

Ove Hermansen's Nobile Collection

Catalogue of a collection of letters and other material relating to Umberto Nobile and the airship *Italia*

INTRODUCTION

The Dane Ove Hermansen was born on 19 November 1933 in Copenhagen. Landing the job of errand runner for the polar researcher Lauge Koch, he developed an interest in the Arctic as a boy. At 18, Hermansen went to north-west Greenland and stayed for two years. During several dog-sled excursions, he toured the area south of the weather station at Danmarkshavn at 77 °N. These trips were often in cooperation with members of the British North Greenland Expedition, which was there in that period.

Back in Copenhagen, Hermansen worked as an air traffic controller at Kastrup Airport from 1958 to 1988. Through this job, he was stationed for half of 1967 as an air traffic controller at the former American air base in Narsarsuaq in south-west Greenland. Some years before this he had begun to collect literature and other material bearing on the crash of the airship *Italia* north of Svalbard in 1928 and the subsequent rescue operations.

Over time, Hermansen contacted many of the people who had been involved in the events of 1928. Among these was Tsjuknovski, chief pilot of the Soviet plane carried by the ice-breaker *Krassin*. It was he who spotted, from his aircraft, the two surviving members of the Malmgren party on the drift ice. (Several books relate how Tsjuknovski was later executed during one of Stalin's purges.) Hermansen was also in touch with Finnish and Swedish pilots who participated in the search for the *Italia* and those who had been onboard.

Hermansen corresponded for years with Rolf S. Tandberg, in Oslo. Tandberg had led the dog-sled expedition that Hjalmar Riiser-Larsen despatched to the north coast of the island of Nordaustlandet, in northern Svalbard, to look for the Malmgren party. Hermansen also befriended the widow of the Dane Ludvig Varming, who participated in the dog-sled expedition led by the Italian alpinist and military captain, Gennaro Sora, whose mission was the same as Tandberg's.

Hermansen corresponded with Commander Gunnar Hovdenak, who headed the search for Roald Amundsen, when he disappeared during his own quest to find Nobile. Tryggve Gran, who led a private search expedition for Amundsen, also became part of Hermansen's network.

Devoting much of his free time to his collection, Hermansen eventually amassed more than one hundred books relating to the crash of the *Italia*. These formed the basis for his detailed record of the events of the summer of 1928 in the form of a journal that chronicles – day by day – the progress of each search party. The account also offers an overview of other activities connected with the crash and attempts to locate and rescue the survivors.

Seeking to straighten out inaccuracies in their books, Hermansen was in touch with a number of authors working on his favourite subject. His colossal correspondence eventually exceeded 700 letters, filling seven binders. Five additional binders housed Hermansen's comprehensive collection of newspaper articles about Nobile.

A breakthrough in Hermansen's research came in September 1966, when he established contact with Umberto Nobile himself, who was living comfortably in Rome. The two men quickly forged a close bond, and Hermansen frequently enjoyed the hospitality of the Nobile family in Rome. Hermansen's passionate engagement with, and extensive knowledge of, the *Italia* accident and its aftermath prompted Nobile to ask Hermansen to handle his historical interests after his death. On the 50th anniversary of the transpolar flight of the airship *Norge*, which Nobile had undertaken together with Amundsen, Hermansen served as Denmark's representative at the commemoration in Rome.

The friendship between Hermansen and Nobile lasted until the Italian's death in 1979; Hermansen stayed in touch with Nobile's family until 1990 or so. His ambition has been to write the definitive book on the subject, but this has yet to be realized. He has, however, served as an inspiration to many other writers. In their books about Nobile, authors Alexander McKee, Anders Odsbjerg and Poul Larsen have all credited Hermansen for his considerable assistance.

In 1979, Hermansen wrote, at the behest of the Museum of Danish Resistance 1940-1945, the book *Gruppen der Bombede Shellhuset (The Squadron That Bombed Shell House)*, about the British Mosquito aircraft attack on the three Gestapo headquarters in Denmark. In 1988 his employer, the Danish Aviation Authority, tasked Hermansen with writing the book *Flyveledertjenesten 50 år: 15. juni 1936 – 15. juni 1986 (50 Years of Air Traffic Control: 15 June 1936 – 15 June 1986)*. Hermansen's most recent book came out in 2001: *Danmarks fyrårne og fyrskibe: beskrivelse og historie fra 1560 til i dag (Denmark's Lighthouses and Lightships: Description and History from 1560 to Today)*. This became the definitive book on its subject and the Danish Maritime Safety Administration authorized it for internal use on account of its high quality. Hermansen has also published several articles about polar and aviation history and has translated books on such topics such as the Orient Express, German airships and German submarines during the First and Second World Wars.

Hermansen has been married since 1959 to Bente. They have three sons who as children were holiday guests of the Nobile family in Italy. Since his children don't share Hermansen's fascination with the fate of the *Italia*, he chose to donate his Nobile collection to the Norwegian Polar Institute and the Polar Museum, in Tromsø, in the autumn of 2004. Those books that were already represented in the Norwegian Polar Institute's library were offered for sale through a book dealer in Oslo, to the joy of Norwegian readers.

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