

RESEARCH NOTE

Further to the death of Sigurd B. Myhre at Camp Abruzzi, Rudolf Island, Franz Josef Land, during the Ziegler Polar Expedition, 16 May 1904

P.J. Capelotti

Division of Social Sciences, Penn State Abington, Abington, PA 09001, USA

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Correspondence

P.J. Capelotti, Division of Social Sciences, Penn State Abington, Abington, PA 09001, USA. E-mail: pjc12@psu.edu

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Abstract

In the spring of 1904, during the Ziegler Polar Expedition led by Anthony Fiala, Sigurd B. Myhre, a Norwegian from Trondheim who served on-board the expedition ship *America* as a fireman, fell ill and died. The papers of Dr George Shorkley, surgeon to the Ziegler Polar Expedition, contain hints that Myhre may have died from causes other than natural causes.

By May 1904, the Ziegler Polar Expedition had suffered a series of misfortunes at Camp Abruzzi, its base on the northern edge of Teplitz Bay on Rudolf Island in Franz Josef Land (Fig. 1). The spectacularly well-funded, and hence well-equipped, expedition was provided with further supplies that had been left behind on Rudolf Island by the polar expedition of the Duke of the Abruzzi, in 1900, and by the Baldwin–Ziegler Polar Expedition, in 1902. However, by April 1904 Fiala had managed to squander much of this vast quantity of material. Even before the expedition base camp was established, he had lost nearly a quarter of the ponies he was to use for the polar dash to disease and careless handling. Five per cent of his 218 dogs were lost, along with the ship's dinghy, after they were left on the Teplitz Bay ice and carried away as a gale sprang up.

The ship itself—the *America*—was crushed by pressure ridges of ice in Teplitz Bay in November 1903, and disappeared in a storm two months later, either sinking at its mooring or being simply blown out to sea. Twenty-three sailors who had been living on-board the ship were now forced into the shore hut, alongside 16 already overcrowded scientists, surveyors and surgeons. The grumbling of the crew, who had accompanied the expedition on the voyage through the ice, south of Franz Josef Land, through the British Channel to Rudolf Island, hardened to dissension with Fiala's leadership.

Dissension, failure, injury and revolt

On 7 March 1904, Fiala made the first of three attempts to reach the pole. He took 26 men, 16 ponies and 117 dogs north-east to Cape Fligely, where he planned to descend onto the sea ice and sledge north. At Cape Fligely, five men could not proceed. These included the Norwegian Sigurd B. Myhre, with an unspecified ailment, and Charles E. Rilliet, an engineer from St. Louis, Missouri, who had been instrumental in launching a series of balloons from Alger Island during the Baldwin–Ziegler expedition in June 1902 (Capelotti 2008). Rilliet had suffered a hernia pulling one of the sledges across the Rudolf Island ice dome. Fiala, blaming his failure on the bad condition of his men, retreated to Camp Abruzzi after just four days. When a second attempt, on 25 March 1904, only managed to proceed three kilometres on the sea ice north of Cape Fligely, with Fiala retreating after just two days in the field, dissension erupted into open revolt.

At Camp Abruzzi, the expedition now broke down into a variety of cliques, with no real central authority, so when Fiala called for men to remain on Rudolf Island for another try at the pole in 1905, there were few volunteers. As Fiala admitted, “the men lost interest in the northern campaign and openly expressed their deep felt desire to go home” (Fiala 1906: 88). Faced with a disintegrating situation, Fiala led a retreat to Cape Flora on



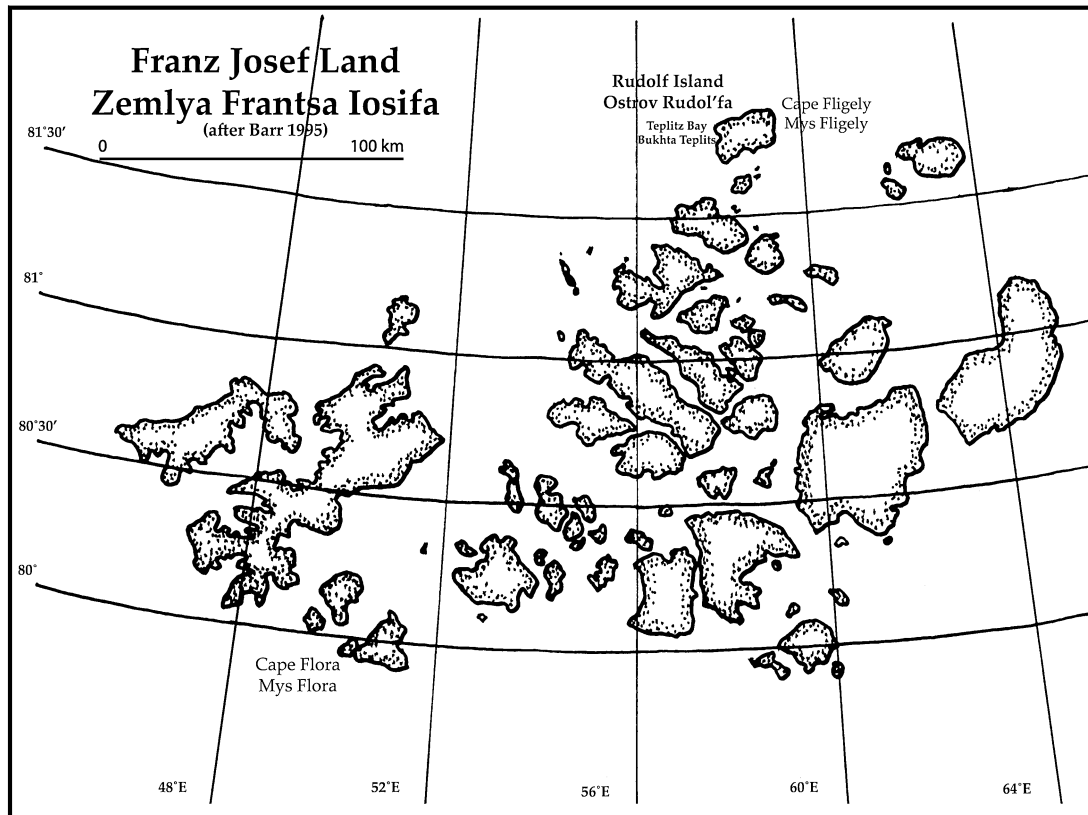


Fig. 1 Franz Josef Land, showing the locations of Cape Flora, Teplitz Bay and Cape Fligely (after Barr 1995).

Northbrook Island with 25 of the 39 members of the expedition. There, Fiala expected a relief ship to arrive that summer and take his disheartened crew home, prior to Fiala making another attempt on the pole in 1905.

Those who left Rudolf Island included all of the expedition's medical personnel: doctors George Shorkley and Charles L. Seitz; medical student J. Colin Vaughn; and veterinarian H.H. Newcomb. Those who remained behind at Camp Abruzzi included the chief scientist of the expedition, William J. Peters, and his two assistants, Russell W. Porter and R.R. Tafel; the chief engineer of the ship, Henry P. Hartt; the assistant commissary, Spencer W. Stewart; the steward, Bernard E. Spencer; three sailors from Massachusetts, William R. Myers, D.S. Mackiernan and Elijah Perry; two Swedes, John and Anton Vedoe; two Norwegians, Myhre and the carpenter Peter L. Tessem; and, finally, Rilliet (Fiala 1906: 12–14; Vedoe 1992: 115–116; Fig. 2).

Brief notes on the last months of Sigurd Myhre

The first suggestion that something was wrong with Sigurd Myhre comes in the medical journal kept by George Shorkley (Shorkley 1903/04). From the start of



Fig. 2 Sigurd Myhre (left), pictured along with other members of Fiala's crew at Teplitz Bay in the winter of 1903–04. The men are sewing fur clothing. In this image, Myhre is working away, contrary to notes written about him before and after his death. (Courtesy of the Norwegian Polar Institute Photo Library. A cropped version of this photograph was published in Fiala [1906], between p. 72 and p. 73.)

the expedition, Shorkley had kept a close eye on the health of each and every crew member. For example, he had very quickly diagnosed Fiala with a severe nervous condition that caused disorientation, bordering on madness (Shorkley 1903/04: 15 August 1903), and had also diagnosed Captain Edwin Coffin, the Master of the *America*, with extreme alcoholism (Shorkley 1903/04: 23 August 1903).

Shorkley's journal mentions Myhre in several places. On the initial journey from Norway to Franz Josef Land, Shorkley had examined each member of the crew, save Coffin and his first officer Edward Haven, both of whom refused to submit to physical examination. Myhre's examination elicited the following details: he was 29 years old, stood 5 feet 6 inches (168 cm) tall and weighed 155 pounds (70 kg). He had been born in Trondheim, Norway, and had a tattoo of an "Indian girl" on his right forearm and the initials "S.M." on his left hand. His teeth were in very poor condition, with two upper and two lower molars missing on each side of his mouth. When Shorkley weighed the crew later in the fall, Myhre had put on seven pounds, weighing in at 162 pounds (73 kg).

On 10 November 1903, Shorkley wrote that he had gone from the base camp out to the ship to see Hartt, who was ill with an incapacitating rectal inflammation, and Myhre. He wrote "[Myhre] is a case of malingery [*sic*]" (Shorkley 1903/04). Since the summer, Shorkley had noted several crew members that he believed were shirking their work, and from this note he clearly felt Myhre was one of them. On March 8, Shorkley recorded what happened to Myhre on the march to Cape Fligely: the Norwegian had stabbed his own hand while trying to cut a piece of pemmican.

Shorkley and the rest of his medical staff left Camp Abruzzi on 1 May 1904. On 5 May 1904, Anton Vedoe wrote in his diary that "Tessem and Myhre have been sick. Most likely a bad touch of cold. They have been in bed most of the time and feel quite feeble. I have had a slight cold but not to interfere with my work" (Vedoe 1992: 116).

Four days later, Anton Vedoe left camp on a surveying journey south, via Austria Sound, with Porter, Rilliet, Mackiernan and Spencer. Peters, Tafel and John Vedoe would journey south to Cape Flora via the British Channel later in the summer. Anton Vedoe and his party reached Cape Flora in mid-July, whereas Peters and his team did not reach Cape Flora until 31 August. They brought the news that Myhre had died on 16 May (Vedoe 1992: 137).

Fiala wrote briefly in his official account of the expedition that Myhre "died at Camp Abruzzi on May 16th after an illness of several weeks" (Fiala 1906: 121). The expedition buried Myhre four days later, on 20 May,



Fig. 3 The grave of Sigurd B. Myhre, Cape Saulen, Rudolf Island, Franz Josef Land (from Fiala 1906).

under a pile of rocks at Cape Saulen, just north of Teplitz Bay. Fiala described his gravesite as "the most northern tomb, I believe, in the world" (Fiala 1906: 121). A photograph (Fig. 3) from Fiala's account shows a carefully crafted and erected cross marking Myhre's grave, which overlooks the Arctic Sea. Barr (1991) was shown the remnants of this cross when she visited the nearby meteorological station at Teplitz Bay in 1991.

Porter, who, by the end of the summer of 1904, was having serious doubts about whether any of them would survive, mentioned the death in his diary.

... [the] person was one Murray [*sic*], a Norwegian fireman, who passed away at Camp Abruzzi, on 16 May, with no medical aid at hand (all the physicians had come south to go home). Score one against this expedition for the evil spirit hovering forever over the Arctic waste. May it be the last although I doubt it. This man was ill when I was there the first of May and I understand he never recovered, was unconscious a good deal of the time and would not answer when spoken to. He leaves a wife in Bergen.

(Porter no date: 50)

(Fiala [1906: 195] wrote that when the expedition was rescued by the ship *Terra Nova* in mid-summer 1905, "great bags of mail" arrived with the ship, including one letter addressed to Myhre, who had already been dead for over a year. It related the news that Myhre's wife in Norway had died. One account relates the extreme coincidence that husband and wife had passed away on the very same day.)

Shorkley, in overall charge of the health of the expedition, questioned the Peters group closely about what had happened to Myhre. Written beneath his notes on Myhre's physical examination, Shorkley added the following.

Party arriving at Cape Flora from Camp Abruzzi report the death of Myhre, at the latter place, on the 16th of May 1904. Cause of death unknown. The only significant symptoms available are that, during the last few days of his life, deceased was in a state of extreme cyanosis & of stupor amounting almost to complete coma. Buried in a cairn of rocks on the hill just NW of the camp, the cairn being marked by a wooden cross about 6 ft. (183 cm) in height, upon which is carved a suitable inscription.

(Shorkley 1903/04: undated entry, probably 31 August 1904)

Shorkley's doubts and Hartt's letter

When ice prevented the expected relief ship from reaching Franz Josef Land in 1904, the expedition, riven by dissension, crippled by short rations and scattered in several groups around Franz Josef Land, descended into depression. Shorkley's medical journal soon diminished to barely a single line each day, and then ceased altogether on 7 September 1904.

Somehow, the men all survived the second winter. Fiala attempted his third, final and equally brief attempt on the pole on 16 March 1905. The following day, Porter arrived at Camp Abruzzi from Cape Flora, and brought a letter to Hartt from Shorkley. Shorkley must have heard or been told by someone in the Peters party at Cape Flora that Rilliet had given some medications to Myhre before he died, and Shorkley wanted to know just what those medicines had been.

In reply, Hartt wrote a long, tortuous letter describing his own rectal surgery at the hands of Seitz, who had returned to Camp Abruzzi the previous fall. Hartt additionally suffered from a sprained ankle, a sprained knee and a broken rib. He had all but given up hope of seeing civilization again. Then, in answer to Shorkley's query about Myhre, Hartt wrote the following.

You were asking me to try and remember the kind of medicine that Rilliet, gave Murry [Myhre]. I could not say what he gave him, I only heard him make the remark before he left here that he had given him enough medicine to kill two men. I suppose though he was fooling at the time he made the remark, because he thought as every one else did I suppose, Murry, was playing another one of his tricks to get out of work.

(Hartt 1905)

From this note it is impossible to identify which substances Rilliet might have given to Myhre, or whether he had received any further medication after Rilliet left Camp Abruzzi, on 9 May, with Porter's exploring party. At that time, nine men, including Myhre, were left at

Camp Abruzzi. These included Hartt, the Peters party, of Peters, Tafel and John Vedoe (who would leave after Myhre died and bring the news of his death to Cape Flora), along with sailors Gustave Meyer and Elijah Perry, assistant commissary Spencer Stewart, and carpenter Peter Tessem.

Anton Vedoe, as quoted earlier, merely thought both Myhre and Tessem were suffering from bad colds. He certainly gives no hint that he thought that Myhre was near death. Tessem soon recovered from his "bad cold", but Myhre worsened and soon died. If the two events are connected, did Rilliet give a bigger dose of medicine to Myhre than to Tessem simply because he thought he was shirking his workload?

Shorkley's list of medical supplies left behind at Camp Abruzzi—when the larger part of the expedition retreated in May 1904—includes enough to supply a small hospital, including over 30 000 pills of various types. A sense of what would have been included comes from Shorkley's medical journal entry of 13 July 1903, when Fiala asked Shorkley to prepare a package of medical supplies that would be left in a box at Cape Flora in case of emergency. These include morphine, laxatives, diarrhea tablets, and medicines for coughs and headaches.

Conclusions: suicide, illness or murder?

The comments made by both Shorkley and Rilliet about Myhre's avoidance of work cast an interesting light on his hand injury at Cape Fligely. Was the stab wound in fact accidental, or had Myhre—like Fiala himself, for that matter—looked out over the implacable polar sea from the heights of Cape Fligely, and searched for a way out of what was clearly a doomed expedition? By the time they reached Cape Fligely, Shorkley was already convinced that Fiala was incompetent, if not outright mad. If Myhre had come to the same conclusion, then a cut on the hand was preferable to being led across a thousand miles of polar ice by a hopeless commander.

Such an action would suggest a strong impulse for self-preservation, which would seem to rule out the notion that Myhre might have killed himself through an overdose once safely back at Camp Abruzzi. Shorkley's long-distance diagnosis of extreme cyanosis could have been the result of hypothermia, but could also have resulted from any number of other causes, including myocardial infarction or heart attack. The additional condition of stupor further suggests hypothermia. During a winter when the temperatures at Camp Abruzzi fell below -40°C , it is possible that Myhre was literally freezing to death.

The possibility that Myhre was suffering from the end stages of some other undiagnosed terminal illness cannot

be discounted, but this possibility seems unlikely to have escaped the notice of Shorkley. Furthermore, the symptoms, such as were gathered by Shorkley, do not suggest any of the more common afflictions suffered by polar explorers of this and other eras. Scurvy is discounted for several reasons. The expedition's table was well supplied in its first months, and the disease would have produced bleeding and anaemia, neither of which was recorded for Myhre. The boiled stews and processed foods eaten by the expedition, combined with the length of time Myhre seemed to suffer, argue against the more rapidly moving trichinosis, which apparently caused the demise of Andrée and his men seven years earlier. Fever and coughing, two symptoms of tuberculosis, do not seem to have been present in Myhre, and, of course, the great influenza epidemic that indeed reached the Arctic was still 14 years away. Rilliet would have made his comment about giving Myhre enough medicine to kill two men both before he left Camp Abruzzi and before Myhre died. We have a sense of how he reacted when the Peters party arrived at Cape Flora just after midnight on 1 September 1904, bringing with them the news of Myhre's death. Most of the camp was asleep, except for Rilliet and Anton Vedoe, who were pottering about in their own small hut. John Vedoe, whose diary of the trip south to Cape Flora is embedded in his brother's account of the expedition, writes that "the sad news of Myhre's death brought seriousness to the otherwise happy faces . . ." (Vedoe 1992: 212). If Rilliet had indeed made light to Hartt that he had overmedicated Myhre, the realization that Myhre was dead and that he might be the cause must have come as a tremendous shock.

Anton Vedoe, Tessem and Rilliet all returned to Camp Abruzzi at the end of June 1905, to make a last visit before retreating south. They remained in the otherwise empty camp for a week. Vedoe spent the time taking photographs and cleaning the expedition hut. He makes no mention of what Rilliet did during this time, and there is no indication that any of them hiked to Cape Saülen to visit Myhre's grave. On 2 July 1905 they nailed the expedition hut closed, and the last three representatives of this

"American" expedition—a Norwegian, a Swede and an American—left Rudolf Island for the final time.

What can be said for certain in this strange tale is that Sigurd Myhre died on 16 May 1904, after suffering for more than a week with an extreme form of cyanosis, accompanied by near-coma, while his fellow countryman, Tessem, recovered from his illness. If, as Hartt suggests, Rilliet really thought that Myhre was shirking his workload, and proceeded to medicate him to the point of overdose, his actions contributed to, if not caused, Myhre's death. Such an event further complicates a chapter in the history of an expedition that is already replete with examples of human weakness.

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