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TRAPPED IN ICE IN THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

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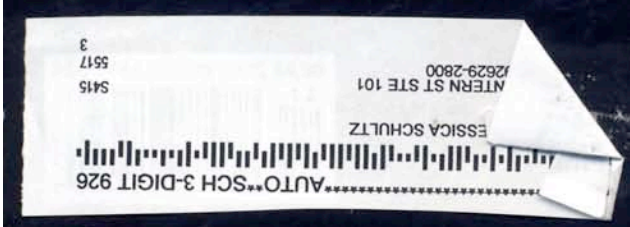
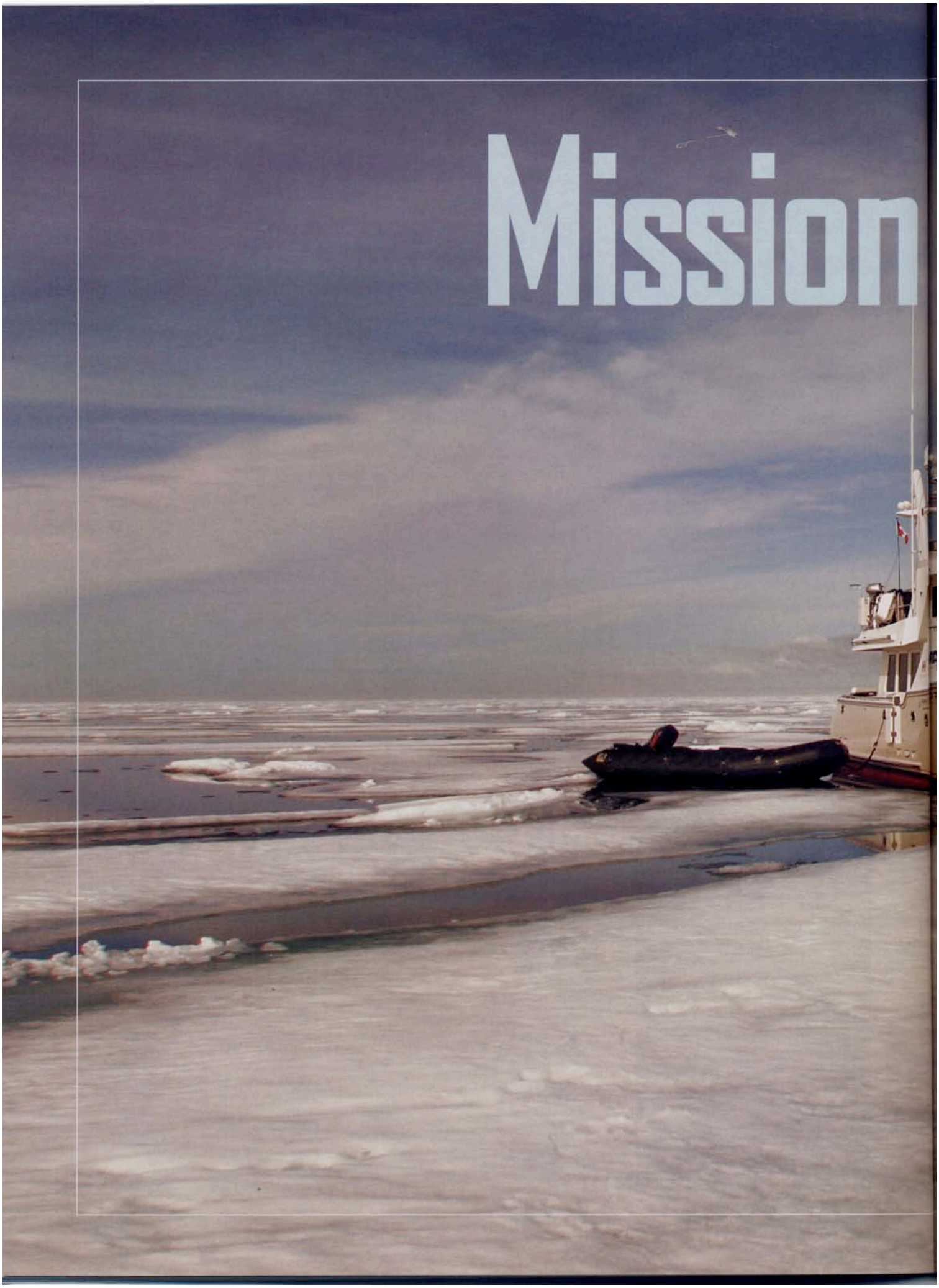


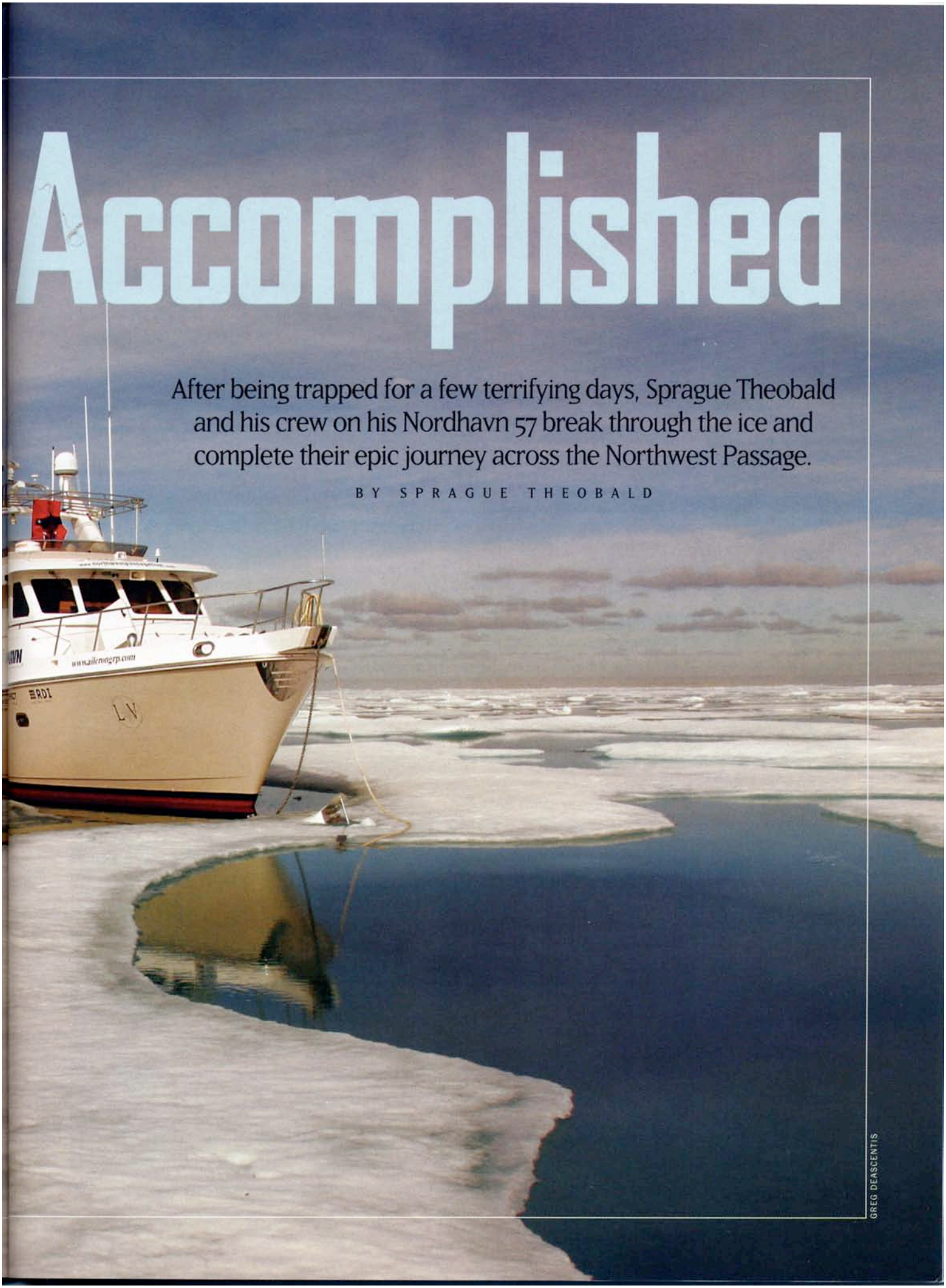


Mission

Accomplished

After being trapped for a few terrifying days, Sprague Theobald and his crew on his Nordhavn 57 break through the ice and complete their epic journey across the Northwest Passage.

BY SPRAGUE THEOBALD



GREG DEASCENTIS

We dropped the hook on Aug. 1 in Blaney Bay, a long, circuitous arm of a bay whose entrance was marked by a massive glacier. We slowly powered *Bagan*, my Nordhavn 57, up to the ice shelf and cut the engine. Echoing around us was creaking and groaning from deep inside the ice block as it slowly moved its way toward the water. Yet after a few minutes, we realized we were listening to the groaning of not the glacier but something entirely different. About 75 feet off our stern was a gathering of walruses, all bathing in the shallows of the bay.

As we broke out the camera gear, my son, Sefton, a student at the University of Colorado Denver, saw a polar bear half a mile down the beach. A small rise separated the bear from the walruses, and every now and again the bear would stop to take a large sniff in the walruses' direction. We watched as the bear came closer and closer to the herd, which was basically unaware of him. But then we had to start our engine to avoid beaching, and we scared the bear away from what seemed to be his next meal. Before he ran off, he was 100 feet away from the walruses, hunkered down and ready to pounce. Truth be told, I wasn't entirely disappointed to have deterred him from his kill, as this was something I wasn't very anxious to film.

TOP OF THE WORLD. Bagan *tries to find open water (opening spread). The walruses in Blaney Bay (top); and the Nordhavn 57's anchor set on the ice to keep the boat from drifting (above).*

Early the next morning we up-anchored and headed west to Beechey Island, one of the few places in the Northwest Passage I'd elevated to almost mythical status. Beechey is one of the last known stops of the doomed Franklin Expedition of 1845. As the short version of that story goes, John Franklin left England in 1845 with 128 men and two ships to find a route through the Northwest Passage, a way to connect the Atlantic to the Pacific at the top of the world. Apart from one contact made in Baffin Bay, Franklin and his men were never seen or heard from again. Several years after his disappearance, a search expedition found the gravesites of three of Franklin's crew as well as various artifacts on Beechey that suggested he was there at some point. Today, the barren and high-sided area is every bit as Franklin found it, and ultimately left it, 164 years ago.

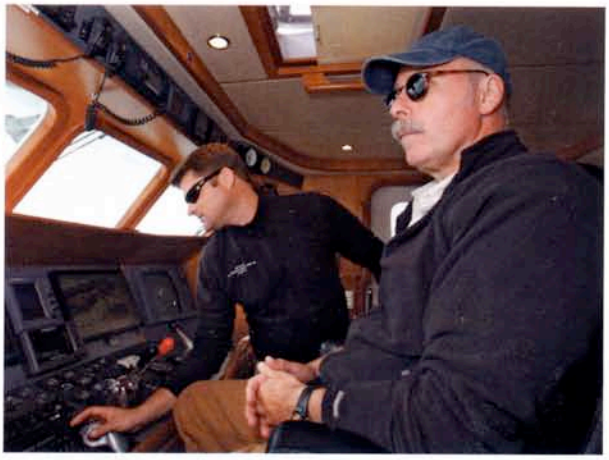
I've been fascinated with the Franklin Expedition for as long as I can remember, and to be anchored at one of its last, virtually undisturbed, sites was about as powerful as it can get for me. We all agreed there was most definitely a haunting presence on land at Beechey. Yet it

TOP: GREG DEASCENTIS; SPRAGUE THEOBALD

was nothing compared to what Greg Deascentis, a diver and underwater videographer, and I experienced. Donning our drysuits and underwater communications gear, we dove the waters at Beechey from the stern of *Bagan*. If perhaps a few thousand people have at one point or another visited Franklin's gravesites, it's a fairly good guess that very few, if any, have been under the water in the approximate location of where his ships were caught in the ice for two years. If ever the absolute presence of the doomed expedition was to be felt, it was there. When Greg and I surfaced, we simply stared at one another in awe.

At Beechey, we started to download the Canadian Ice Service's charts on a regular basis and studied what was happening south in Peel Sound. Twice a day, the service puts out color-coded charts of the area, which show on a percentage scale of 1 to 10 the current ice coverage. We detected in Peel Sound what we thought might be an opening trend in our favor, so we decided to leave Beechey the following day and head to Resolute. The next morning, we began to realize this part of our expedition was going to be governed by some very serious rules.

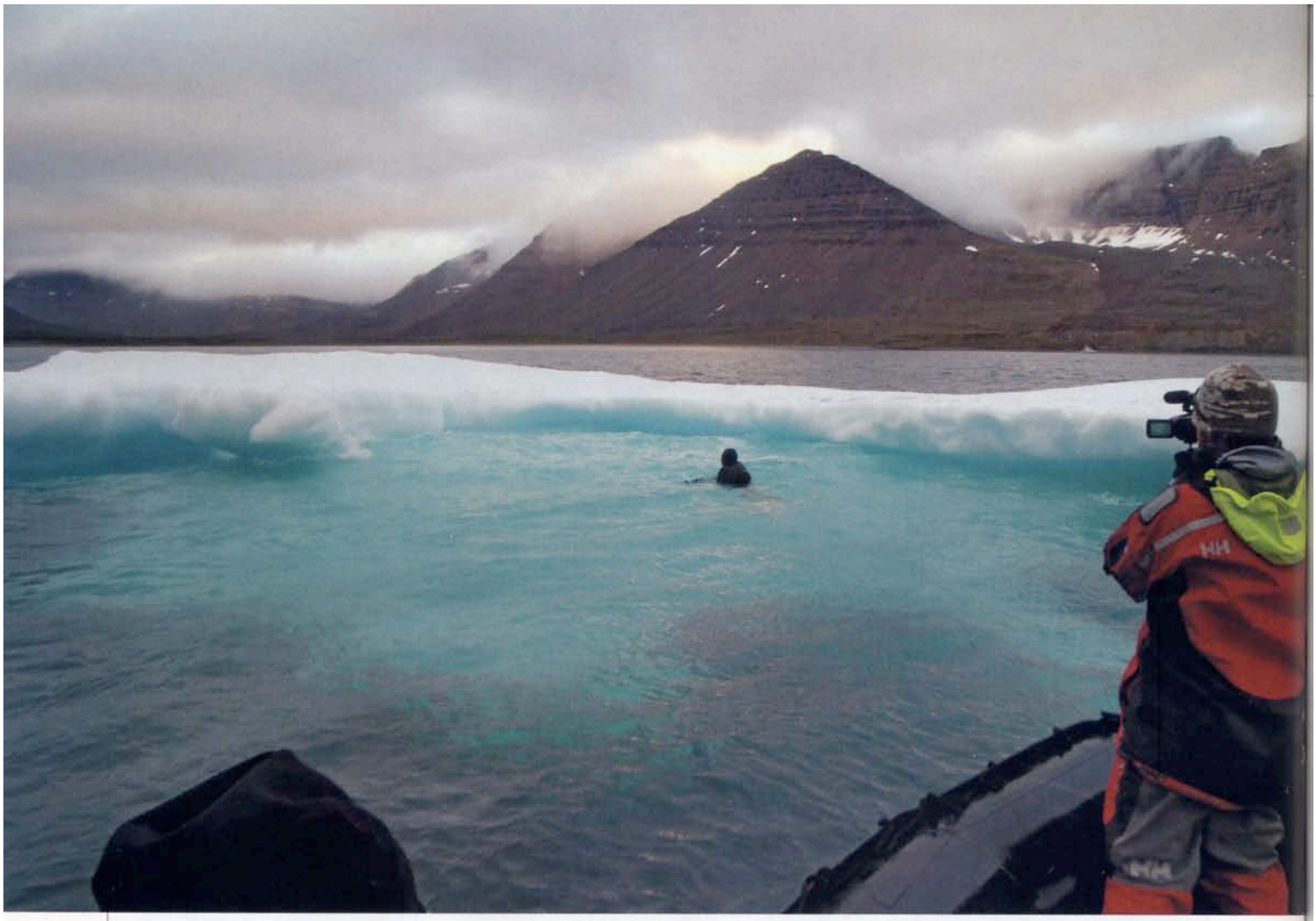
About 50 miles north of Resolute, pack ice started to come into evidence. Pockets of it and fog came and went, forcing us to slow the boat down and alter course. We continued this way for several hours, mostly in silence and on guard. Just outside of Resolute we realized its harbor was totally locked in by ice. We decided to head away from Resolute and start our way south down Peel Sound to get out of the pack ice's path. The central part of the Passage was still blocked by nine-tenths ice, so we couldn't go much farther south. That evening, we dropped the hook on the west side of Devon Island in a small and protected cove. Immediately, we were treated to the sight of a mother polar bear and her cub on shore, not 100 yards off, which was a massive consolation for not being able to get into Resolute.



EASY DOES IT. *Sprague Theobald at the helm (above right). In one terrifying 17-hour period,* **Bagan** *moved 18 miles through the ice.*

HISTORIC SITE. *The graves on Beechey Island for some of the 128 men in the 1845 Franklin Expedition who explored the Northwest Passage; all perished.*

TOP: JASON R. EVANS; GREG DEASCENTIS



DANGEROUS DIVE. *Greg Deascentis, an experienced diver and underwater videographer, swims out to a small berg in the Passage for filming.*

For the next several days we slowly hopped our way south from small cove to small cove, getting about as close to the pack ice in the Central Passage as we could. We were in a small bay just off Pandora Island when I received an e-mail from Peter Semotiuk, a radio operator in Cambridge Bay who has been advising boats about ice in the Passage for many years. Peter and I had been e-mailing for a few weeks, and he always kept us apprised of conditions. In this e-mail, he simply stated, "The ice in the Central Passage may not open for two more weeks. Keep an eye on the ice off Resolute, as it can start down Peel Sound and trap you in." What had been a fear and concern that, up until this point, resided only on paper under "Plan B" was now starting to take on a form and life. The monster under the bed began to stir. That night, Clinton Bolton, our captain, and I discussed head-back dates and plans. If we were still in Peel Sound on Sept. 1, we would try to head back the 3,000 miles to Newport, Rhode Island — our starting point. If we were not past Cambridge Bay by Sept. 8, we would do the same. This e-mail and subsequent planning marked the beginning of a long stretch of little sleep and deep concern for me.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE. Check out additional pictures of this epic voyage at our website, motorboating.com.

Two days later, still off Pandora Island, we downloaded the newest ice chart, where we saw what appeared to be the beginning of a lead opening up on the east side of Peel Sound. What had been nine-tenths was now seven-tenths. We decided to stage farther south to try to take advantage of the opening if and when it occurred. On Aug. 13, we made the move down to Wrottesley Inlet and dropped the hook there to wait. That evening's ice chart was amazing: There was a clear lead on the east side of Peel Sound, which ran all the way down to and past King William Island. The next morning, we headed off. It was at this point the monster under the bed truly came to life, crawled out and stood in front of us, filling the room with its power and strength. What the charts showed to be ice-free was now before us slowly turning into two-tenths coverage. It very quickly worked its way up to nine-tenths. As quickly as it filled in front of us, it came in behind us, blocking any retreat to the north. Our forward progress was immediately reduced to 2 knots or less and, at that, resembled nothing remotely suggesting a straight line.

At first, Chauncey Tanton, a former professional snowboarder and financial advisor, and Sefton stood on the radar arch calling out the small openings to take while Greg; Dominique Tanton, our first mate (and Chauncey's wife); and I fended the ice off the boat with poles. With

TOP: HOLE IN THE WALL PRODUCTIONS

BOLD JOURNEY. *Theobald and his crew started in Newport, Rhode Island, and then went into the Arctic Circle to complete their voyage through the Northwest Passage. The dotted line remains to be covered.*

no formal schedule, we all rotated into each other's positions. For seven hours, we all settled into where we fit most naturally. I was at the wheel (if anyone was going to damage the boat, I wanted it to be me). Chauncey and Sefton fended ice off the bow while Dominique and Greg took care of the stern. Clinton stood on the arch, looking for and calling out the ever-changing leads.

To keep forward progress going we had to ask the unthinkable of *Bagan*. We utilized it not only as an ice-breaker, but also as a tug. We'd gently move up against the floe blocking our path, make contact and then pour on the coals. The noise was terrifying, horrific. Never having been in a situation like this, I didn't know how much the boat could take. The stabilizers were exposed as well as the prop and rudder. Every time I applied the throttle, I expected the worst. Fog had come and gone all day, and at about 8 p.m. it rolled in for good. As hard as it was to find a lead and then reposition *Bagan* to take advantage of it, now the fog kept us from seeing any lead that was more than 50 yards away. Our course became more and more erratic, our backing and filling less and less effective. By midnight we had completely run out of options. We had gone 18 miles in 17 hours. We were trapped in a nine-tenths sheet of ice that was 1 to 4 feet thick, and we could do nothing about it. We all agreed the best course of action was to drop the hook on the ice that was pressed against our bow and try to get some sleep. I wasn't able to. For some very dark and disturbing hours, I had to acknowledge and give consideration to a very disturbing endgame.

The next morning we walked out onto the ice and took stock of our predicament. By all accounts, *Bagan* had suffered very little damage the night before. That afternoon the ship's computer and GPS showed us the inconceivable: Where we were once a mile and a half off the beach, we were now only half a mile off, and the pressure ice building up to our west was slowly pushing us toward the rocks. We all gathered in the pilothouse to make the hardest yet simplest decision I've ever had to make: Stay put and have the boat destroyed on the rocks or try to face west and push our way out of it, risking equally as much damage.

We started the engine and pushed west. In five hours, we managed to get three miles off the beach and once again became firmly stuck. Once more, with complete despondency, we dropped the hook and slept. Yet upon waking, I had one of the most magnificent mornings of my life. When I came up to the pilothouse, Chauncey and Dominique were huddled around the computer. The GPS showed we had drifted with the ice seven miles to the south, away from land. Several hours later, Chauncey came down to my cabin and told me the radar showed no ice ahead of us. After he left, I was blasted with emotion. All the terror, angst and despondency of the past two days flooded out of me.

Two days later, we were in Gjoa Haven licking our wounds, and after that was Cambridge Bay, where I was finally able to meet up with Peter to thank him for his continued e-mails of support and advice.

On Aug. 30 we crossed our "official unofficial" exit of the Northwest Passage at the 130th meridian. Dominique made a cake (bakeless Alaska), and there was a very joyous yet subdued on-board celebration. We had done it. We had transited the Northwest Passage, the full gravity of which probably won't hit me until this winter. On Sept. 4, we arrived in Barrow, Alaska, marking our entry back into the United States, which we had left back on June 16. For me, that was as good a feeling as there ever could be! ✤

For more stories, photos and video, go to northwestpassagefilm.com.

VICTORY. *The crew celebrates. From left: Sprague Theobald; Sefton Theobald; Dominique Tanton; Clinton Bolton; Chauncey Tanton; Greg Deascentis.*