. So everything was prepared in this way. I could drop

everything. And when the advice came from the meteorologists, we left one morning--the morning of the 23rd.

We met fog going up to Greenland, so we could not see where we were very well. Visibility was rather small, rather narrow, but we continued and the weather conditions changed: in came brilliant sunshine and strong wind from south to north, helping us. So we were marching very swiftly to the North Pole. We were--I was happy of these conditions, as far as exploration was concerned, because this region had never been passed before. But we did not find anything, just frozen sea.

But while we were approaching the Pole, at about two hours distance, I saw a cloud--some dark clouds--before us, very dark. When I saw this heavy fog--dark fog, dark clouds--I had the feeling we would not pass through that. Then I started to think about doing it. We had a very strong wind with us, which we should not have when we were flying back, because we should be flying back from the Pole. Not simple, but following another route across another unknown region, if the strong wind should be against us, which was helping us, it would be a very dangerous thing. So I asked the meteorologist, because he was collecting the meteorological data, "What will it be tomorrow?"

He said, "According to my data, tomorrow the wind will change. We will have wind from the north."

I said, "But if this will not happen?"

"No, this will happen." He was sure about this: that this wind would change. I said I would like after we had reached the Pole to go towards Mackenzie River. This was just a route that I had already gone. For this possibility, I thought I'd prepare. I sent word to the consul in Canada telling him that possibly we would go towards the Mackenzie River. So my feeling was just after we had reached the Pole, to go westward to Mackenzie River, but Malmgren told me no, it would not be necessary because the wind would change.

Well, we reached the Pole but would have had to drop the people without any wind. The wind was very strong. It would be absolutely very dangerous for people to go down. So I had to give up this important part of our flight, and we started to come back.

We left the Pole at 2 o'clock on the morning of the 25th--2 o'clock. After more than 20 hours--we had always strong winds, snowstorms, ice storms all the time, sometimes 10 hours it lasted. It lasted so long. In the beginning we were flying up over the fog, but after, when I saw that we could easily lose our bearings, I decided to go under the fog, and we went down just in order to see the ground and measure our speed, our distance, against the ground--you could control.

While on the ship, when we were going to go, the people were cheerful on board because everything was right. Now everyone was gloomy because of the storm and ice. It was so depressing. People started to be downhearted after about two days of flying, but we went on.

Certain moment, Malmgren came to me and said, "We shall go out as soon as possible, because it is dangerous to continue--meteorological conditions. So I beg you to increase the speed."

I agreed and I started--usually I went on two engines, so I started the third engine. We went with the three engines and we proceeded for several hours under these conditions.

But then I began to be rather worried for the consummation of our gasoline with three engines. We had always some wind against us at this time, so we were going a very little--we were marching at a very low speed. We should need at this moment to spare the gasoline, while with three motors, three engines running, the consummation was increasing. So I was very much upset by this problem, and I stopped the engine. We proceeded with the two engines.

There was an incident--a banal, common incident. I mean, the man who was at the elevators, the rudders, could no more handle them. No, it was stopped. I thought it was some ice inside it. In this moment, when the elevator was stopped, the airship began to bow down--it was descending. I stopped the engines, but still we were just going slowly down. But I knew that this airship was very light, because I had never given out gas, hydrogen, so it should be very light. I was sure after a while it would stop by itself, so long as the engines were stopped, it stopped.

Unfortunately, one of my men, without my order, dropped down a few tins of gasoline, thinking that they would help, but it was so little it could not help. It was not with my order. He thought that they were some gasoline, which was lost. Then when we were about 70 meters from the ground, from the ice, we started to rise. We started to rise again.

Being down, I gave the order to dismount the elevator wing and look inside and see how everything was. I called the chief mechanic to do this. Of course, we could no more help the conditions. Being light, the airship, we were rising. It goes up and up, you know. While we are flying we know that the fog becomes thin and then becomes more luminous.

This moment, the meteorological officer came and told me, "We go up over the ground, over the fog, and we stop just to check our position by the sun."

I said, "All right," and we went up over the fog, and a measurement of the height was made. Then, I started the engines. We flew for a few minutes in this position. I hoped to be able to see the tops of the mountains, or things of that nature. But nothing was there.

Then, to go over the fog--of course, the flying conditions was very nice, but without knowing our position, I was forced to go down again, and I went down again.

It was about 10 hours, 15 minutes, the morning of the 25th. We went down, to a height of about 300 meters. We flew. Everything was in order; people were tired, but everyone was

at his place. The officers were making just observations of the speed, controlling the speed. We had some radio readings from our bases, from Kings Bay, so we could try to trace on the map a line where we were. Of course, we could not say at which point we were, but we had this line.

I was very much concerned with the consummation of the gasoline. In this moment, I was just following this navigation. The navigation part was in the middle part of the table and all commerce was on the far part. But time from time I went from the navigation table to see if everything was in order and, at such a moment, I was just dropping down on the ice a bulb--a glass bulb with some red liquid inside, some alcohol--just dropping it on the ice; it would break so that I could know the moment when it touched the ice, from which the chronometer could be checked, from which I would know more or less if it was right. It was necessary to check on it.

In the meantime, I saw the river was already north. We had found nothing. Everything was in order, so possibly it was just ice. As I was dropping this bulb someone cried "We are heavy. The ship is heavy." We looked and we saw at this moment and they saw that although the tail was down (this means that there was some dynamical left), we were falling.

This moment we had only two engines running. Now, what should I do this moment? It was just to increase the dynamical lift. To increase the lift, I should increase the speed, so I give orders to start the third engine, and we were going at the full speed now, this means, more or less, over the mountains. But I looked and I saw we were dropping, perhaps even more rapidly. Then I saw there was nothing to do.

No doubt we would crash on the ice, and I thought to avoid the danger of fire, I gave orders to stop the engines. Two engineers--they found very soon that two engines stopped. The third one, perhaps they could not hear the order, was still running. Then I went out on the wing to stop the engine and I came inside. I can make it inside--between the elevators and wing this morning there was mud, and the mud would have--I saw that we were very near to the ice. Nothing could have been more heavy. It wouldn't steer anymore.

By instinct, I clutched the wheel myself. I thought, if possible, I would steer it; I could go to a place where there was snow and no ice, but it was no good. I saw this block of ice increasing in size--big, big, and a few minutes later we crashed.

It was a terrible crash. Something hit me on the head. I had broken limbs--I didn't know--but without any pain, of course. I thought that something was broken; a leg was broken, but without pain. These words came into my mind: everything is finished. These words came into my mind, and I closed the eyes and there was a terrible crash. When I opened my eyes I found myself lying on the top of a block of ice.

Q: An iceberg was it?

Nobile: Not iceberg, just blocks of ice. But this pack of ice was very broken; there were many blocks of ice. I saw the airship up in the air. The bottom had been torn out of the cabin and one of its sides. There was left only one side, and there were tears all over the hull, in the fabric. It was rising up. It was last that was seen of it. It was carrying out six men.

Q: Six men were still in the ship?

Nobile: They were at this moment; they were sleeping, and two motorists, which were inside, inside of the engine compartment.

Q: The rest of you were thrown out. There were nine of you?

Nobile: All who were in the cabin were thrown out--everyone.

Q: Nine of you?

Nobile: Nine people. The motorist died, so I looked around. I saw the other men that were in the cabin. One, a mechanic, was just sitting on the ice. He was crying. "I have a broken leg." Just near to me, there was Malmgren. He was sitting on the ice very depressed, with the arm.

I said, "Malmgren, nothing to do," that is because I thought that there were all the people there without any help. So I was hopeless without any hope, nothing.

He answered, "Yes, nothing to do but to die," and he got up. He was just going slowly, limping because he had something broken--broken condition of the arm. He said, "I thank you for the trip. I go out in the water."

Q: He was going to kill himself?

Nobile: Yes. "I go under the water."

I stopped him. I said, "No, Malmgren, you have no right to do so. Help may come. You cannot consider it. Stop it."

Q: You cannot anticipate death.

Nobile: The people were all around, more or less injured. Then at a certain moment, I hear the radioman crying, "We have found the radio set!" This radio set was intended for the people that should descend.

Q: You mean you had one of these bags [filled with survival gear]?

Nobile: No, it was inside of the cabin, the bag--it was found. Some of the radio was broken, but he said, "We have found a radio set, now we'll put it up."

Then I called together the officers and I gave the command, "I have only a few hours of life, so you try to do all possible to help your good comrades." For example, we had found the radio. We found also some foods on the ice.

While he was speaking, I looked before me and I saw one of these two bags.

Q: With all the equipment in it for survival?

Nobile: It was everything. I said, "Open the bag, you'll find a sleeping bag, you'll find pistols, you'll find munitions, you'll find everything that we need."

Q: It was enough for three men for two months?

Nobile: Yes.

Q: But you had nine people.

Nobile: Yes. And it was opened. They put me in the sleeping bag. My arm was paining in this situation. As the day started to end, they erected a tent and they put me inside. After they opened the bag, they were lying on the floor of the ice. And so we start our life on the ice.

This life lasted seven weeks. It was full of happenings. Of the 16 people who went on board the airship, six disappeared on the airship. Of them we had no more news. One motorist was killed in the crash. They found him just sitting on the ice with one shoe off--the other shoe being just on the point of taking off. They thought that he was alive, that he was just taking off his shoes. They said, "Can we help you?" and so on. He did not answer.

Q: He was dead.

Nobile: It was sad. One more died.

Now, we started this life. We were lucky, very, very lucky, because we found the bag. We found chronometers. We had to find everything that was necessary to take these readings by the sun and establish our position. We sent out messages, SOS's, for three or four days continuously, without interruption. No answer. We could hear the other stations. We could hear every night the station of Rome. We could keep track of all the happenings in Italy. But they could not hear us.

Before long, some people started to think that the only possibility to be saved was to march on the ice and to reach land. This could not surely be done by myself, not by the other men who had broken legs. It could only be done by the more fit. The more fit were

the two naval officers; the radioman was also very strong, was in perfect health conditions, and possibly Malmgren.

So they came to speak to me about this. I thought it would do no good because I believed that our only hope was the radio. But if you go march, you never know what will happen. The march was so difficult from the place where we were.

Q: The ice was drifting all the time?

Nobile: Yes. So our only hope--

Q: You advised them not to go?

Nobile: I was against this project, but they insisted. They insisted, because they were convinced that our radio set was not trustworthy. They said, "We will reach the land, we will try to send you help." They were convinced that it was the only possibility.

So they started. When I said, "Let's wait, perhaps things will change," they objected, "Yes, but we have so little food that the food will be less and less."

But while we were there, the second night a man who was outside, on account of the ice-- the ice was moving, there was a danger of breaking the ice. So it was exciting, of course. They went all out.

He said, "There is a bear outside. Give me the pistol, I go to hunt him."

So I said, "All right, take the pistol." The pistol was there.

I was taking my small dog to be sure she didn't bark.

It was a very, very picturesque scene. If I was a painter, I would paint this scene because everybody is taking something, some article--hatchet, a knife, a small knife--everything they could find.

And the bear was there, a big white Polar bear. He was just there about 30 meters distant. He was an enormous bear, enormous. He lay on the block of ice, and the others took all these things. Someone pointed the pistol and at first shot the bear was killed. First shot. He was drifting on the ice.

Strange fate--just during today, just before, Malmgren had spoken about this pistol. He asked me, Malmgren, if a bear comes, it would be wonderful to kill it.

I said, "No, no good at all. We have tried so many times. Impossible we should kill a bear with a pistol.

Q: You had plenty of food now?

Nobile: We had plenty of food. Therefore I called these men, these officers, "We are not in such a rush. We can wait."

"Yes," they said, "but we are drifting. We are getting farther from the base, so it will be more and more difficult."

Finally I thought I should consent, because if I would still make objection, they would believe--get a false impression--that I didn't like to be left there. So I felt it was my duty to say, "If you are convinced of this, then go, go off. Leave me with the other wounded man, I will take care of him."

When Malmgren asked them one by one, "Who is willing to leave," the Czech scientist, Behounek, refused.

He said, "No, I came here with you, I will not leave. I will stay with you."

One of the engineers said, "No, I don't go, I stay here with you."

And the others were prepared to go. All the other Italians, even the radioman. I invited people to go because I said to everybody, "Go. If you are convinced of this, that it's your only hope to save yourself, you better go off."

Then it came to Malmgren. He said, "Bianci"--Bianci was the man--"If Bianci leaves, I will remain with you, because I could never go back to my country, Sweden, and say that I left my chief without any possibility or hope. The only hope is the radio."

So Bianci, he was just like Malmgren, they both said, "I remain here with you."

This decision of Malmgren had a final effect on the others. I believe that the other officers convinced Bianci that he should stay, and Bianci came in and said, "General, excuse me, I must apologize. It was a moment of aberration, but I remain here with you."

The others left with as much provision as we could get. We had shoes. We had plenty of shoes, all those things, but they were all disappeared with the airship. We had some finsko and some kind of shoes, which are excellent for cold weather and snow. When the snow is very cold it is excellent, but no good when the snow is wet. We gave them provisions and they left.

As soon as they left, I called Bianci. I wrote a new message and I gave orders to Bianci, "You, every night for one hour, for one continuous hour, you should transmit this." This was a wise decision, because during one of these transmissions, a Russian man caught some words. The Russian government checked on these things. Then, from there, it passed to the captain of a ship --

Q: The Russian ship?

Nobile: No, our ship. Our base ship, with which we should be in communication, to pay attention to our calls. Soon we were in communication. So after about two weeks, we were in communication.

Q: You established radio communication with the Italian ship.

Nobile: Yes. Our emergency was not finished, of course. Still we had a great deal of hardships. But anyhow, came some fliers--

Q: And dropped you food?

Nobile: --and dropped us things: food and so forth, hooks for fishing--very convenient.

Q: They couldn't catch any fish without them.

(Interviewer's note: I think this means they tried to fish but couldn't catch any without hooks and the plane dropped hooks.)

Nobile: While we were inside the tent, we heard a barking. It was so strange, barking. I thought I would go out and see why the dog was barking. There was this strange thing I saw: the bear was running away. After a time, the bear found a channel, a channel of water, and dropped into that. She didn't like water, so she stopped.

Q: When did Lundberg come?

Nobile: Lundberg came in one month after our expedition of '25 began. The Swedish people, the Swedish fliers, they were flying always in two airplanes. First they flew in with some supplies, even a whiskey bottle. They wrote on this parachute, "Please, if you can find a place to land--where a small airplane could come in on skis--lay down this parachute there and show us." They had found my companions I think about this time, the second. They came back.

Q: Your companions came back.

Nobile: They came back a few hours later. They came back and also this airplane landed on the ice.

Q: You found an area where they could land.

Nobile: Yes. It was far from the place where I was still laying on the ice, but I would follow, because I saw that they could safely come down on the ice.

Q: This was the point of landing. That was Lundberg?

Nobile: Lundberg with other men.

Then my people, they went to meet him and brought him back. While he was coming with my men, he was telling us that his plan was to take us one after another, starting with me, because I could give suggestions how to make the search for the other people-- the people that were gone with the airship because they had not found any trace of them. They could get instructions from me on how to look after them, where to look, so they had orders to take me first.

When they approached me, they told me so, this company.

I said, "Look, I will not come. I will not go with the first plane. I believe you have to start with the other men, who have broken limbs, such as the mechanic."

He looked at the mechanic and said "All right," because after all, they are waiting for you there, this is my order. Second place, they needed a report. They said I would have to leave my companions. This I would not do.

I said, "But on the third trip, I will come along, and then we can give the information." He insisted. I considered the situation, and all people were telling me to go first.

They said, "If anything happens, you can help better than anyone else." So I said, "All right, I go," and I went. It was not pleasant for me, of course, because it was more nice to make a gesture and say "No." But I went. I left everything, to make it as light as possible, and I went.

When I was received by the Swedish ship, Wilkinson's men, very nice people, greeted me very, very nicely.

Q: You took off in Lindbergh's plane? I thought Lindbergh cracked up his plane too.

Nobile: That was after.

Q: Oh, so first he took you --

Nobile: --to the base, and he started taking the others. He went back there, he went alone this time, and stopped to take on board the other men. And I was anxiously waiting for them to come back. But he did not come back. But the other plane, which went, came back from making the second trip. Lundberg didn't.

Q: He crashed.

Nobile: He crashed.

Q: So he was there with the other men now.

Nobile: He crashed his plane. But Lindbergh--it was terrible for him--he became a prisoner of the pack ice, together with the others. He lost his temper. He had a breakdown. This lasted too long.

So they sent me a message asking me for permission to march to land. I answered them, "Don't do so, don't do so," because it would be very dangerous. I told them to wait in the place. Then the Swedish expedition sent another plane.

Q: They rescued two more people?

Nobile: No. Only Lindbergh. But after that, the fliers refused to go again to rescue the others.

Q: But they were finally rescued by the Russian ship?

Nobile: Yes. Then came the Russian ship. The Russian icebreaker crossing, when they were already ready to march. But he was stopped in the ice, because the ice was heavy. He looked forward and the propeller was broken, and so he stopped. But then I knew the captain, so I told him "Do go on, if possible. Do, as possible, go on. Very good."

In another small plane was Chockalost. He's still alive, Chockalost. Chockalost was flying it, just to fly to the place where the others were. While it was this way, the ice, he saw three men. He came around over their position and he sent a message at a certain point--at this point there are three people lying on the ice. They could see well the three men. Some clothes were spread on the ice, and with these clothes they made letters, "Help, Food, Help, Food." But there were clothes and no men.

Q: No men?

Nobile: No men. Just the clothes. There had been two men.

Q: How many were there, three men?

Nobile: There were. They were dead on the ice. After they reached them, they were dead.

They left an account of their march. They said that they had marched for about 14 days, but after 14 days--they were marching towards an Island--after 14 days, they were farther away on account of the drift. Then, at this moment, Malmgren said to them, "It's no use to go on. I will not go on. I will stop here. Take my food and clothes. I can't go on."

Q: He dug a hole in the ice?

Nobile: A hole in the ice and lay down. He said, "You go on, try to reach the land. I will stop here." Then they went. He said, "Only give to my mother this compass"--he had a

little compass--and they went. But it was no use because they could not go too far. They were lost. Besides this, one man had a frozen leg and could not more march. So they lay down.

Horgen was in good shape. He was tempted once, when the land was rather near, to reach the land by himself, but he saw that was difficult, even for only one. So they stopped there in that place. They saw the plane, so they hoped for rescue. They could hope to be rescued.

Q: Amundsen had tried to rescue you, too?

Nobile: He heard this early on the radio--early about our disappearance. There was Amundsen at a banquet, then came the news of our disappearance. And then Amundsen decides to come, to set forth. So he accepted the offer of the French, and he started with this airplane from France, the airplane the *De Latta*; the commander of "*De Latta*" was Quinbau.

Q: Was this a plane or an airship?

Nobile: A plane. Quinbau, with other four men. There were six. They started for King's Bay but never reached it.

Q: Were never heard from again?

Nobile: He disappeared. They disappeared from the scene. But after, a few months after, they found Amundsen's belongings floatings. So we should believe that they fell into the sea.

But the worst of this thing was, the day when Amundsen and Quinbau left with this airplane from France, on the same trip left two more airplanes. So the best would have been to go on all together.

Q: But they didn't. They went separately. Tell me, General, to what do you attribute the falling of your ship.

Nobile: I believe it was ice. All things considered, I came to the conclusion that it was ice. It could have been also holes in the tube.

Q: It could have been a hole?

Nobile: Yes. We were flying against a strong wind and were forcing our speed--flying at full speed--and the structures were rather beaten.