



Like many adventurers, Sprague Theobald loves a good challenge. In one of the world's most treacherous sailing passages, he found a worthy adversary

# CROSSING THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

BY ALLAN KREDA

# FOR CENTURIES THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

has been a deadly challenge for adventurers. The sailing channel along the upper rim of North America is fraught with deadly challenges from near-freezing currents and devastating ice flows.

When adventurer and yachtsman, Sprague Theobald, set sights on the circuitous 8,500-mile journey from Newport, Rhode Island to Seattle—with frozen stops in Greenland, Beechy Island and Barrow, Alaska—he knew it would be the achievement of a lifetime. That is, of course, if he actually survived.

“I wanted to honor those who tried before. I felt I owed it to them,” Theobald, 59, said, “Maybe, I told myself, if I succeeded, they could all rest a little easier.”

Theobald and his small crew began their spectacular journey on June 16, 2009 aboard their boat, the Bagan. There were polar bears and glaciers the size of skyscrapers ahead, as well as riveting conversations with Inuit elders, overpowering natural beauty and items left behind by those who perished in the 1845 Franklin Expedition. But Theobald had to balance the unmatched experiences the adventure offered with a singular focus on survival.

On a specially outfitted 57-foot Nordhavn production powerboat, Theobald hired three family members—son Sefton, stepdaughter Dominique and stepson Chauncey—to help guide the vessel through the Arctic Circle. The quartet had not lived together for many years and used the five-month journey to build family ties amid the voyage.

On an adventure such as this, there are several moments where the beauty of nature can turn deadly in an instant. Theobald experienced the terror a moment like that could create in mid-August as the Bagan reached Peel Sound—well north of the Arctic Circle in “The Passage.”

The water from Greenland to Alaska ranged between 28 degrees Fahrenheit and 35 degrees Fahrenheit, so cold that just a few drops on bare skin while diving—encasing in the best dry suit—caused extreme pain.

The vessel encountered an ice field coming down from the north, which was actually south of the Bagan’s location. Known as ‘old’ ice, it was hard as cement, four-feet thick and perhaps 20 square miles in total size.

“When we turned around,” recalled Theobald, “we found the ice filling in behind us and saw that we were now in a massive and monstrous ‘squeeze play’ with no exit.” Theobald had never encountered this type of situation while training with the crew of the America’s Cup yacht Intrepid in the late 1970s. “We had powered into a very large pocket, a trap that quickly closed in around us.”

“The sounds were absolutely horrific,” Theobald added. “I thought the hull was being crushed – we heard a



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cas eo, in derfernum,  
Catabescero videfacior  
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Multorae cones, nonim  
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confit reo vati, oculatam  
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grinding, cracking noise. You would think fiberglass would sound like this if it were breaking. It finally dawned on me. It was the ice itself that was making all that noise.”

The crew managed to extricate the Bagan from supreme danger by methodically slicing through the frigid water as ice blocks shifted. Theobald’s sense of accomplishment, not to mention his thrill of surviving nature’s version of chess, has increased exponentially.

“For the first time in my life, I truly felt what it was like to be totally out of options and in Mother Nature’s control,” he admitted. “In everyday life we always have an option (pulling to the side of the road, calling a tow truck, calling a plumber, asking a police officer for help). There was absolutely nothing left that we could do except wait out our fate. Will we get crushed on the rocks or stay afloat? It was completely out of our control.”

When their vessel crossed into waters off the northeastern-most coast of Alaska on Sept. 2, it marked the crew’s first sight of the United States in four months.

That may have been the start of the true journey “home,” but more white-knuckle days and nights remained ahead. When the ship made its way from the Bering Sea into the Gulf of Alaska at 2 a.m. on an especially cold morning, the wind immediately ran up to 50-plus knots, as 15-foot waves were smashing into the Bagan’s hull with every swell— a veritable combination of *Deadliest Catch* and *The Perfect Storm*.

“No matter what direction I’d head the boat, we’d fall off the back of waves with tremendous concussion,” Theobald said. “The heavy and cold winter wind was rolling down the faces of the mountainous islands and gaining speed before it blasted us. We fought this until daybreak and slowly emerged. Each time Bagan fell off the back of a wave, I had my doubts as to whether she would stay afloat. It’s one thing to contemplate sinking in the Long Island Sound but quite another to capsize hundreds of miles from help in water colder than you can imagine.”

On November 5, amid a full gale, the Bagan completed its journey in Seattle. Looking through the prism of time, Theobald has a better understanding of what he has actually accomplished.

“For many years, very few sailors had managed to get through the Passage. Hundreds had died trying. In the 19th century, those explorers were akin to our astronauts, and I felt that I was now among a very select group of men and to receive this honor simply took my words away.”

