Basic Detail Report

Inuit Kayak

Vessel number

HV000676

Date

c1930

Primary Maker

Inuit Community

Description

The Inuit kayak is understood to have been built for Rymill by the community while he was on one of two expeditions in the Arctic, and in the archived collection of his polar exploration material it is the only surviving example of a craft that he used. It represents the story of his ability to recognise the use of appropriate technology for the purpose of exploration in an extreme environment, in particular his wide use of the native Inuit technology. As well as the kayak he used their seal skin clothing and quickly grasped the advantages of dog sled teams for work on the ice. His Arctic work was the training ground for his successful Antarctic work from 1934-37, using their technology in many aspects of the work. The 4.5m long single seat kayak is a single chine hull made of wooden frame covered in sealskin, with the typical deck, cockpit and double ended hull shape favoured by the Inuit in Greenland. It is a shape now copied by many contemporary sea kayaks. The kayak recorded as item number R.1 is now one of the Rymill exhibits on display in the Australian Polar Collection and the History of Science Collection, at the Science Centre in the South Australian Museum. Rymill was in the Arctic on two separate expeditions in 1930-31 then again in 1932-33, both lead by Gino Watkins. In 1931 with W. E. Hampton, Rymill made a notable 400-mile (640 km) crossing of Greenland, using sledges transporting kayaks, from the base near Angmagssalik to Holsteinborg on the west coast. In the second expedition they also used kayaks as part of their equipment, but it has not yet been established when this kayak was made for Rymill during the time he spent in the Arctic. The kayak was not used in the subsequent Antarctic work, but various items and other aspects of what he learnt from Inuit people and how they had adapted to the environment were used by Rymill, and the kayak represents tangible evidence of his ability to understand and use their technology. JOHN RIDDOCK RYMILL (1905-1968) John Riddock Rymill was born on 13 March 1905 at Penola, South Australia, younger son of Robert Rymill, farmer, and his wife Mary Edith (Riddock). He was educated at home then went on to the Melbourne Church of England Grammar School. He had good practical abilities and was extremely interested in polar literature. The combination led to a determination to be a polar explorer, and he left Australia for England to undertake wide study and preparation to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for this career. He studied anthropology at the University of London, surveying and navigation at the Royal Geographical Society, snow and ice conditions in Switzerland and Scandinavia and he also qualified as a pilot and aircraft mechanic, along with courses in social sciences, commerce and cooking . His exploration career began when H. Gino Watkins appointed Rymill to the British Arctic Air Route

Expedition to Greenland (1930-31) as surveyor and pilot. They gathered physiographic and meteorological information essential to great circle polar flights between Europe and North America. Rymill revealed versatility and leadership qualities; he excelled in skiing, sledging with dogs and in the servicing and maintenance of the two aircraft. When Augustine Courtauld, a companion, was lost on the Greenland Ice Cap and his camp was buried by snow, Rymill's route-finding enabled Courtauld's location and relief. Watkins took Rymill as second-in-command on a four-man Greenland journey in 1932-33; during it, Watkins drowned while fishing. Rymill assumed command and with his team maintained the project, recording information to assist polar aviation. Rymill determined to continue polar exploration and to fulfil Watkins's ambition to mount an Antarctic expedition to South Graham Land and the Weddell Sea south of Cape Horn, South America. During 1934-37 Rymill led his own expedition to Antarctica, the British Graham Land Expedition. His work there would prove that Graham Land, or the Antarctic Peninsula was a peninsula of the main continent, and not a series of islands as believed by Hubert Wilkins in his aerial survey of 1928 /29. The B.G.L.E. logistics were innovative in Antarctica. Outstanding sledging with dogs, especially over sea ice, was backed by air support and depot laying; the use of a motor launch probing ahead to plot a route for his support ship PENOLA through uncharted, rock-strewn waters, was original and successful. After this project he retired from exploration, married and settled on the family station Penola in South Australia. Like his father he died as the result of a car accident on 7 September 1968. His wife and their two sons survived him and he was buried in New Penola cemetery. John Rymill was awarded the British Service Polar Medal with Arctic (1930-31) and Antarctic (1934-37) bars; the Murchison grant (1934) and the Founders' medal (1938) of the Royal Geographical Society and the David Livingstone Centenary gold medal of the American Geographical Society of New York (1939). The citation for this award reads, in part, 'The survey work of this expedition constitutes probably the largest contribution of accurate detailed surveys of the Antarctic Continent made by an expedition'. A bay, a cape and a coast in British Antarctic Territory are named after John Rymill, and in the Australian Antarctic Territory a peak in the Prince Charles Mountains carries his name. A Sydney newspaper headline from 1955 summarzied his life well “Quiet Australian gained honors from many countries for his sterling Polar work”. Prepared with reference to the Australian Dictionary of Biographies entry on JR Rymill

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 4.75 m × 0.65 m (15.58 ft × 2.13 ft)