

FROM KRUGERSDORP TO THE MOON

How a little piece of Africa made lunar history.

BY CHRIS BISHOP

A COUPLE OF KILOGRAMS of African-made goods, made in a speck on the South African satellite map, made it to the moon before Neil Armstrong did 50 years ago. It evaded the complex politics of the day to make it to the moon and yet didn't make the entrepreneur behind it a cent.

This is the story of how a couple of kilograms of putty made in a factory in Krugersdorp, a small town west of Johannesburg, spent the early 1960s orbiting the moon while Armstrong was still training for his giant leap for mankind.

It all began with an entrepreneur called George Montague Pratley – born in Johannesburg – who went to King Edward VII School and studied to be an engineer. He left South Africa for Britain in the 1930s and ended up working on the jet engine project with the world-famous aero engineer Frank Whittle.

When World War Two broke out, Pratley enlisted in the British Army and trained as a tank engineer. On D-Day, June 6, 1944, he found himself in the thick of the fighting on Gold beach in the Normandy landings.

“When the tank tracks got blown off, he would put them back on again,” says his grandson Andrew, more than 75 years later.

Pratley married an English lass from Rugby, Warwickshire, and returned to Johannesburg to set up his own business in 1947. He started out in Hillbrow making mining equipment, like electrical junction boxes and delayed igniters for underground blasting, before moving across the city to Roodepoort and finally to Krugersdorp, where the factory remains today run by his son and grandchildren. It still produces tonnes of putty every year for export across Africa and around the world. It has been used for everything from shoring

up sinking ships to wildlife conservation to fixing leaking car radiators deep in the Malawian bush.

The invention of this water-proof and powerful putty, to insulate electrical junction boxes, was to make a fortune for Pratley and also yield an African link to the moon landing in July 1969.

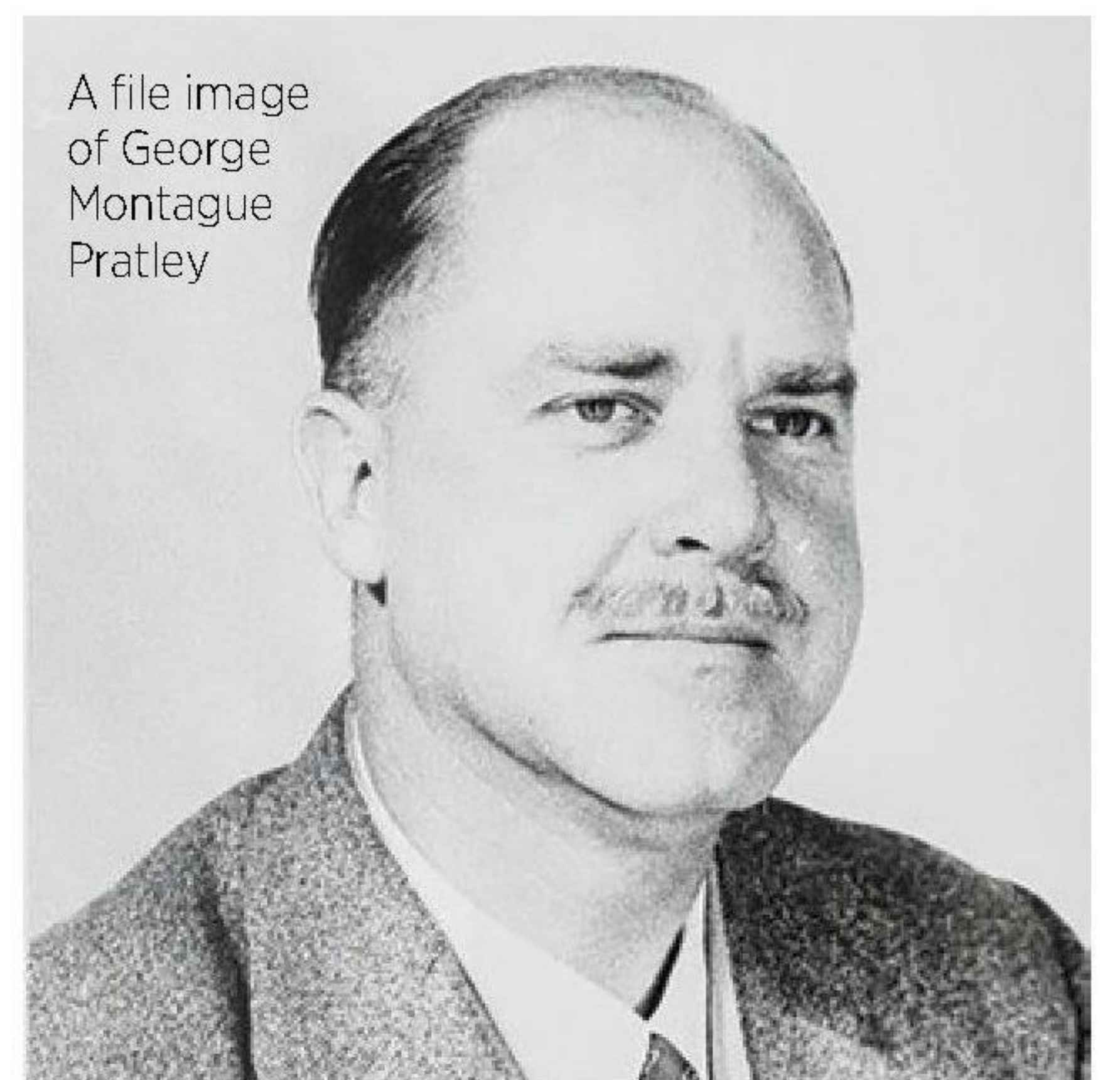
In the early 1960s, Atlas Minerals, of Pennsylvania, in the United States (US), asked Pratley to send a sample of the putty. At that time, US President John F. Kennedy was trying to make America great by beating the Russians to the moon.

“We were in talks with a company who wanted to produce putty in the States under licence from us. We were still in negotiations and we had sent them two kilograms of Pratley putty as a sample. Their rep got ahead of himself and went to NASA with it. The company couldn't supply it and we couldn't directly because of sanctions over apartheid that meant we couldn't even sell to the States, let alone NASA. So the company over there gave our sample to NASA ...We got a letter from NASA to confirm it was used on the Ranger project,” says Andrew.

The Ranger project was a series of unmanned probes launched in orbit around the moon, between 1961 and 1965, to pave the way for the 1969 landing – inside, the electrics were held together by Pratley's putty. A number of these probes were fired into the moon's surface to help scientists get the lay of the land.

“It made headlines in the newspapers. There was a sense of pride for us; the only African product used in the moon project was made by the people who work for Pratley. It is a proud thing we boast about and that putty is still up there! My family is involved in aviation and anything in

A file image of George Montague Pratley



aviation, space and the moon landing really cranks our handle,” says Andrew.

In later years, the putty has held fast everywhere from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. It was used to shore up the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco and once saved a stricken merchantman off the coast of Durban in South Africa. A huge hole threatened to sink the vessel until an emergency supply of putty was flown from Krugersdorp to plug the gap.

Environmentalists use the putty to fix radio transmitters into the backs of pangolins and turtles so they can track them.

Good business in the 21st century, but Pratley, remarkably, didn't make a cent from putting putty on the moon.

Now, the Reserve Bank of South Africa has decided to bring money into the story by putting out a set of coins, this year, to commemorate a South African invention that made a little bit of lunar history.

“Apparently, it is selling out. I have bought my set so I can tell my children this is what your great grandfather did!” says Andrew.

An African family story, surely, likely to hold as fast as the putty.