

# The mystery of Amundsen's post

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A joint report by geographer D. Alexeyev, lawyer B. Piskarev and doctor V. Zvyagin.

ON THE steep rocky bank of the Kara Sea in the Arctic settlement of Dickson there is a basalt obelisk. The marble plaque bears an inscription: "Tessem, a Norwegian seaman, member of the *Maud* motor schooner expedition. Died 1920."

This is the site of a polar tragedy, the details of which are unknown, but for nearly fifty years no one had had any doubts as to who lay buried under the monument.

In 1918, Roald-Amundsen decided to retrace Nansen's route on board the *Fram*.

His small vessel, *Maud*, was supposed to get frozen in the ice of the Chukchi Sea and then to drift right across the Arctic Ocean.

Amundsen and his nine companions, who included Grigory Olonkin, a Russian wireless operator, had to spend the winter just off Cape Chelyuskin.

The expedition members took a year to make their observations.

In the autumn of 1919, Amundsen asked the ship's carpenter Peter Tessem and navigator Paul Knutsen to deliver a load of mail, summing up their findings, to the radio station on Dickson Island.

Both 45-year-old Tessem and 30-year-old Knutsen were experienced Arctic explorers.

They set off on the 600-mile journey along the uninhabited shore of the Taimyr Peninsula in mid-October.

The long polar night with its attending severe snowstorms and frosts was upon them. Neither reached Dickson.

The search got under way.

In the summer of 1921, a Soviet-Norwegian search party led by Nikifor Begichev found a note written by Tessem and Knutsen on Cape Vild, halfway to Dickson.

Dated November 15, it said: "We are alright and planning to leave for Port Dickson today."

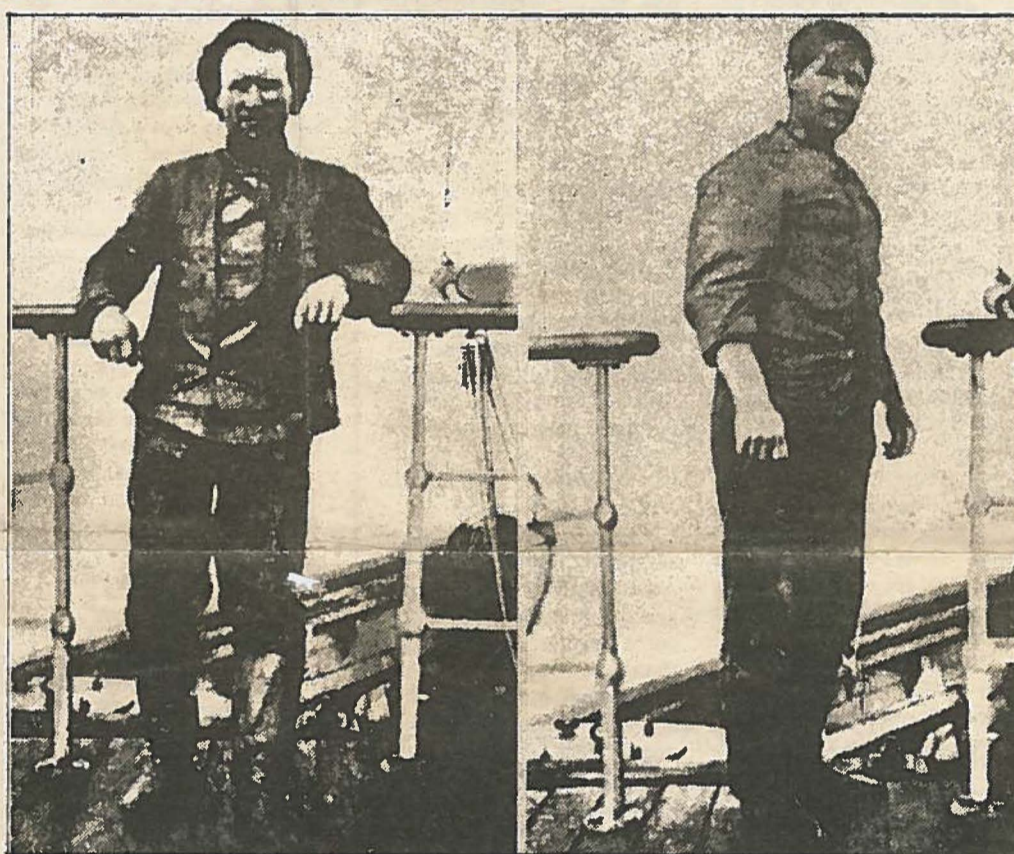
A year later, a team of geologists led by N. Urvantsev found all of Amundsen's post, some 55 miles from Dickson.

The heavy bags, containing scientific material and the lost Norwegians' personal effects, were found inside a makeshift log cabin.

Urvantsev made this entry in his diary: "Among the items are Tessem's documents and his notebooks."

The remains of one of the Norwegians were found a mere two miles from Dickson.

There were no documents but there was a watch inscribed with Tessem's name and his wedding ring on a thong.



Peter Tessem (left) and Paul Knutsen on board the *Maud* shortly before their last expedition

The geologists decided that it must have been Tessem and put a mound of rocks over the remains.

In 1958 the people of Dickson erected the obelisk on the steep shore.

But in 1969 the newly-published volume of the Norwegian *Encyclopaedia of*

*Biographies* included an entry on Tessem, written by Richter, a Norwegian researcher.

He had analysed Urvantsev's diaries and come to the unexpected conclusion that it was Paul Knutsen who had died near Dickson.

Richter based his arguments on the old Norwegian custom of never removing a wedding ring from the hand of a living person.

His version had some other facts to support it.

He maintained that Tessem would hardly have left his small wallet by the River Zelyadeyeva if he had been alive.

Apart from his personal documents, it contained an important telegram from Amundsen.

The researchers' opinions divided. Some continued to believe that it was Tessem who had died near Dickson, while others sided with Richter.

The Moscow branch of the USSR Geographical Society suggested an experiment to identify the remains of the Norwegian.

Experts from the USSR Procurator's Office and the Forensic Medicine Research

Institute were eager to help.

The idea was also supported by the Norwegian Polar Research Institute.

Forensic medicine experts can establish a person's sex and age and determine height to within an inch or so.

They can even find out what diseases the person had suffered.

They are able to match a person's photographs with photos of his skull to see whether they are identical.

They can also compile a physical description of a person.

In short, they can determine his facial features.

Collecting the necessary information about Tessem and Knutsen was not easy.

While their ages were known, there was no available information on their height.

They had different coloured hair. Apparently Amundsen remembered that Tessem suffered from intense headaches — very important evidence.

They established each of the Norwegians' heights from photographs taken during their lifetime.

Months of strenuous and thorough investigation brought the researchers to the conclusion that the remains belonged to Peter

Tessem.

The age, the height and the colour of the hair all tallied. This was confirmed by matching the photographs and the physical description.

The ship's carpenter, who was only 1.56 metres tall, proved to be tougher than his younger companion, despite the fact that, as the research confirmed, he really had suffered from frequent and severe headaches.

Tessem also suffered from radiculitis.

However, the research did not reveal the cause of his death.

No traces of any injuries that could have caused death were detected.

Urvantsev believed that Tessem fell down the steep slope of the mainland shore and the research supported that assumption.

Spectral analysis revealed traces of copper colouring on the right side of the dead man's face and on the bones of his hand.

The traces were left by the rifle cartridges as they spilled out of Tessem's pockets during his fall.

He must have lost consciousness and died of the cold.

Researcher M. Masterskikh, of the USSR Hydrometeorological Centre, computed the general weather conditions in the area of Dickson as they were in late December 1919 — the time Tessem was battling his way towards the polar station.

Apparently the temperature hovered between  $-27^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $-39^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

That spelled certain death for an exhausted man.

So we know now that Knutsen died first, at Cape Zemlyanoi, halfway to Dickson.

Tessem burnt his companion's remains, so that the polar foxes and bears couldn't get them and continued the trek alone.

But there are still many gaps in the Tessem and Knutsen episode.

Why did Knutsen die?

Why did Tessem leave his wallet containing all his papers behind with the mailbags?

Perhaps the answers lie in his notebooks, which were sent to Norway.

The monument to Tessem, put up in 1924

