

Lost in the Arctic: 129 Men Gone Forever

Captain John Franklin's 1845 departure from England marked the start of one of exploration's most haunting mysteries.



THIS DAY IN HISTORY

MAY 19, 2026  PAID



On the morning of May 19, 1845, two stout Royal Navy ships slipped from their moorings at Greenhithe on the Thames. HMS Erebus and HMS Terror carried 129 officers and men under the command of Captain Sir John Franklin. Their orders were clear: find the Northwest Passage through the Canadian Arctic and return with charts that would open a new trade route to Asia.

Franklin, already a veteran of earlier Arctic voyages, stood on the deck of Erebus as the ships caught the tide. Crowds lined the riverbank to cheer. No one imagined the expedition would vanish so completely. The vessels were the best equipped of their day. They carried three years of preserved food, libraries, a hand organ for Sunday hymns, and even silver plate for the officers' mess.

By the summer of 1846 the ships had reached the waters west of King William Island. There the pack ice closed around them. The vessels became locked fast in Victoria Strait. Through the long polar night the men remained aboard, hoping for a summer thaw that never came. Scurvy and lead poisoning from the canned food began to take their toll.

In April 1848 the survivors abandoned the ships. They hauled sledges loaded with supplies southward toward the Back River and possible rescue. None reached safety. Scattered bones and relics later told a grim story of starvation, exposure, and desperate marches across the tundra.

Search parties sent by the Admiralty and by Lady Franklin combed the Arctic for a decade. They mapped thousands of miles of previously unknown coastline. Inuit accounts preserved oral histories of the starving strangers who appeared on the ice. One of the last confirmed sightings placed a group of about forty men dragging a boat across the sea ice in the spring of 1850.

The loss of the Franklin expedition ended the era of purely naval Arctic exploration. It also produced the first concrete maps of the channels that now form the modern Northwest Passage. Every subsequent expedition carried lessons bought at the price of those 129 lives.

Today the wrecks of Erebus and Terror lie on the seabed where they were finally located in 2014 and 2016. The artifacts recovered from the ships and from the island camps continue to yield new information

about the final months. The story remains a stark reminder that even the best-prepared ventures can be overwhelmed by forces far larger than any human plan.

Also On This Day...

1915



On the Gallipoli peninsula, Australian and New Zealand troops holding the precarious Anzac Cove perimeter faced their third determined Ottoman assault. Machine-gun and rifle fire from the steep ridges cut down waves of advancing Turkish infantry. By nightfall the attackers had fallen back with heavy losses, leaving the beachhead intact for several more months. The defense bought time for the Allies to

reinforce their narrow foothold, though the larger campaign ultimately ended in evacuation.

1780

Thick smoke from widespread forest fires, combined with dense fog and low cloud, blotted out the sun across New England and parts of eastern Canada. By noon on May 19, streets required candlelight and farm animals returned to their barns as if night had fallen. The sudden darkness sparked sermons and anxious speculation, yet scientific observers later traced the phenomenon to the smoke pall that had drifted hundreds of miles on unusual wind patterns.

715



When Gregory II ascended the papal throne, the Roman Church stood at a turning point in its relationship with the Byzantine Empire. His long dispute with Emperor Leo III over icon veneration and taxation eventually freed the papacy from direct imperial control. The resulting independence laid groundwork for the popes' later temporal authority over central Italy and shaped the political map of medieval Europe.

1962



In a televised birthday salute at Madison Square Garden, Marilyn Monroe stepped to the microphone in a glittering gown and delivered a breathy, intimate version of "Happy Birthday to You" for President John F. Kennedy. The performance lasted barely a minute yet became an instant cultural landmark, blending Hollywood glamour with the power of the Oval Office in a single televised moment.

The paid section examines the exact sequence of events that doomed Franklin's crew after the ships froze in place, including newly recovered documents detailing their final attempts to reach the mainland. One overlooked supply decision proved decisive. Start your free 7-day trial now to read the full account...