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Magellan's Madness

By Lori Calabrese

The Search

Nearly 500 years ago, on September 20, 1519, five ships sailed from Spain. As the ships set out across the Atlantic Ocean, only one man knew their goal. Magellan, a Portuguese sailor, hoped to find a passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Some said this route went straight through the tip of South America. If Magellan could find it, he would shorten the journey to the Spice Islands across the Pacific. European traders wanted to reach these islands. There they could buy valuable spices. Magellan and his crew were going to trade for cinnamon and cloves. But he wasn't even sure the passage existed.

In those days, there was no such thing as radio or GPS devices. There were no lights except candles and lanterns. And the ships had no source of power except for wind and rowing. In the dark, the ships communicated with each other by torchlight. If ships were in trouble, sailors fired a cannon. None of the ships had accurate maps or clocks. And they had no way to tell what weather was coming. So the sailors were unable to prepare for the fierce storms that struck the ships. With no refrigeration, food could spoil quickly. Much of their food was preserved with salt. They ate a lot of pork, sardines, dried fish, and hard biscuits.

Three hard months passed. Using the stars for guidance, Magellan and his crews finally made it across the Atlantic to the coast of Brazil.

Once they reached South America, the ships headed south, along the coast. They were looking for the passage Magellan had heard of. But winter had come. For the safety of his men, Magellan decided to stop the search until spring. They had reached what is now Patagonia in Argentina. For many months, the men shivered in unheated huts and ships in the port of St. Julian. They hunted seals and penguins for food. They repaired their ships in frozen clothes that crackled as they moved. One of the ships was wrecked in a storm. The men were unhappy.

FOUND!

When the worst of the winter had passed, Magellan and his men sailed south once more. At long last, 13 months after leaving Spain, Magellan found the passage he had been looking for. The ships sailed inland. The journey was difficult: through the narrow, winding, channel. Thirty-eight days later, they reached the Pacific. Magellan wept at the sight. He gave this "new" ocean a name. He called it Pacific, which means calm, peaceful.

They steered into the Pacific where no European had sailed before. Without strong winds, they drifted in the heat. Their drinking water went bad. The biscuits an important part of the men's diet - crumbled into a dirty powder, swarming with insects. The sailors ate rats they caught on the ships. They tore leather off the ships' masts and chewed it. Many men fell ill; many died. The crew buried their bodies at sea.

After three months, Magellan and his men saw land. But the natives did not want these strangers landing on their island. They attacked the ships with arrows. So the men sailed on.

At last, the ships found land where they could anchor. They had reached the Philippine Islands. They were not far from their destination, the Spice Islands. Sadly, Magellan was killed there during a battle.

Heading Home

With their leader gone, the sailors' spirits sank. But they sailed on and finally reached the Spice Islands. While they were there, the remaining sailors traded cloth for cinnamon and cloves. Then they began the journey home.

Three years and one month after leaving Spain, only one of the five ships reached home. Out of more than 200 men who set out, only 18 survived.

Although Magellan didn't live to celebrate, he is remembered today as the leader of the first around-the-world journey in history. Magellan's voyage not only proved that the world was round, but also that it was possible to sail all the way around it. Many people believe that Magellan's voyage was the most remarkable in history. What do you think?

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