

# HOW THE NORTH POLE WAS LOST

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN LOOMIS



C  
A  
w  
ic  
s  
a  
v  
t  
I

Captain Alfred McLaren,  a lifelong

American  adventurer, thought he

would be the first man to reach the true



North Pole, two miles beneath the

ice sheet. Then his  Australian partner

squeezed him out of the expedition 

and cut a deal with the  Russians,

who turned the dive into a modern-day



landgrab. From the lavish soirees of

the Explorers Club  to the halls of the

Kremlin, **MATTHEW TEAGUE** takes us inside the

battle for the last great first on Earth. 



War, the world viewed the Arctic as a wasteland, so dark and frozen it wasn't worth claiming.

That's not the case now. As climate change melts the ice pack, it's unlocking two features of the Arctic — one geographic, one geologic — that could, to some degree, affect the lives of just about everyone in the world.

As sea ice melts, the northern route grows more attractive to shippers; it would save 4,000 miles, for instance, on a trip from England to Japan. Its feasibility as a route is not some abstract future notion. At the rate the ice is melting now, experts say, ships will be able to transit the Arctic within 10 years.

The increasing value of Arctic real estate has sent countries into a frenzy of claim-laying and flag-planting unseem since the colonial era. Consider tiny Hans Island. A barren little blip of land at the head of the Northwest Passage, it was uncontested until the Danes put a flag on it in 1984. A couple of years ago Canada hoisted a larger flagpole of its own. The Danes, outraged, took out international Google advertisements trumpeting their territorial rights. Canadians, in turn, called for a boycott of Danish pastries. The whole international imbroglio concerned what was essentially a lump of rock desired by two normally mild-mannered countries. The spat doesn't bode well for the fate of vast tracts of passageway now thawing across the Arctic.

The geological stakes may be even higher. Millions of years ago the top of the world was a warm place, full of wildlife. All that organic material settled to the seabed and was covered in sediment and compressed over time, like what happened under the sands of the Arabian Peninsula.

"All signs lead to the fact that there's a ton of oil up there," says Scott Borgerson, an Arctic expert for the Council on Foreign Relations, a nonpartisan think tank. He estimates that as much as a quarter of the world's still-undiscovered oil and gas may lie under the Arctic seafloor.

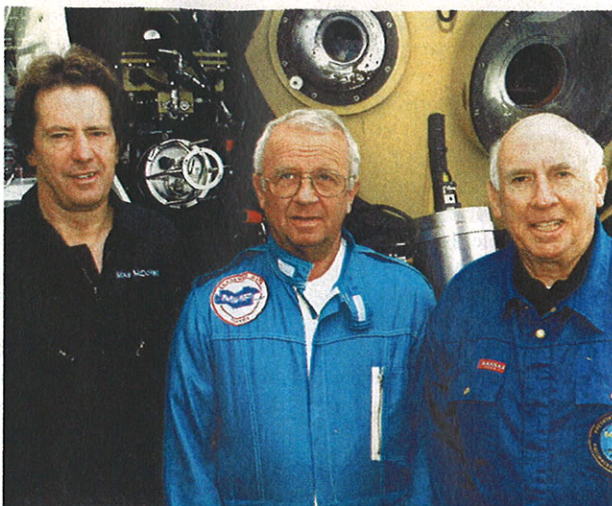
Those two assets — shipping lanes and mineral resources — are in short supply around the globe. Ships stand in line at the Panama Canal, and the price of a barrel of oil now reaches three digits. That makes the Arctic increasingly important to any nation willing to pull on its snowshoes. So about the same time the Explorers Club flag motored toward the undersea North Pole, a team of Danish scientists was also pushing north on an ice-breaking ship for research; an American Coast Guard cutter was setting off to map a large portion of the seafloor; and Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper was traveling to the extreme north of Canada's territory to announce a new military training base and declare that the first rule of Arctic sovereignty is "use it or lose it."

None of those countries, though, matched the prowess of Captain Fred McLaren's former Cold War enemy, the shrewdest of all Slavic sea dragons.



**THE FIRST RUSSIAN TO CLASH WITH** McLaren was a polar bear, fixed in the crosshairs of the captain's periscope. It was 1970, and McLaren had charted half the Siberian continental shelf. He and his crew ascended to periscope depth, and he spun to

take a look at the ice on all sides. His stern naval demeanor fell away when he cried out to his quartermaster, "Polar bear! Polar bear!... Quick, hand me the camera."



**THE EX-PARTNERS** "It was a sham," says McLaren, right, with Mike McDowell and Anatoly Sagalevitch in more congenial days.

McLaren removed the periscope's eyepiece and slapped on a Hasselblad, snapping shots as the bear took notice and slid off the ice. "He's swimming right for us," he called out. "He's closing fast."

The bear charged, showing white fangs set in a black mouth, at what it apparently thought was a fearless, one-eyed Arctic seal. Had the bear dived, it would have discovered the rest of the USS Queenfish, a nearly 300-foot, 4,650-ton attack submarine powered by a nuclear reactor. After a while the bear gave up and retreated, leading away what turned out to be a whole family of polar bears, looking over their shoulders in puzzlement.

Such spontaneous moments punctuated the crew's otherwise claustrophobic and isolated life beneath the ice. At the North Pole the

sub had surfaced long enough for the crew to clamber out on the ice and take a photograph with an impromptu Santa Claus while McLaren sent a pair of scuba divers to examine the ice from below. On a previous trip he had made to the North Pole, 10 years earlier, his crew played the first game of baseball there, in which a batter could knock the ball into tomorrow, literally, and circumnavigate the globe on his way around the bases. The one thing they didn't do either time — couldn't do, because McLaren's sub was not built to handle the pressure at such depth — was touch down on the North Pole seafloor.

McLaren now lives in a cabin tacked onto a mountainside in central Colorado, up a dirt — often mud — road that folds itself upward in a series of tight turns and requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle. His home is above the snow line, at a lonely height that squeezes the breath from any unacclimated lungs, an interesting choice for a man who has spent a whopping five cumulative years of his life under the sea.

He showed me to his library, where two functional, quarter-scale biplanes hung on cables from the ceiling, and books, photographs, and paintings covered the walls. He pointed to one. "My great-grand-aunt," he said. "When she died in 1911, she was the wealthiest person in all of California." He grinned. "And she died without a will, which created pandemonium." McLaren comes from a long line of warriors, thanks to a meeting of Scottish clan chiefs on one side of his family and Spanish conquistadors on the other. "A very long family tradition of military," he said. "I was told from a very early age that the family considered that the most honorable occupation."

After his adventure under the Arctic — for which he won his second Legion of Merit — McLaren pursued more academic and scientific interests. He earned advanced degrees at George Washington University, Cambridge in England, and the University of Colorado, where he became a professor in the geography department. But his work always drifted back to the Arctic, because his heart remained under the ice. During a lunch meeting with colleagues in early 1997, for instance, McLaren developed an idea to return to the North Pole — the true underwater pole — and touch the spot of Earth that had eluded him on his previous visits.

The most prominent feature of his library is the Arctic submarines. They present themselves in photographs, paintings, and models. They're shown swimming beneath the ice and smashing through it. McLaren pointed out each with tremendous affection, as though describing one of his four children, and talked about life under the ice until his wife Avery appeared with a glass of apple juice and a slice of banana bread. She touched his bare head briefly — the head of a bald eagle — and asked him about his cough, which she could hear in the next room. She knows he gets wound up when he talks about "the betrayal."

"Thank you, dear," he said.

PHOTOGRAPHS: FROM TOP, COURTESY CAPTAIN FRED MCLAREN; KEVIN SUMMERS/GETTY IMAGES; PETER BANSON/DEPFA/PHOTODISC.COM; DIMITRI ASTASHOV/ARTASAP/REUTERS TVR/PHOTO.COM; RICH RUSSELL/CHANNEL4/PHOTO.COM; CLUB; PETER BANSON/DEPFA/PHOTODISC.COM; THIS PAGE: PETER BANSON/DEPFA/PHOTODISC.COM (2)

Si-  
SS  
ins  
ce  
  
n't  
n-  
ay  
id,  
  
g a  
en  
he  
  
s."  
  
ND  
ite  
rs  
ng  
ce  
u-  
fic  
or-  
ed  
ith  
fi-  
ay  
id



OVER THE CREAK AND GROAN OF THE nuclear icebreaker *Sovietsky Soyuz* ("Soviet Union") the sound of laughter escaped the captain's cabin. The comrades inside, American and Russian, told salt-crusted stories and drank enough vodka to float their ship.

It was mid-1997. An Australian expedition organizer had chartered the ship and its crew to make a trip to the North Pole — not the underwater one but the traditional, above-the-ice pole. The company had brought along two Americans as lecturers — McLaren and a colleague named Don Walsh — and when the crew of former Soviet sailors heard who was onboard, these legends of the sea, they invited the Americans to a private fete in the captain's cabin.

Australian Mike McDowell, who had chartered the ship, was there as well. He's a remarkable adventure entrepreneur who arranges for wealthy clients to fly fighter jets, observe rare wildlife, and even — most expensively — fly aboard a rocket to the Space Station. "Used to be \$20 million," he told me. "Now it's \$30 million and climbing."

In the course of that evening, while crashing through the Arctic ice and "getting merry," as McDowell put it, someone brought up the true geographic North Pole. No one remembers who mentioned it first. "By the time we got around to talking about the North Pole, we'd inhaled a lot of vodka," Walsh says. "So my memory of the details is fuzzy." Regardless, by the time the men staggered back to their quarters that night, something had happened. The two Americans and the Australian had formed a partnership on a handshake. Not a partnership in something as secular and passing as mere business; they wanted to enter the cathedral below the ice and touch the northernmost piece of land on the planet, before any other human in history.

It wouldn't be easy, since the floor lies more than 4,000 meters beneath a thick and ever-shifting sheet of ice, and there's hardly a more difficult place on the planet to navigate than underwater at the North Pole, where traditional compasses fail because it lies so close to the Earth's magnetic pole and GPS signals can't reach because of the depth. But the expedition would

then dove in the twin *Mirs* to the shipwreck sites. The submersibles each seat three — a pilot and two passengers — inside a sphere of two-inch-thick nickel and steel. They performed beautifully. The partnership had solved the hardware problem.

That left the considerable obstacle of money.



EXPLORERS AND THEIR RICH BENEFAC- tors have carried on a troubled, abusive affair since the first hale fellow struck out for the horizon. Roald Amundsen, the Explorers Club member who discovered the Northwest Passage, begged and borrowed from creditors

across Norway in preparation for the expedition. About midnight one summer night in 1903, in Oslo, Amundsen stood in the rain on the deck of the *Gjøa*, pondering the upcoming trip. His first mate came running to report that one of Amundsen's creditors was approaching on the wharf with a bailiff, planning to seize the boat and arrest Amundsen for fraud. Amundsen acted: He grabbed an ax, cut the mooring lines, and launched himself into immortality.

Not much has changed in the intervening century. Exploration promises glory, adventure, women, and wine; it does not promise cash. But the best explorers have perfected the art of living on wealthier men's best.

The Explorers Club's headquarters sits just off New York's Central Park in a Tudor mansion with twin arches set in a brick-and-limestone facade. The interior is even more impressive, all carved linenfold oak and leaded windows, with six floors so packed with the totems of masculinity that conversation immediately deepens a half-octave from the sheer vigor of the decor: a taxidermied polar bear on a stairway landing; wooden ceiling beams taken from the HMS *Daedalus*; a large bell from the cutter Admiral Richard Byrd used to reach the Antarctic; and the towering portrait of a man who, when trapped in the Arctic, used a hammer to knock off his own frozen toes so he could stomp back to civilization.

The idea of it all, this unashamed search for glory, today seems mis-



**RETURNING HEROES** Chilingarov, center, with Vladimir Gruzdev and Sagalevitch in Moscow after their historic dive

## Sensing an opportunity, Artur Chilingarov, the big-bearded deputy chair of the Russian parliament, got personally involved in the expedition. Said Chilingarov, "THE ARCTIC IS RUSSIAN."

be not only a display of seafaring and technical prowess; it would be something even more rare. It would be a first for mankind.

Their two greatest obstacles, they realized, were hardware and money.

They tackled the hardware problem soon enough. Only Russia had the equipment needed to reach the true pole — nuclear icebreaking ships and deep-diving submersibles — so about a year after the boozy agreement on the *Sovietsky* the team brought on a fourth partner, a Russian scientist named Anatoly Sagalevitch, who had access to two submersibles, named *Mir One* and *Mir Two*.

Over the next several years, in preparation, McLaren says, for the North Pole dive and to drum up money for the submersible crews, the four-man team organized several less complicated, but breathtaking, dives to the *Titanic* and the *Bismarck*. They took along paying passengers, who listened to talks by McLaren and Walsh on the ship,

placed in time and an easy target for a cynical smile. But maybe that's because now there is so little real glory to go around; for all its swagger, the power of the club's history is best delivered by a small engraved stone near the foot of the stairs, quietly listing the accomplishments of a few members: First to the North Pole. First to the South. First to the summit of Mount Everest. First to the deepest point in the ocean. First to the surface of the moon.

Although exploration may not make men rich, some rich men do enjoy a bit of exploration. There are dozens of millionaires in the club, and a handful of billionaires. These are the men Fred McLaren, as then president of the club, intended to tap for funds to help pay for the North Pole expedition. The club set up a travel program whereby passengers could book a spot on the expedition ship for \$20,000, or on a submersible dive (after the initial, historic dive) for \$50,000. McLaren also wrote to some of the most prestigious supporters of

exploration — National Geographic and Rolex, among others — seeking funding. But those efforts were meant to pay only for a principally scientific expedition, and so McLaren wrote up a series of scientific goals alongside a detailed dive plan for safely descending and ascending through a hole in the ice. He particularly wanted to explore Arctic hydrothermal vents, through which superheated water erupts from the Earth's crust, and around which whole worlds of strange creatures thrive without sunlight. The data gathered, he said, might teach humanity about life in much farther flung locations: Arctic seafloor conditions resemble those on Jupiter's moons.

McLaren's reputation had served to draw in paying passengers during the earlier dives in the Atlantic, and his photo appeared on the partnership's website. Then one day in 2005 he sat down at his computer and checked the site. He was no longer there. His photo had disappeared as completely as those of Cold War apparatchiks who fell from Stalin's favor. After nearly a decade of work, McLaren discovered he'd been dropped from the North Pole project.

An exchange of bitter messages followed. McLaren accused Mike McDowell, the Australian tour organizer, of betrayal. McDowell accused McLaren of not pulling his weight in the fund-raising. The argument highlighted the difference in the two men's natures: McLaren saw the expedition as an old-fashioned science-and-glory endeavor for which money was a necessary trouble, and McDowell saw it as a commercial job that involved adventure.

McLaren felt he'd received the treatment any sailor dreads: He'd been, he says, "tossed overboard."

In retrospect, a few things tumbled into place for McLaren:

McDowell is a businessman, not a scientist.

The fighter jets he charters are MiGs.

The "zero gravity" airplanes are Ilyushins.

The icebreakers. The space shuttle.

All Russian.



MIKE MCDOWELL GREW UP IN A WORKING-class home, and his family rarely ventured outside Sydney. In school he studied to become a geophysicist, yet on his first working trip, to an island south of Tasmania, he realized that what he wanted more than anything — more than geophysics, certainly — was to roam the globe in search of adventure. He launched what he calls "a life unplanned" and found his calling as an expedition organizer.

In the early 1990s McDowell saw an imbalance following the collapse of the Soviet Union. America had tremendous wealth, a surplus of dollars; Russia had the dormant trappings of a former superpower, a surplus of hardware. All he did was bring them together, arranging high-performance field trips for rich Westerners.

One of those rich men was Fredrik Paulsen, a Swedish pharmaceuticals millionaire. In 2005, after the partnership had spent years trying to scrape together the funding for the North Pole project, Paulsen offered to pay \$1.5 million — about half the expedition's cost — to tag along. But he wanted control of the other seats on the dive, including the one Fred McLaren expected to fill.

"No one was trying to knife Fred in the back," said McDowell. "He was never kicked off the expedition. He was simply told that he could no longer be guaranteed a seat on the submersible, but he's the kind of guy who has to be on the first submersible or says 'screw it.'"

Then came a second twist: The Russians took over.

McDowell had haggled with the Russians for months, trying to arrange icebreaker ships for the trip. They were consistently "unavailable." Then suddenly Russian politician Artur Chilingarov announced that the dive would indeed go ahead: with Chilingarov at the helm.

Chilingarov is the big-bearded deputy chairman of the Russian parliament who, when he was younger, explored the Arctic and was awarded the status of Hero of the Soviet Union. *(continued on page 138)*

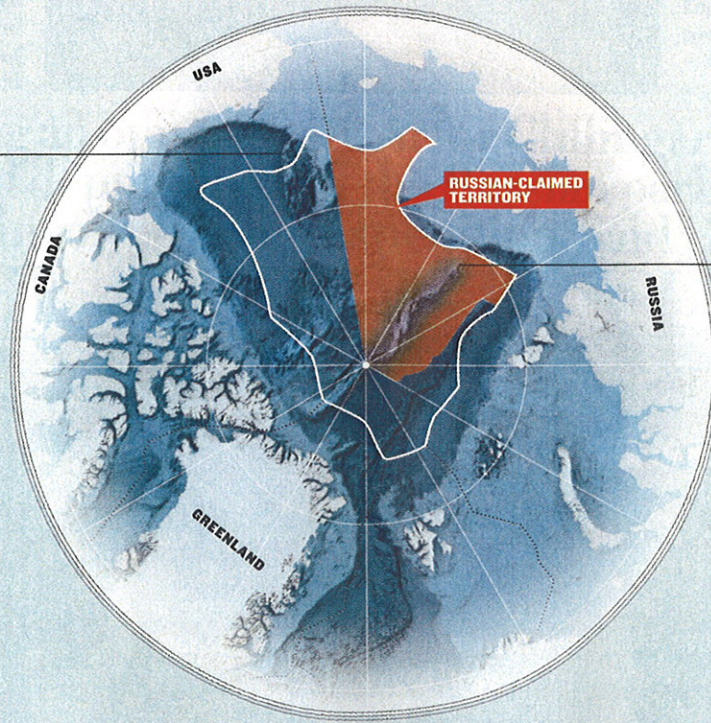
## RUSSIA'S ARCTIC LANDGRAB

When the Russians planted their flag at the true North Pole, it was largely a symbolic gesture. But there is more than just bragging rights at stake in their fight for control of this area. No one

knows for sure just how much fossil fuel is beneath the ocean floor here, but estimates have ranged from 10 to 25 percent of the world's still-undiscovered supply. A couple of significant points:

### 200-mile line

As things stand now, none of the five nations bordering the North Pole region can cross this demarcation for economic development, according to the United Nations' 1982 Law of the Sea. The outside border of this zone stretches 200 nautical miles from each country's coast.



### Lomonosov Ridge

This 1,100-mile-long formation runs from Canada's Ellesmere Island to Russia's New Siberian Islands and has become the heart of Russia's land claims. If Putin & Co. can prove it connects to their continental shelf, they could extend their North Pole rights another 150 miles (orange area), including any resources under the seafloor.

He held the keys to Russia's Arctic equipment — the icebreakers and submersibles — and saw the expedition as an opportunity.

"The Arctic is Russian," he said. "We must prove the North Pole is an extension of the Russian coastal shelf."

Chilingarov wasn't being romantic or abstract when he said this. He meant it literally.

Here's why: In 2001, Russia submitted to the United Nations a vast territorial claim for the Arctic, all the way up to the North Pole. The UN, in a bureaucratic flourish, asked Russia to resubmit the claim; the Russians needed a firmer case for ownership. According to the 1982 United Nations Law of the Sea, a country can claim anything within 200 miles of its coast or that connects to its continental shelf. So the Russians set out to prove that something called the Lomonosov Ridge, which runs underwater to the pole, is an extension of their continental shelf. Proving it would, they say, give them ownership of everything within hundreds of miles. Including the oil. According to Russian estimates, a successful claim would add a staggering 5 billion metric tons of fuel to the country's reserves. So on the North Pole expedition the Russians planned to conduct soil tests to improve their case.

One of the original project team members was the Russian scientist who could pilot the twin Mir submersibles. Anatoly Sagalevitch visited New York recently, and I found out the hotel in which he was staying; after some wheedling, the front desk rang his room, and a heavily accented voice answered.

As a child in Russia, at the height of Stalin's Soviet power and enmity with the West, Sagalevitch had found a copy of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and it set him on a course toward working as a Cold War submersibles engineer. He agreed to meet me in the lobby of his hotel, where he sat back in a chair, glancing now and again at the waterproof Rolex on his wrist. He acknowledged that the idea of the true North Pole dive came from an American, but he waved a hand as he said it. A hand to say, enough of this.

"I say to you, I have idea to go to the sun. If somebody go to the sun, I don't care."

LAST JULY TWO ICEBREAKERS RENDEZVOUSED at Murmansk, a Russian port north of the Arctic Circle. One, the nuclear *Rossia*, pushed north through the ice, and the other, the diesel *Fedorov*, carried the delicate Mir submersibles. The two ships spent a dozen days cracking and splintering their way north. Near the pole they found a relatively tiny hole in the ice, about 50 meters across, where they brought the caravan to a halt. The *Fedorov* lowered Mir One into the water, and it began its long drop to the bottom. Mir Two followed about half an hour later, carrying the Australian McDowell, the Swedish telecom investor Paulsen (who lost control of the other seats when the Russians took over), and a Russian pilot.

Tellingly, in the first Mir, Sagalevitch steered, with the politician Chilingarov on one side and Vladimir Gruzdev, another member of Russian parliament, on the other. The little submarines drifted downward for three hours.

The Mirs used a system of floating transponders to triangulate their position underwater. They touched down on the silty bottom and started moving toward the pole. When they arrived Sagalevitch used the Mir's manipulator arm to take samples. Then he set a titanium Russian flag in the seabed.

I asked Mike McDowell about that flag.

"If this had been Sweden or Norway, people would be saying, 'Oh wow, what a great expedition,'" he said. "But since it's the Russians: 'How dare they go and do something new and different?'" He called such talk "clap-trap" and "utter rubbish."

That's remarkable innocence from a man with so much experience in international affairs. Sweden and Norway, of course, are nothing like Russia. The flag-planting didn't happen in a vacuum; it was part of a much larger mosaic of action by Russian president Vladimir Putin, who invited Chilingarov and Sagalevitch to his residence after they resurfaced. Putin, for instance, recently ordered flights of nuclear-capable bombers to resume over the Atlantic and Pacific oceans — and over the North Pole. He has issued combative warnings to the U.S. about planned missile-defense sites in Poland. And within Russia he has cracked down on the press, at one point converting the nation's sole independent news network to a state-run sports channel.

Those moves all ring with Cold War tones. But this time everything pertains, of course, to oil. Russia is the world's largest exporter of gas and the second-largest exporter of oil. "The Russians are being aggressive," says Scott Borgerson, the Council on Foreign Relations fellow. "They were down for a while, but they're back up with the price of oil, and now they're flexing their muscles." The flag at the North Pole may not give them any legal claim, but it sent a powerful message.

SO IT CAME TO BE, AT THE EXPLORERS CLUB dinner in March, that McLaren and McDowell stood with hands and eyes locked. The American offered to take his former friend outside to duke it out.

"Whenever you're ready," the Australian answered.

But before the two tuxedoed gentlemen could commence with the tail-whippings, a kilted man with bagpipes came reeling through the cocktail area, tweedle-tweedling the call to dinner.

Chest-puffery is endemic to great adventurers, according to Don Walsh, one of the original partners in the North Pole project. He is a quiet man; his achievements aren't found among the tusks and bells and paintings at the Explorers Club, but instead on that small engraved stone near the foot of the stairs: Almost a half-century ago Walsh, along with Swiss engineer Jacques Piccard, dropped in the Trieste a crushing depth of seven miles to the ocean's deepest point. Walsh's humility stands in contrast to many of his colleagues' hubris. Some members, he said, treat the Explorers Club like "an ego feast."

After dinner in the Waldorf's grand ballroom the Explorers Club presented several awards for meritorious exploration, leading to the evening's climax: the North Pole team's

return of the Explorers Club flag it had taken to the Arctic.

The team, including Sagalevitch and McDowell, lined up on the stage, and Chilingarov, the Russian politician, stepped to the podium. He stroked his great beard, then gripped the sides of the lectern with both hands and issued a forceful, rousing speech in Russian. He finished several minutes later, as a translator struggled to keep pace, by adding a nod to international brotherhood; after all, he said with a grin, there's room at the North Pole for anyone's flag.

That was a bit of a dig. Anyone who'd care to try it — an unhistoric second visit — would be just as reliant on Russian equipment. I asked Explorers Club President Dan Bennett whether the club had been duped into supporting the Russians, whether the original science-minded expedition had been swallowed whole by a Russian oil exploit. "I don't think we've been manipulated," he said. "Or at least I don't feel I've been manipulated."

The club, he said, takes interest in exploration, not politics. And the Russian territorial claim? "I didn't know anything about that ahead of time. I think few people did."

With its Cold War echoes and overtones of oil, this latest Russo-American spectacle is really a new twist on two very old themes.

One is that explorers have always brawled with one another, like the great Titans of Greek mythology. Even today Explorers Club members feud over who reached the surface North Pole first. Some support the club's second president, Frederick Cook; others back the third president, Robert Peary.

Second, politicians have always stepped on the boot heels of men who lead the way. After Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, club members both, scaled Mount Everest in 1953, an avalanche of propaganda came down. India had recently won independence from the British empire, and celebrated the Everest summit with stirring, patriotic songs about how the local Sherpa had dragged Hillary, the queen's subject, to the top. Never mind that until Norgay's death neither man divulged who reached the summit first (it was Hillary), or that Norgay was most likely born in Tibet, not India.

Considering the context of exploration — in this case the friction between countries, the rush for oil, the lure of achievement — it seems inevitable that individual men might be crushed in the grind toward glory.

"A sham," McLaren says of the whole affair. "A charade."

His life carries on. He's planning another submersible adventure, but nothing so grand. Nothing historic. That chance — his legacy — disappeared the moment a Russian flag settled into the Arctic silt. **M**

**WHERE TO BUY PAGES 120-125** Gap shirt at gap.com. Prada pants at select Prada boutiques, 888-977-1900. Converse sneakers at converse.com. Daniel Cremieux shirt at Dillard's. John Varvatos jeans at Bloomingdale's. Havaianas sandals at havaianas.com. Burberry jacket at burberry.com. A.P.C. jeans at apc.fr. PF Flyers at pfflyers.com. Dolce & Gabbana tuxedo at 877-703-4872. Giorgio Armani shoes at Giorgio Armani boutiques. Bailey hat at hats.com. Banana Republic blazer at bananarepublic.com. Perry Ellis shirt at perryellis.com. Isala pants at Andrisen Morton. Vans sneakers at vans.com.