

Searching for Amundsen: Louise Arner Boyd aboard the *Hobby*

by Joanna Kafarowski

In the spring of 1928, forty-year-old California multi-millionaire Louise Arner Boyd was busy preparing for her next thrilling Arctic adventure. A few years earlier, she had inherited a fortune and, without the constraints of a husband or children, realized a dream by hiring a ship and traveling with friends through the frigid Arctic Ocean. She was enthralled by her encounters with sleek seals, imposing polar bears, and towering icebergs. Another pleasure cruise followed two years later, which departed from Norway and sailed to the mysterious and forbidding Franz Josef Land, far above the Arctic Circle at 81°N 55°E. After each voyage, Boyd returned dutifully to her opulent mansion in San Rafael, California, and resumed her role as an elegant socialite and respected philanthropist. With two Arctic sailing expeditions under her belt, Boyd had been well and truly bitten by the polar bug. By 1928, she was planning to return that summer to study the fiord region of northeast Greenland.

On these voyages, she was not traveling as a tourist. She had become a serious student of the North. Although her formal education ended when she was a teenager, she devoted herself to reading and learning whatever she could about this region. She hired experienced Norwegian captain Kristian Johannesen and his ship, the *Hobby*, in which she had sailed previously. Despite her eagerness to undertake a challenging Arctic journey in a hazardous area of the world, Boyd appreciated continuity and she was delighted to travel with Captain Johannesen and the *Hobby* once more.

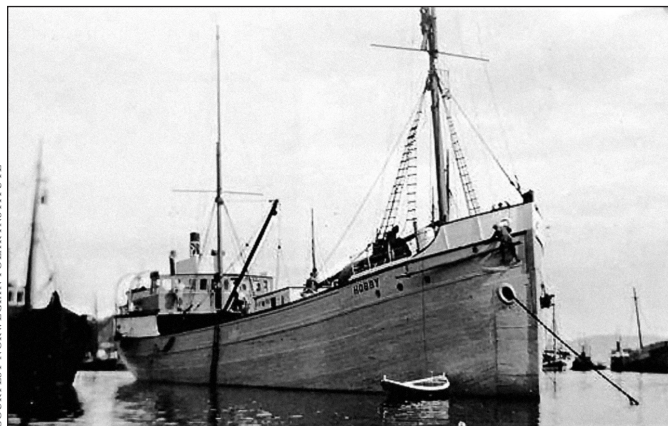
With unerring instincts, Boyd had chosen captain and vessel well. The *Hobby* was a highly respected Norwegian vessel with a distinguished lineage. Built in 1918 in Arendal, Norway, the 300-ton wooden steamer measured 130 feet in length and 24 feet on the beam, and could maintain an average speed of eight knots. Boyd was especially proud of *Hobby's* links to polar history. In 1925, *Hobby* had been the base ship for Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen as he transported two airplanes to Spitsbergen prior to the *Amundsen-Ellsworth Expedition*, while attempting to fly to the North Pole. The following year, *Hobby* had rendered assistance to another polar icon, Richard E. Byrd. Like Amundsen, Byrd also sought to be the first to fly to the North Pole. In 1926, his supply ship, *Chantier*, had gotten stuck in the ice upon arrival at King's Bay in Spitsbergen and had to be rescued by *Hobby* and her crew.



Louise Arner Boyd (1887–1972)

In late June 1928, Louise Boyd arrived in Tromsø, Norway, ready to undertake her highly anticipated voyage to northeast Greenland. She expected to meet with Captain Johannesen and join the *Hobby* for her next Arctic adventure, but her plans were about to change radically with the shocking news that explorer Roald Amundsen had gone missing. Amundsen was one of her heroes. His daring exploits, including being the first to reach the South Pole, the first to traverse the Northwest Passage, and the first to fly over the North Pole, had inspired her own adventures. Weeks earlier, the *Italia* Expedition, led by Umberto Nobile, had attempted to fly an airship to the North Pole, but the airship disappeared and a rescue mission was underway. Amundsen had joined the *Italia* rescue effort and departed in his plane, a Latham 47, in the direction of the search area. But now he had gone missing as well. His last confirmed message was on 18 June. In an odd twist of fate, the *Italia* airship had been located and its survivors were being rescued, as the search now turned to Amundsen's Latham 47 and his French crew of five, including renowned long-distance aviator Commander René Guilbaud.

Norwegian steamer Hobby in Tromsø, Norway, harbor in 1928. For her next expedition to the Arctic, Louise Boyd picked a ten-year-old solidly built wooden steamer that had seen service in the Arctic for the Amundsen-Ellsworth Expedition in 1925.



COURTESY NORWEGIAN POLAR INSTITUTE

PUBLIC DOMAIN

All her meticulous plans had been made, the itinerary had been established, and Louise Arner Boyd was keen as mustard to sail to the Arctic once again, but Amundsen's disappearance changed all that. In a bold move, Boyd contacted the Norwegian prime minister, Johan Mowinckel, and put the *Hobby*, its equipment, provisions, and the services of the crew—already paid for by Boyd—at the disposal of the Norwegian government. Amundsen was a revered native son of Norway, and the government was in dire need of sturdy vessels such as the *Hobby* to help locate him. Boyd's offer came with a catch. She stipulated that she and her guests were to stay onboard as working members of the search party. Her generous offer to the Norwegian government was, nevertheless, accepted with alacrity.

After receiving official approval, Boyd and her crew worked feverishly to load supplies onboard. This included additional medical items to deal with any unexpected emergency, as well as enough extra provisions should *Hobby* become trapped in the ice and be forced to overwinter in the Arctic. This was a distinct possibility for any polar explorer and a sobering thought for the inexperienced Louise Arner Boyd. By now, the rescue effort had become international in scope. The Amundsen rescue mission involved more than eight European countries, with high-ranking naval admirals and commanders in charge. Boyd was an official member of the 1928 Amundsen rescue effort from that point on—but not everyone was happy about it. There was no time to lodge a complaint, as the situation was too dire, but women aboard



Roald Amundsen (1872–1928)



COURTESY GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVES

The airship Italia set off from Svalbard (Spitsbergen) in May of 1928 with its designer, Umberto Nobile, serving as both pilot and expedition leader. When the dirigible did not return, an international rescue mission was launched to find them—Roald Amundsen among them. Amundsen and Nobile had flown together over the North Pole two years earlier in the airship Norge, which Nobile had also designed.

ship were generally considered a liability during this era. One official wrote: “It cannot be denied that we onboard *Strasbourg* were a bit worried about how the cooperation with the *Hobby* would turn out. Admiral Herr was, from the very beginning, as expected, skeptical of the presence of women.” Boyd was not about to let anything deter her, and, since the *Hobby* was hers to direct, no one could demand that she disembark. Norwegian Rolf Tandberg, who participated in the Amundsen rescue, commented that “Miss Boyd was very eager to set out and fairly impatient when they did not get ready at American speed. She specified very strongly that when she put her expedition at their disposal, it was in hopes of contributing efficiently to the search and that it was to be used as if there were only men on board.” Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Louise Arner Boyd committed herself fully and without reservation to this redefined Arctic mission.

Despite the heavy rain falling in torrents on the day of departure, the pier was lined with people waving and wishing *Hobby* well. On 3 July 1928, the *Hobby* weighed anchor and sailed from Tromsø harbor at 2:30 in the afternoon, while all of Norway fervently hoped for the safe return of their hero. *Hobby* set a course northwards towards Bjørnøya in the Barents Sea, reaching Kings Bay off the west coast of Spitsbergen four days later. The tiny bay was filled with formidable ships and the harbor was buzzing with noise and activity. So many of the ships searching for Amundsen were there. From France, the contingent included the destroyer *Quentin Roosevelt*, the cruiser *Strasbourg*, and the three-masted barque *Pourquoi-Pas?*, which had been purpose-built for polar voyaging. The *Pourquoi-Pas?* was led by French polar scientist Jean-Baptiste Charcot, who had directed two previous Antarctic expeditions between 1904 and 1910. Joseph Stalin and the newly formed Soviet Union sent the icebreakers *Krasin*, *Georgiy Sedov*, and *Malygin*, and the brig *Perseus*. The *Krasin* had a long and illustrious career as an exploration vessel and is best-known for rescuing the main group of the *Italia* Expedition survivors. Led

by Rudolf Samoylovich, explorer and director of Russia's first Arctic Institute, and Commander Karl Eggi, the *Krasin* was the most powerful icebreaker in the world until the 1950s. The *Georgiy Sedov* would become famous as the first Soviet drifting ice station. Italy sent the navy-owned cable ships SS *Citta di Milano* and *Braganza*. Sweden sent the motor ship *Quest* and the steam cargo vessel *Tanja*. The *Quest* is celebrated as the last vessel in which Sir Ernest Shackleton served (and in which he died in 1922), but was also the primary expedition ship of the 1930 British Arctic Air Route Expedition. Not surprisingly, Norway contributed a number of ships to the rescue effort, including the sealer and expedition vessel *Veslekari*, headed by Amundsen colleague Oscar Wisting; the research vessel *Michael Sars*; the battleship *Tordenskjold*; the *Heimland*; and *Hobby*. A more eminent gathering of ships and captains could not be found.

During the brief stay in Kings Bay, Boyd met and socialized with notable men from the other ships, including Admiral Herr of the *Strasbourg*, who was co-ordinating the entire project. Herr developed a search plan for each vessel, but these plans were flexible, allowing for variable weather conditions and reported sightings. It was a challenging task to ensure that the vast search area was covered. After consultation between the commanding officers, it was decided that Amundsen and his Latham 47 had likely been blown off course to the north or northeast. Boyd reported, "The mission specially assigned to us was the examination of the ice pack north of Spitsbergen, going west to east and south-east until *Hobby* met the whaler *Heimland*, which was also assigned to this district." At Herr's request, an already-crowded *Hobby* took six more men onboard. This group included three polar legends: Hjalmer Riiser-Larsen, polar aviator and Amundsen's friend, who

had accompanied him on his 1925 attempted first flight to the North Pole and his successful 1926 *Norge* flight; Arctic surveying pioneer Finn Lützwolf Holm; and naval pilot Finn Lambrechts. In addition, two Hansa-Brandenburg W. 33 seaplanes, F. 36 and F. 38, were carefully loaded aboard the *Hobby* and would play an integral part in the search.² Having these men join the *Hobby* proved a boon for the rescue mission, but it made for cramped quarters onboard. Louise Arner Boyd was the official leader of this expedition, but she shared responsibilities with Captain Johannesen and First Mate Astrup Holm. Boyd also brought along experienced English ice pilot Francis Gisbert. The addition of Riiser-Larsen, Lützwolf-Holm, and Lambrechts added greatly to the level of Arctic experience on the ship, but it also raised the possibility of greater tension and inter-personal conflict. The fact that an inexperienced American woman was ultimately in charge did not help matters.

By 9 July, *Hobby* was on her way. She traveled north towards Amsterdamøya, where they encountered the edge of the ice, and then west, where *Hobby* met up with the *Heimland*. Following the instructions of Admiral Herr and, in conjunction with the other rescue ships, *Hobby* set course again for Amsterdamøya, then on to Kongsfjorden (Kings Bay) and Hinlopenstretet. The pilots hoped to join the search as quickly as possible, but from the beginning flights by the two Hansa-Brandenburg seaplanes were hampered by the adverse weather conditions, with poor visibility and near-constant fog. Boyd remarked:

Among the ice floes far in these Arctic waters to see a plane lowered off *Hobby* and go off gave me a real thrill but glad to have him safely back. It's a job getting the planes on and

(right) Dornier Do J Wal "N25" being unloaded from the *Hobby*, 1925. Amundsen abandoned sled dogs for aircraft for his expeditions to the North Pole, but the ships in which he transported them to the Arctic were not exactly aircraft carriers. For the 1925 expedition, Amundsen and a crew of five others, including pilots Hjalmer Riiser-Larsen and Lief Dietrichson, flew two Dornier aircraft (called "flying boats"), which had been disassembled and packed in crates for the transit to Tromsø aboard the *Hobby*. For Boyd's 1928 voyage to search for Amundsen and his crew, the *Hobby* carried two seaplanes fully assembled on deck. This time-saving measure, deemed a necessity for the emergency at hand, rendered the planes vulnerable to damage from severe weather, as did indeed occur during the voyage. The planes were loaded by crane and transferred to the ice for take-off and landing. The Hansa Brandenburg W.33 was originally designed as a fighter floatplane, so its smaller, lighter design allowed for greater ease in movement from the ship to the ice and vice versa. Nevertheless, it was quite an operation to get them on and off the ship once they were away from port facilities. Louise Boyd related: "Soon the planes came alongside the *Hobby*, one on one side, one on the other. Loading them on our little hatch looked like an impossibility; they looked far too big. After lunch the airship going on the hatch by the galley was hoisted and after some difficulty was finally adjusted to its place. Then the one on the hatch by the bow was hoisted onboard and went into place very easily. They really did not look large at all once they were on the *Hobby* because all the passageways were free, and the planes were not in the way."¹



AMUNDSEN AND ELLSWORTH 1915 ARCTIC EXPEDITION GLASS PLATES NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE ARCHIVES

¹ Joanna Kafarowski, *The Polar Adventures of a Rich American Dame: A Life of Louise Arner Boyd* by Joanna Kafarowski (Toronto, Dundurn Press, 2017), p. 107.

² Hansa Brandenburg W. 33 refers to the manufacturer and model (W. 33) names. F. 36 and F. 38 are the unique registration numbers for these specific planes.

off *Hobby* and today *Hobby's* engine vats had to have oil so we had to stop, remove the planes and get at the oil in the barrels in the hold. Now we are off again!

Regular communication by radio between the planes and the ships proved critical. After sailing throughout the region, there was still no confirmed sign of Amundsen or his crew. The situation was looking grim. According to Boyd:

Now that we are in the ice, or along the edge of it, there are always at hand four field glasses scanning every bit of the territory we are covering. The three officers and petty officers change watch with themselves so two are always on the bridge day and night. It's almost a weird sensation, sad, solemn, to say the least, to stand on *Hobby's* bridge these days and see the men ever watching for the lives we seek and pray to save one at least or more. There is no play these days. We are most congenial and happy together but all serious and intent in our job.

For weeks, *Hobby* followed the ice edge while the aviators flew reconnaissance flights along the coast towards Edgeøya when they were able. Riiser-Larsen worried about the aging planes and, indeed, both planes suffered mechanical problems throughout the mission. By the end of July, Admiral Herr approved *Hobby's* plan to move their search area to the region around Franz Josef Land. On 1 August, Boyd's instructions from Herr were succinct:

During next cruise please explore Western Islands of Franz Josef Archipelago and ice in region between said Archipelago and line drawn across Victoria Island in direction North forty five West to South forty five east if possible. Also Victoria Island stop. *Veslekari* will explore zone between said line and a line parallel passing through Abel Island. She will try to reach coast of North East Island. Stop... At the moment when you are about to undertake according to your own proposal a particularly long and hard research I beg to renew my best wishes for success.

After topping up with fresh water and fuel in Kongsfjorden, *Hobby* set a course for Franz Josef Land. Boyd was delighted with the new destination, as she had traveled there two years before and was eager to visit again. Ice conditions made it impossible to travel to Franz Josef Land by way of Hinlopenstretet or the waters north of Nordauslandet, which meant a longer southerly route via Sørkappøya, Spitzbergen. Rough open seas and heavy pack ice made for stormy sailing, and dynamite was sometimes used to clear the ship's path.

Hobby sailed on relentlessly to Cape Flora on Franz Josef Land. Previously, the crew had taken on lumber with the intention of rebuilding the deteriorating cabins left at Cape Flora by the Jackson Harmsworth Expedition of 1894–1897. Those aboard *Hobby* were also tasked with leaving food depots there, specifically for Amundsen and the Latham crew, should they be able to reach this area. Despite their best intentions, fog and rolling seas meant that the men from *Hobby* were only able to take the lum-

ber ashore, store it as safely as they could, and then return hurriedly to the ship. Time was running out. Boyd confided in a letter: "Riiser-Larsen wanted to stay there as late as possible and just leave in time not to be frozen in ourselves so we will therefore be the last ship South from those waters or near there. Therefore, don't worry about us but we will not get down from there most likely until late in September."

The unpredictable weather worsened, with gale force winds howling continually. Ice built up on the rigging and encased the airplanes. It hung so heavily aloft that the skipper could not get to the barrel of the crow's nest, and navigation had to be directed solely from the bridge at deck level. Finally, the ship's antenna broke and fell, causing significant damage to both airplanes stored on deck, further delaying their progress. On too many days, the ship lay entombed in the fog. Despite bad weather, engine failures, and water rationing, Boyd and all onboard remained focused on the task at hand. But the Arctic Ocean had more in store for *Hobby*.

This was an Arctic trip like no other. In volunteering for the rescue expedition, Louise Arner Boyd had no idea of the tribulations she would endure. The greatest test of all was saved for late in the mission. Boyd and most of those onboard *Hobby* had retired for the evening. Asleep in his cabin near the galley, Hjalmer Riiser-Larsen was abruptly awakened in the night by the acrid smell of smoke filling his quarters. Jumping up in alarm, he was shocked by the sight of smoke pouring through the bulkhead. He shouted to a mechanic on deck, who rushed to get an extinguisher. Riiser-Larsen aimed it at the bulkhead, expecting the fire to be smothered immediately. To his shock, an enormous flame shot out of the extinguisher towards the bulkhead and the ceiling. Someone had mistakenly filled the extinguisher with fuel! Another extinguisher was quickly obtained and discharged, luckily dousing the fire. Without Riiser-Larsen's quick thinking, the outcome of the crisis might have ended quite differently. *Hobby* was a wooden ship carrying numerous gasoline drums and sailing in a remote region of the Arctic Ocean. The ship and crew came perilously close to disaster that day.

In early September, a pontoon from Roald Amundsen's plane was located near the Norwegian coast. All ships waited for confirmation, but hopes were growing dim that anyone onboard the Latham 47 would now be found alive. Yet, it was inconceivable that the great Amundsen, who had achieved the pinnacle of success in polar exploration at both ends of the earth and had overcome so many obstacles, had perished.

The pontoon was confirmed as belonging to the Latham 47, and on 7 September Admiral Herr officially called the Amundsen rescue mission at an end. All participants, including everyone onboard *Hobby*, were officially thanked for the courage and determination they had displayed, and special thanks was reserved for Boyd herself. She responded, "I ask you to accept the warmest and frankest thank-you from me and all who are with me on *Hobby* for your very kind words. We ask you to accept our deepest sympathy in regards to the French nation's loss of Guilbaud and his companions and we only regret that fate has robbed us of the opportunity to fulfil our serious desire to be of assistance."

On the return journey to Tromsø, *Hobby* made a brief stop in Adventfjorden, off the west coast of Spitsbergen, where Boyd hosted her forty-first birthday party.

Taken to dinner on the arm of the Director of the Coal Co., wearing my breeches I had slept in and worn for two and a half months, full of telltale spots where food and soup had missed. Dinner was at 11 pm. We danced till nearly 4 am. Back to *Hobby* where we sat in the tiny mess and chatted and it was soon ten minutes to seven in the morning when the *Hobby* family broke up and we sailed soon afterwards. All so blue at parting.



Newspaper coverage in early July started out hopeful and reported Louise Arner Boyd’s participation in the rescue mission with excitement. Two months later, the search was called off and Amundsen and the five others on his crew were assumed to have perished. Their bodies were never found.

Then, on to Tromsø, where *Hobby* arrived late on the evening of 21 September. *Hobby* had traveled more than 10,000 miles and everyone onboard needed a rest.

Louise Arner Boyd prepared to return home to California. Although deeply saddened that the international rescue expedition had failed to achieve its objective and that the great Amundsen was dead, Boyd had proved her mettle to her Arctic colleagues, earning their respect and admiration. She was delighted by the report in an Oslo newspaper, which stated:

All ships [participating in the rescue mission] had complained of awful storms, bad ice and fog and the difficulties of searching, but no complaint had ever come from the *Hobby* and it was known she had been in the thick of it and as she had gone the farthest North of all of them, it could not have been so bad because *Hobby* never complained.

In Norway, Boyd was showered with unexpected—but no less welcome—honors. Admiral Herr wrote: “You have volunteered

for the hardest and most difficult cruises, showing devotion and courage that deserve the greatest praises... Because of your actions, your initiative and your tenacity, we are honored to admit that the *Hobby* has taken the lead in the search we initiated.” Boyd was thrilled to receive the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav from King Haakon VII himself—the first time it had been awarded to a non-Norwegian woman. In recognition of her search efforts, not only for Amundsen but also for his valiant French crew, the French government bestowed the Ordre national de la Légion d’honneur upon her. For several weeks, she, Riiser-Larsen, and other senior members of the *Hobby* team were wined and dined by ambassadors and high-ranking government officials.

Back in the United States at the end of October, she was besieged by the media clamoring to know more about the daring socialite in their midst. Boyd was a private woman, however, who never enjoyed the publicity even after she became a renowned polar explorer. She soon settled back into her usual routine, hosting lavish parties and attending gallery openings and musical recitals. She kept in close contact with many of those who had sailed aboard *Hobby*, writing later: “Please remember me most kindly to everyone in Tromsø as I always have a very warm spot in my affections for Tromsø and, of course, Miss Hobbs [her nickname for the *Hobby*]—I love her!” Although she never sailed aboard her again, she followed *Hobby*’s career with great interest until the ship was later sold to Russian owners in Novosibirsk.

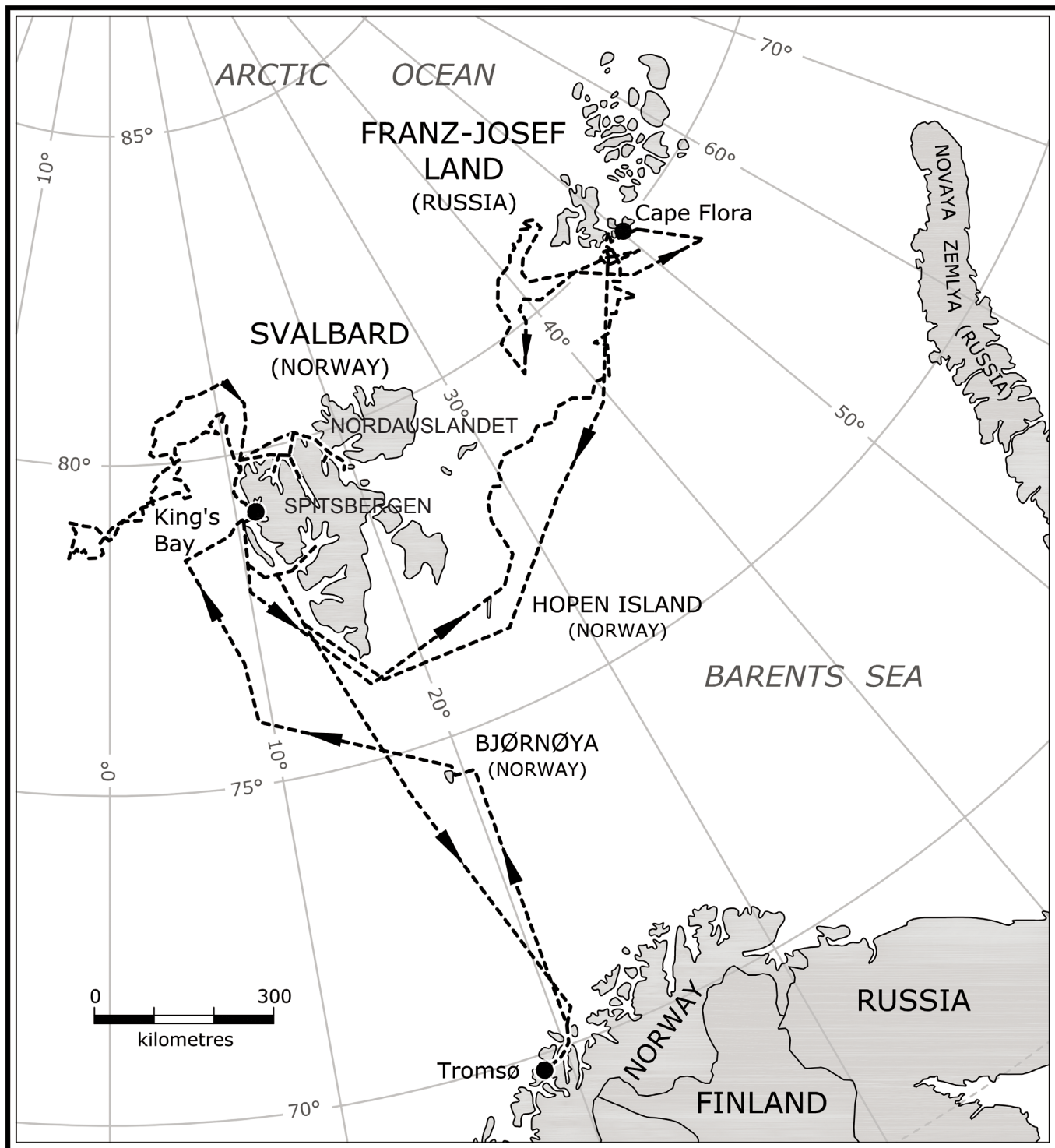
Participating in the 1928 Amundsen rescue expedition completely altered the trajectory of Louise Arner Boyd’s future. From that time on, Boyd dedicated herself to a life of exploration and polar science in the frozen world she loved so passionately.

She managed to lead a double life with aplomb. While in the circumpolar North, Boyd was a risk-taking, courageous adventurer who faced danger head-on in the pursuit of her expedition objectives, but when she returned to California she stepped into the role of the dignified and elegant society doyenne. She wrote books and traveled the world, giving lectures about her Arctic adventures, while struggling to conform to the life of an American woman of her age and class. She would always work hard to balance those seemingly conflicting aspects of herself—the polar explorer and the socialite. Taking part in the 1928 Amundsen rescue mission would only mark the beginning of her life as an Arctic explorer. There was so much left for her to discover. †

Ivory carving likely gifted to Boyd as a memorial to Roald Amundsen.



COURTESY OF THE CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES



The Hobby's route during the search for Roald Amundsen and his flight crew. Boydffellet—a mountain in Orvin Land at Nordauslandet—was named after Louise Boyd in recognition of her efforts in the 1928 rescue mission.

*Joanna Kafarowski, PhD, is the author of the first comprehensive biography of a female Arctic explorer, *The Polar Adventures of a Rich American Dame: A Life of Louise Arner Boyd*, published in 2017 by Dundurn Press. In July 2021, Blackstone Publishing released it as an audiobook. Dr. Kafarowski is an independent scholar, geographer, and polar specialist with two decades of experience working in the Arctic region. Her next book, *Antarctic Pioneer: The Trailblazing Life of Jackie Ronne*, is the first biography of a female Antarctic explorer and will be published in May 2022 by Dundurn Press. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Geographers, a member of the Society of Woman Geographers, and is the editor of *Gender, Culture and Northern Fisheries* (Canadian Circumpolar Institute, 2009). For more information, see www.joannakafarowski.com.*