

Northernmost shipwreck ever an emotional find for explorer

MISSISSAUGA LIBRARY SYSTEM

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Staff Writer

Eight years of research and preparation finally paid off last month for a former Mississauga resident when two Canadian divers touched down on the deck of the Breadalbane, 130 years after it sank in 103 metres (340 feet) of frigid water off the coast of Beechey Island.

The northernmost shipwreck known to man, the three-masted vessel had been the subject of a five-year search by physician-diver-explorer Joseph MacInnis when it was sighted by sophisticated sonar equipment aboard the Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker John A. Macdonald in 1980.

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After two fruitless expeditions, impeded by dangerous weather and ice conditions, in 1981 and 1982, MacInnis and a small crew from the National Geographic Society, underwriters of part of the exploration's cost, found that ice over the ship this year was thick and unbroken.

Although the team had not planned to make a dive until next year, the near-perfect ice conditions prompted an early dive. "When the pilots said the ice was really good, it was a last-minute scramble to get the expedition organized," said MacInnis.

To reach the ship, divers had to be lowered through holes cut into the two-metre (six feet) thick ice into the -2 degrees Celsius (29°F) water. The four dives, spread out over a three-day period, were photographed by television cameras aboard a remote-piloted vessel.

Samples of wood and metal and an almost perfectly preserved wheel were brought up by the divers and will be sent to Parks Canada for analysis to determine the effect the exceptionally cold water had on the preservation of the Breadalbane.

Despite his joy at the excellent condition of the ship, MacInnis said, "The high point for me was when the first diver touched down the ship.

"It was a terribly emotional experience, to reach back through a century to feel the spirits of those guys who I think were the astronauts of their generation," MacInnis admitted.

MacInnis was accompanied by three students on the mission, including his son, Jeff, who still resides in Mississauga. "They were really the backbone" of the expedition, he said.

The Breadalbane and a companion ship had originally been sent out in 1853 to locate the British explorer Sir John Franklin. In August of that year, ice ripped through the hull of the Breadalbane, sending the ship to the ocean floor in less than 15 minutes.