

A Club for Explorers

by W.M. Akers



What's at the bottom of the ocean? People have wondered that for a long time. To find out what lay far beneath the waves, scientists developed diving equipment, like flippers, goggles and scuba tanks. They built scientific submarines to go even farther underwater, where they found fish and plant life that had never been exposed to the sunlight. But no matter how advanced their technology, no one could go all the way to the bottom of the deepest part of the sea-the Mariana Trench-which is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

At 36,000 feet below sea level, the deepest part of the trench, known as the Challenger Deep, is deeper than Everest is tall. In 1960, two men attempted to get to the bottom of it. In a cramped submarine called the *Trieste*, Jacques Piccard and Don Walsh descended slowly to the bottom. They made the trip safely. When they landed on the ocean's floor-farther down than anyone had ever gone-they kicked up so much dirt, they couldn't see what was out there.

It was fifty years before anyone attempted to make the trip again. In 2012, film director James Cameron-best known for movies like *Avatar* and *Titanic*-became the first man to make a solo dive to the bottom of Challenger Deep. It took 90 minutes for his tiny, torpedo-shaped submarine to reach the bottom. Like any good filmmaker, he made sure to bring a camera. In fact, he brought a lot of them-3D cameras that captured the bottom of the sea in detail that Piccard and Walsh could never have dreamed of. The footage, said the expedition's chief scientist Doug Bartlett, is "so, so beautiful."

"It's unlike anything that you'll have seen from other subs or other remotely operated vehicles," he said.

Besides the cameras, Cameron's submarine carried a flag: a red, white and blue banner with an "E" and "C" on it. It's the official emblem of the Explorers Club, an international organization dedicated to promoting exploration worldwide. For over a century, they have helped lead the charge into the unknown. And no matter how deep mankind goes, they will never be finished.

What Does the Club Do?

Founded in 1904, the Explorers Club was started by a group of men who had previously belonged to the Arctic Club of America. In those days, polar exploration was the cutting edge of science, but the men who had conquered the North and South Pole wanted to broaden their horizons. They welcomed jungle explorers, mountain climbers, and the deep sea divers who paved the way for Piccard, Walsh and Cameron.

"It was meant to bring together explorers, to promote exploration and to promote knowledge of it to

the public," said Mary French, the archivist at the Explorers Club, who spoke to us recently by phone. French is responsible for documenting the history of the club, whose membership rolls have included some of the greatest explorers of all time. Those explorers include Roald Amundsen, who led the expedition that first reached the South Pole, and Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon.

Whenever its members go on an expedition, French explained, they bring along an Explorers Club flag. Many of these flags have a long history of their own. The one that Cameron took to the bottom of Challenger Deep, for example, had previously been to the top of Mount Everest-meaning that it had been both to the top of the world and the bottom.

"Among our retired flags is one that in 2007 was taken on an expedition to the true North Pole," said French. "Team members went under the ice in a submarine to find the magnetic North Pole, not over the ice, because that isn't true north. They went on a deep-sea dive under the ice."

A Famous Trip across the Water

Perhaps the most famous Explorers Club expedition was made in 1947, by a Norwegian adventurer named Thor Heyerdahl. Heyerdahl had a theory that ancient South Americans could have traveled across the Pacific Ocean and settled in islands in Polynesia—a journey of over 4,000 miles, across some of the most dangerous water on Earth. To prove his theory, Heyerdahl used centuries-old technology to build an open-air raft called *Kon-Tiki*. In this primitive raft, six Scandinavian explorers set out on the journey of a lifetime.

"It's a very classic adventure story," said French. "A story that's kind of timeless."

For three months, the little boat drifted westward, carried by the tides and the faint Pacific winds. They ate coconuts, sweet potatoes and fish they caught themselves. As they endured the elements, people back home followed their every movement, hoping that the brave Scandinavians would arrive safely.

"That was a very popular expedition at the time," said French. "It was kind of like a reality show. It was in the newspaper every day."

When they finally made it across the sea—passing not too far from the Mariana Trench—they were greeted by a tribe of native Polynesians, who threw them a big party. For their daring, Heyerdahl and his crew became some of the most famous people in the world, and the Explorers Club flag they took with them became one of the most famous in French's collection.

Can You Be an Explorer?

French said that if she could choose any Explorers Club expedition to have gone on, she would have picked *Kon-Tiki*. She called it "a classic example" of the explorer's mentality. What does it take to be an explorer?

"The rebelliousness that's required to go against people who are saying that it's not possible," she said. "Questioning authority, and not just authority, but standard knowledge. Having your own ideas,

and exploring those ideas for your own knowledge, and not just to impress other people."

At a recent Explorers Club dinner, James Cameron was given an award for his trip to Challenger Deep. French said that he called exploration "curiosity in action."

"It could be something as humble as going out and hiking a trail," she said. "Or it could be much bigger-like becoming an astronaut."

As long as you're "seeking the answers to questions," she concluded, you can be an explorer.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is the international organization, The Explorers Club, dedicated to promoting?

- A. exploration worldwide
- B. prevention of exploration
- C. protection of the Mariana Trench
- D. the films of James Cameron

2. What does the passage describe?

- A. submarine technology
- B. the Explorers Club
- C. James Cameron's film career
- D. deadly expeditions throughout history

3. James Cameron is a member of the Explorers Club.

Which evidence in the text best supports this conclusion?

- A. He brings the flag of the Explorers Club on his dive.
- B. He brings many cameras on his dive.
- C. He is known for making movies such as *Avatar* and *Titanic*.
- D. He was the first man to make a solo dive to the bottom of Challenger Deep.

4. What do all explorers have in common?

- A. They all have been to the bottom of the Challenger Deep.
- B. They all actively seek the answers to questions.
- C. They all belong to the Explorers Club.
- D. They all go on dangerous expeditions.

5. What is the passage mainly about?

- A. the Explorers Club and expeditions of its members
- B. James Cameron's life and achievements
- C. how to discover the unknown at the bottom of the ocean
- D. the work of Mary French, the archivist at the Explorers Club

6. Read the first two sentences of the passage: "What's at the bottom of the ocean? People have wondered that for a long time."

Why might the author start the passage with this question?

- A. to introduce a passage about swimming
- B. to establish a setting for the rest of the passage
- C. to introduce the Arctic Club of America
- D. to show how universal the desire to explore is

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

_____ the club was called the Arctic Club of America; later, it became the Explorer's Club.

- A. Instead
- B. Moreover
- C. Ultimately
- D. Initially

8. What is the Explorers Club?

9. Explorers tend to be the first ones to accomplish a goal or complete an expedition. Provide an example from the passage to support this statement.

10. James Cameron calls exploration "curiosity in action." Give an example from the passage of curiosity in action and explain why it might be considered "curiosity in action."
