

# ACROSS THE TOP OF THE WORLD

*USCG NORTHWEST PASSAGE 1957*





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## The U.S. Coast Guard's 1957 Northwest Passage Expedition

Written for the 50th anniversary  
of the expedition and the occasion  
of the decommissioning  
of the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Storis*

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March 2007

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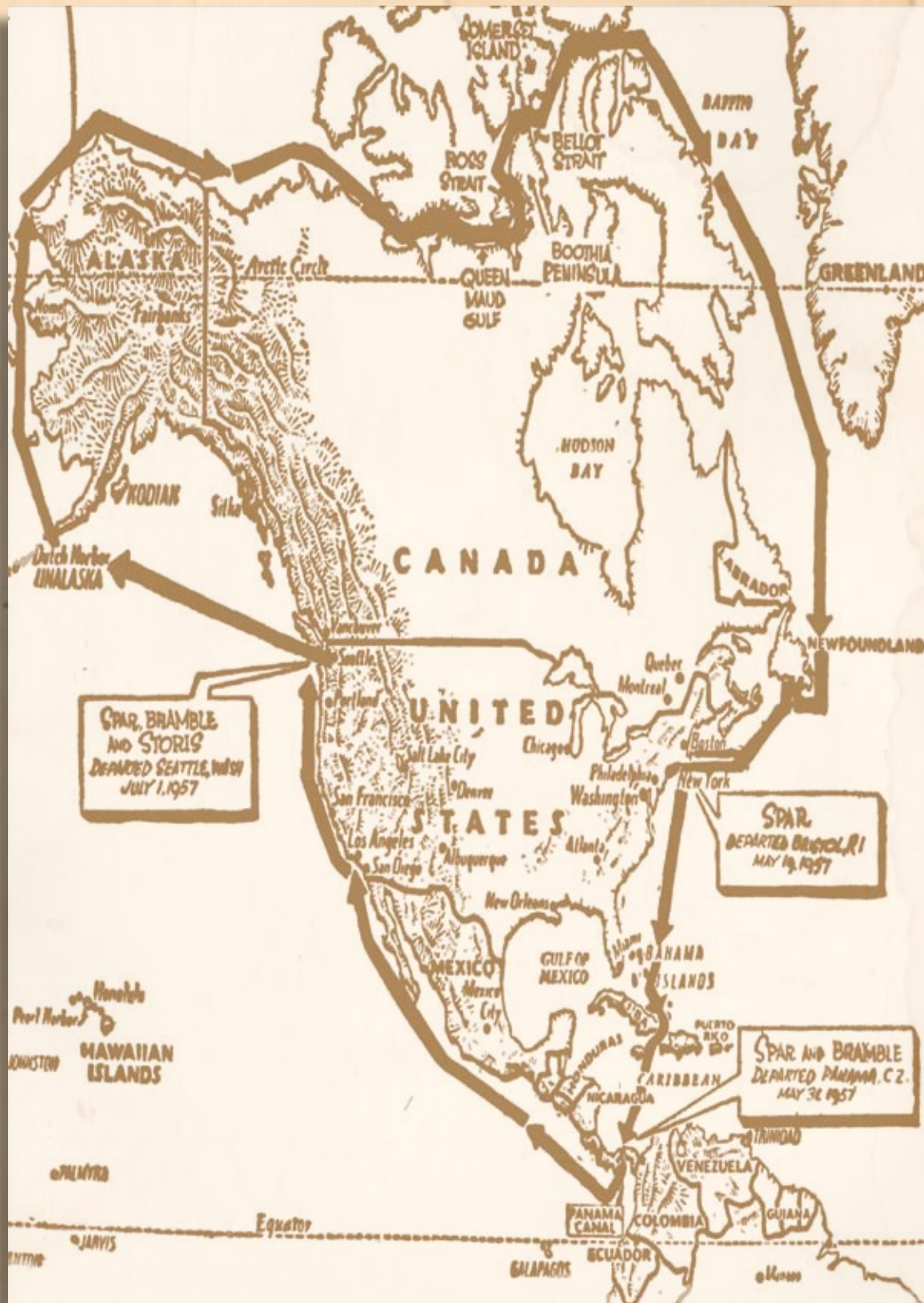
Layout and Design by PA2 Mike Lutz  
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# Chapter 1

*"We shall never cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."*

*-T. S. Eliot (1888 - 1965)*



**O**n the morning of Sept. 6, 1957, the U.S. Coast Guard buoy tender Spar reached the eastern side of Bellot Strait. Lt. Charles V. Cowing, Spar's young skipper, had a moment to write a special entry into the vessel's log.

1320: Arrived eastern point Bellot Strait having completed transit of Bellot Strait and the Northwest Passage in company with CGC Storis (WAG 38) and CGC Bramble (WAGL 402) and the HMCS Labrador. 109 days out of Bristol, Rhode Island.

Perhaps at this moment Cowing also took the opportunity to enjoy a deep breath. He had brought his buoy tender safely through a mythical passage the pursuit of which had killed scores of sailors and destroyed some of the most famous vessels in the history of exploration. In dry geographic terms, the narrow waterway of Bellot Strait separates the northernmost point of the North American continent with Somerset Island in the Canadian Arctic. But in terms of human longing, since the time of John Cabot this Northwest Passage had been imagined as a shortcut to the riches of the Orient, as a pathway to scientific achievement, as the glory road of Arctic exploration, and as the first line of defense for the continent of North America.

Spar's voyage had begun on May 19, 1957, in Narragansett Bay. In little more than three months, the buoy tender had visited Kingston, Jamaica; Balboa, Panama Canal Zone; Acapulco, Mexico; and Long Beach, Calif., before joining in Seattle on June 28

with the Coast Guard icebreaker Storis and Spar's sister buoy tender Bramble. Departing together from Seattle on July 1, 1957, the three cutters traveled through Unimak Pass on their way to Point Barrow, Alaska, where they began their attempt to break through the historic Northwest Passage. On Sept. 4, as they passed through a series of straits and gulfs named for Norwegian and British explorers and royalty, they reached the western edge of Bellot Strait, named for a French naval officer. There they met with the Canadian icebreaker HMCS Labrador. On the morning of Sept. 6, the four vessels transited the 17-mile strait.

*1320: Arrived eastern point Bellot Strait having completed transit of Bellot Strait and the Northwest Passage in company with CGC Storis (WAG 38) and CGC Bramble (WAGL 402) and the HMCS Labrador. 109 days out of Bristol, Rhode Island.*

The passage was clear of ice and took only two hours. Once on the eastern edge of the strait, the cutters steamed for Lancaster Sound and as they crossed the Arctic Circle heading homeward on Sept. 12, congratulatory telegrams rained down on the Coast



Guard cutters from admirals and department secretaries.

Eighteen days later, when Spar docked alongside its home pier in Bristol as the first American vessel ever to circle the entire North American continent, another telegram arrived from Dwight D. Eisenhower, the president of the United States. Within days, Bramble returned to its homeport in Miami as the second American vessel around the continent. Storis completed the expedition — and became the third — when it moored

back in Seattle.

In addition to their triple feat of circumnavigation, the three Coast Guard vessels achieved several other firsts during their historic expedition. They became the first American vessels to make the transit of the Northwest Passage; the first vessels to accomplish a convoy through the passage; and Bramble and Spar became the first buoy tenders (and the only American buoy tenders) to make the Arctic voyage.



### *Geography of the Northwest Passage*

The Northwest Passage is actually several passageways through the complex archipelago of the Canadian Arctic. According to Robert K. Headland of the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, England, seven different routes connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans via these ice-clogged seas. In the century since the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen accomplished the complete transit during 1903-1906 more than 100 voyages have been made through these passages by vessels from 18 different nations.

Even to reach the entrance to the Northwest Passage requires a difficult and dangerous feat of navigation. From the east, the way is challenged by thousands of enormous icebergs. These bergs, broken from the glaciers of Greenland in the east and Baffin Island in the west and reaching 300 feet in height, drift southward through Davis Strait. From the west, vessels reach the passage through the Bering Strait, where the mass of the polar ice cap leans its bulk on the north coast of Alaska and blocks any passage for much of the year.

### *Pursuit of the Northwest Passage*

The Icelandic Sagas record that a Norseman named Erik the Red, banished from Iceland by criminal troubles, sailed with 25 ships from Iceland to the southwest coast of Greenland in 985 a.d. There he and the crews of the 14 ships that survived the journey made a new home near the present-day airfield at Narsarsuak. From this small colony, Erik's son Leif made the first exploratory expeditions along the northeast coast of North America. Over the next five centuries, Norse mariners would probe along the coasts of present-day Canada and perhaps as far south as New England, New York and New Jersey in search of timber and new waterways to take them even further west.

It is not known how much knowledge of these early voyages survived into the world of the Renaissance. But in the mercantile world of the late 1400s and early 1500s, after the conquest of the Middle East by the Ottoman Turks had closed overland trade routes from Europe to Asia, European nations increas-



ingly sought new sea routes to Asia.

For a century after Prince Henry the Navigator founded an institute of geographic research at Sagres, Portugal, both Portuguese and Spanish explorers fanned out across the southern Atlantic, eventually rounding both the Cape of Good Hope in southern Africa and Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America. As Spain and Portugal appropriated these southern routes to the Spice Islands of Asia, other European nations looked north for new maritime routes to these same riches.

The first explorer after the Vikings to search in this northerly direction was Italian navigator Giovanni Caboto, who sailed from Bristol, England, in May 1497 under the name John Cabot. After 35 days at sea searching for a Northwest Passage to China, Cabot found his way blocked by the Canadian coastline. No contemporary sources have survived from his voyage, but it is thought that he spent about a month along the coast of northeastern North America before returning to England.

Cabot tried again a year later, but he and most of his fleet vanished from the seas and from history. By the time his son Sebastian Cabot tried unsuccessfully to locate the passage 10 years later, it had become clear that a new and enormous continent lay between Europe and Asia. For the next hundred years, navigators like Martin Frobisher, John Davis, William Baffin, Robert Bylot and Henry Hudson all probed the straits and bays that now are named for them.

Often the price they paid for this lasting fame was shipwreck, mutiny and death. Humphrey Gilbert, an avid colonizer and half-brother of Sir Walter Raleigh, wrote a book on the mythical passage, then drowned in 1583 returning to England after trying to find it himself. When Hudson's Bay proved to be an ice-filled trap rather than a passage to the east, Henry Hudson himself, his young son, and seven crew members were set adrift during a 1611 mutiny. When William Baffin's explorations convinced him that no northern passage to the east existed, interest in the arctic waned for nearly two centuries. Ironically, Baffin's discovery of Lancaster Sound would become the main portal to the Northwest Passage, and one the U.S. Coast Guard would use 350 years later.



# Chapter 2

“Make voyages!  
- Attempt them!  
- there’s nothing else...”  
-Tennessee Williams (1911 - 1983),  
*Camino Real*

**T**wo centuries after Baffin, and after the defeat of Napoleon, an idled Royal Navy turned its attention to the problem of an Arctic sea route to connect the Atlantic and Pacific. In 1818, Admiralty Sec-

retary John Barrow ordered two ships, HMS Dorothea and HMS Trent, to find a passage through the ice surrounding the North Pole and then to sail through the Bering Strait into the Pacific Ocean. The two ships, led by Cmdr. David Buchan and Lt. John Franklin, explored as far as the northwestern coast of Svalbard before turning back with the knowledge that no simple sea route over the polar sea existed.

Franklin returned to the Arctic as a captain in 1845. He was in command of an elaborate Royal Navy expedition with HMS Terror and HMS Erebus, two polar exploration vessels only recently returned from a pioneering exploration of Antarctica under the command of James Clark Ross. Franklin’s ships were stopped in the late summer of 1846 by heavy pack ice in Wellington Channel, 12 miles northwest of King William Island. Franklin died in the spring of 1847; after living on board the vessels for 18 months, the two crews abandoned the ships and began a long and desperate march southward. All 129 officers and men perished, and a score of British and American expeditions set out to discover what had happened to Franklin and his men. Not until 1859 was a record discovered under a cairn on King William Island that unraveled the fate of the doomed expedition. While scattered remains of the men have since been located, the shipwrecks themselves have never been found.

One of the men who searched for Franklin was a French navy lieutenant named Joseph René Bellot. In 1851, Bellot joined the ship Prince Albert in an expedition financed by



LIEUTENANT JOHN FRANKLIN, CAPTAIN

*John Franklin*



Franklin’s wife Jane. Unsuccessful in finding any trace of Franklin, Bellot instead discovered and traced a narrow channel of water that separated Boothia Peninsula – the northernmost point of land in North America and the place where the Royal Navy located the North Magnetic Pole in 1831 – with Somerset Island. The leader of the Prince Albert expedition, William Kennedy, named this strait after Bellot.

One explorer who read the story of Franklin closely was the Norwegian Roald Amundsen. Determined to avoid what he saw as Franklin’s mistakes, Amundsen in 1903 chose for his Northwest Passage expedition a shallow-draft, 65-foot auxiliary herring sloop by the name of Gjøa. In this small vessel, Amundsen and his crew entered Lancaster Sound and Barrow Strait, then turned south into Peel Sound and the uncharted waters of Franklin, Ross, and Rae straits.

After spending a year and a half at a place now called Gjøa Haven, and relocating the new position of the shifting magnetic pole, Amundsen maneuvered Gjøa through the rocks, shoals and shallows of Simpson Strait and around King William Island. These are the same waters that Storis, Bramble and Spar would create the first charts of 50 years later. Sailing into what is now called Amundsen Gulf, Gjøa in 1906 became the first ship to complete a northwest passage through the Canadian Arctic. Five years later, Amundsen would go on to become the first explorer to reach the South Pole and then, in 1926, the first to fly over the North Pole, in the airship Norge.

After Gjøa, it would be nearly 40 years before another vessel successfully challenged the passage. The St. Roch, perhaps the most famous ship in Canadian maritime history, took three arduous seasons, from 1940 to 1942, to make a Northwest Passage transit. Under the command of her Norwegian-born skipper Henry Larsen, St. Roch sailed from west to east, in the opposite direction from Amundsen and Gjøa.

As a Royal Canadian Mounted Police supply vessel, St. Roch possessed several unique capabilities, including an egg-shaped, two-foot-thick, ice-strengthened hull, and room on her decks for several dog teams. Heavy ice conditions forced Larsen to winter St. Roch at Cambridge Bay on Victoria Island.

Freed from the ice in July 1941, Larsen eventually sailed to Gjøa Haven on King William Island and continued eastward against thickening ice. Trapped again at Pasley Bay, St. Roch grounded on a submerged shoal and barely escaped from being crushed. Reaching what he thought would be the safety of Bellot Strait in summer 1942, Larsen found his ship nearly crushed again by ice racing through the narrow strait. Reaching Halifax, Nova Scotia, that October, Larsen wrote laconically: “It had not been an easy trip.”

As if to prove the point that ice conditions were never the same from one season to another, Larsen doubled back on the Northwest Passage in 1944, sailing east to west. Navigating St. Roch on a more northerly course, Larsen reached Vancouver in less than three months.



Henry Larson stands on the bridge of the St. Roch. The St. Roch was the second ship to sail the Northwest Passage and the first ship to sail it both ways in a single season.



# Chapter 3: The Cold War's Impact

*"You cannot simultaneously prevent  
and prepare for war."*

*-Albert Einstein (1879 - 1955)*

**A**s Cold War tensions between the Soviet Union and western democracies intensified in the late 1940s and early 1950s, both the United States and Canada sought to define the boundaries of any possible conflict. The possibility of a Russian air attack over the North Pole turned the Arctic into a potential battlespace. To demonstrate its sovereignty over this vast area, Canada sent the icebreaker HMCS Labrador through the Northwest Passage in 1954.

Two years earlier, defense planners had begun to look at the Northwest Passage as the first line of defense for the continent of North America. A 1952 meeting of scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology produced an idea for a system of early warning radar stations across the Canadian Arctic. This string of outposts would stretch from Point Barrow in Alaska 3,000 miles eastward to Baffin Island. The system as a whole was designed to detect incoming aircraft, not to intercept or destroy them. Once in operation, military planners expected to gain four to six hours of advance warning of an air attack coming from over the polar horizon. The extra time would allow for the rapid evacuation of cities and the air defense of vital industrial areas.

Two years later, President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved the project and ordered it built as soon as possible. Between 1955 and 1957 this string of installations, called the Distant Early Warning Line, or DEW Line, brought thousands of military and civilian personnel onto remote Arctic shorelines. The

construction of more than 50 DEW Line sites and the emplacement of new weather stations required a massive sealift by the Military Sea Transportation Service. This sealift delivered more than 2.5 million tons of cargo and 12 million barrels of fuel to the Canadian Arctic, all while maintaining alternate season supply runs to the U.S. Navy's Operation Deep Freeze in Antarctica.

At its peak, the DEW Line project employed over 7,500 civilian and military personnel. The line consisted of six main radar stations supported by 23 auxiliary and 28 intermediate stations, with the smaller stations functioning to close gaps in the radar coverage of the main stations. It remains one of the largest and most complicated construction projects ever undertaken.

The Coast Guard Cutter *Storis* had already participated in the previous two summer operations in 1955 and 1956, operating as a hydrographic survey unit with the survey ship *USS Requisite* (AGS-18). DC2 Jim Loback, who reported on board *Storis* the day before she left for the Arctic in 1956, remembered that "there was some scuttlebutt that we would be 'going around' [the continent] in '56, but it never materialized. In '57, I knew they were serious when they sent up the other two ships (*Bramble* and *Spar*)."

MSTS Arctic Operations in 1957 were to be the capstone of this enormous effort. Besides DEW Line construction, bases would be re-supplied in Greenland, Baffin Island, Labrador, and Newfoundland. More than 100 ships and 12,000 military and civilian personnel from the U.S. and Royal Canadian navies, the



U.S. Army, the Merchant Marine and the U.S. Coast Guard would be involved.

Sealift operations for these missions were as hazardous as they were necessary. Previous years had shown that a continuous airlift prior to the annual breakup of pack ice in the Northwest Passage would bring less than 10 percent of the cargo that the MSTS sealift could carry during the brief Arctic summer when sea navigation was possible. Only sealift operations could bring the tonnage of supplies into the Arctic required to build and maintain the forward defense of the DEW Line.

But ships were vulnerable to being trapped by the greatest natural hazard in the Arctic: ice. For much of the year, the polar ice pack pressed down upon the northern point of Alaska at Point Barrow. Any ship caught east of this point when the ice moved in permanently at summer's end would be forced to winter there and would likely be severely damaged if not destroyed. Ice conditions often required underwater demolition divers to blast away grounded ice in order to provide clear approaches to beach areas for landing craft.

If U.S. naval ships were trapped north or east of Point Barrow, as had almost happened in the summer of 1956, they would need some way to break out. The only option was to the east, through the classic Northwest Passage of Amundsen and Larsen, towards escape into the North Atlantic. But the expeditions of *Gjøa* and *St. Roch* had taken advantage of (and at various points nearly been sunk by) areas of shallows and shoalwaters unsuitable for deep-draft naval and cargo vessels.

The U.S. Coast Guard was therefore given a special triple mission: find a usable Northwest Passage through which deep-draft ships could escape from the Arctic; conduct a detailed hydrographic survey of it — extending the hydrographic sounding tracks begun by *Storis* and *USS Requisite* in 1955 and 1956; and then mark this new passage with aids to navigation.

The expedition would be anything but simple. Early season operations in 1957 had already seen the worst ice conditions many Arctic veterans had ever experienced. Despite the use of helicopter reconnaissance and portable automatic weather stations

emplaced on the polar ice pack north of Alaska, six different transport ships were damaged by ice before the Coast Guard task unit appeared on scene. Other difficulties would involve the lack of adequate charts; continuous daylight conditions, which limited the use of celestial navigation; magnetic shifts caused by the proximity of the North Magnetic Pole; and shifting winds that transformed open lanes of ocean into ice-clogged barriers in a matter of minutes.

Such obstacles became instant challenges for the Coast Guard crew. Petty officers who handled quartermaster duties on board *Storis* in 1956 refined their dead reckoning in the ice fields so that their navigation fixes were less than four miles off even after 10 days of moving back and forth through the shifting maze of ice. New whip antennae were mounted on board *Storis* to overcome the lack of radio connectivity experienced in Canadian waters during the 1956 cruise.

A newcomer to *Storis* in the fall of 1956 was a young ensign just graduated from the Coast Guard Academy, Richard Rybacki. When Rybacki arrived in Alaska, *Storis* had not yet returned from her 1956 Arctic expedition. "So they handed me a packet of TRs (Travel Requests), and told me to go out and do some recruiting for the Coast Guard Academy!" When *Storis* did arrive, Rybacki recalled, there was the usual reaction on board a Coast Guard ship when they see a new ensign arrive: "Great, a warm body. Let's put him to work!" If a new ensign had any advantage in the Coast Guard, it was the small size of the service. Rybacki already knew most of the officers in the wardroom. Over the next two years on *Storis*, he would spend nearly 90 percent of his time at sea.

When *Storis* suddenly returned to her homeport in the middle of a May 1957 cruise, the crew suspected something was up. When they were told to spend some time with their families because they might not be back for six months, rumor became fact. They were "going around." In a great synchronized wheeling operation that encompassed the entire continent of North America, three Coast Guard cutters set out in May 1957 to overcome the obstacles of the Arctic and to do what no American vessels had ever accomplished.



# Chapter 4

*“It is better to look ahead and prepare than to look back and regret.”*

*-Jackie Joyner-Kersee*

**T**he first of the three cutters to start the continental circumnavigation was the Spar, which left her homeport of Bristol, R.I., on May 19, 1957. This followed a spring of modifications at the Coast Guard Yard in Curtis Bay, Md., where the hulls of both Spar and Bramble were strengthened with additional steel ice-belts at and below the water line in preparation for cruising in Arctic waters. These thick metal belts stretched from the bow aft of amidships, and would protect the hull from the effects of ramming through pack ice. Additional equipment loaded for the Northwest Passage included an evaporator for producing fresh water and a

rotating Honeywell sonar unit, an early type of side-scanning sonar.

A new stainless steel propeller, designed to withstand the ice better than the usual bronze, was also installed at Curtis Bay. On the way south, at certain speeds, it caused such a shimmy and a loud, penetrating note throughout the entire ship that the Bramble had to go back into dry-dock in Miami until the problem was fixed.

Lt. Cmdr. Harry H. Carter was Bramble's skipper. “They had just transferred anyone who wanted to get off,” remembered Carter. “So we had pretty much of a new crew for this voyage.” The new crew was all volunteers who had signed up for the mission once it had

been announced. The challenge was even greater for Carter, who had no previous experience on a buoy tender like Bramble and had just reported on board himself when Bramble was being fitted out at Curtis Bay. However, he'd faced similar situations in his Coast Guard career. In 1943, due to the war-time emergency, he had graduated with a four-year degree from the Academy in only three years. Later he became a member of the International Ice Patrol though he had never seen any ice. “The Coast Guard believes you can do anything they tell you to do.”

Carter found the Bramble in a sorry state. The hull plating below the waterline from stem halfway to stern had been cut away to be replaced with the heavier plate for work in the ice. The ship's small boats were fitted with portable fathometers for inshore survey work. Once in Miami, the operational plan required the loading of six months worth of specialized supplies for the Arctic expedition. During those months of April and May of 1957, stores of all kinds streamed on board the cutter. Three thousand books were added to the ship's library.

Both Bramble and Spar carried six officers and 54 men during the Northwest Passage voyage. Along with the 125 crew on board Storis and another 60 on board the USCGC Balsam participating in DEW Line operations, the Coast Guard had 305 men involved in the 1957 MSTs Arctic operations.

One of those sailors was a young damage controlman named Ron Kubeck, who had enlisted in the Coast Guard in 1955. While serving on board the USCGC Cook Inlet, he noticed a message seeking volunteers for an upcoming Arctic expedition. With experience as a scuba and hookah hose diver from Damage Control School in Groton, Conn., Kubeck's application to join the new expedition was approved, and in the spring of 1957 he reported on board Spar as the only damage controlman.

Spar steamed for Jamaica, arriving at sunrise on May 25. After the officers, chiefs and crew enjoyed a day of liberty, Spar continued on to the Panama Canal Zone. Bramble left her homeport of Miami, Fla., on May 26 and rendezvoused with Spar in the Panama Canal Zone. With Bramble in the lead, the two cutters convoyed toward Acapulco, Mexico, which they reached on Sunday morning, June

9. There, Lt. Cmdr. Carter made the most of his liberty by hauling in a 119-pound sailfish.

“I don't know how that story got around,” remembered Carter, “but it's true. Four of us — a chief from Bramble and two folks from Spar — had rented a boat with a fisherman. You could catch sailfish out there without any effort at all. We landed five of them in that one day. You couldn't keep it unless you agreed you were either going to mount it or eat it. Well, I couldn't afford to mount it, so I decided to eat this fish that was almost nine feet long. I took it back to the ship, we threw it on the reefer, and it stayed there from June until we got back to Miami in September where I had it smoked.” For the remainder of the expedition, the skipper of Spar, Lt. Charles Cowing, referred to Spar's sister ship as “the fish carrier from Acapulco and Miami.”

The two vessels reached Long Beach, Calif., in mid June, and moored alongside one another. The log of the Spar recorded that she took on board 31,000 gallons of fuel and an LCVP. This landing craft would become one of the inshore workhorses during the Arctic charting and surveying to come. Continuing north along the western coast of the United States, Spar and Bramble reached Seattle on the morning of June 27, where they moored alongside Storis, which itself had just arrived from Ketchikan, Alaska, to have a helicopter landing platform placed in its decks.

Loback recalled meeting with the petty officers and chiefs who handled quartermaster duties on the other two vessels, to go over charts and courses. The sailors from Miami on board Bramble were already sporting their brand new Arctic foul weather gear with fur-lined hoods. “They were complaining about the cold, and we were still going out on deck without jackets.”

In Seattle, the Coast Guard vessels, “three stubby little ships,” as Newsweek referred to them, were attached to Task Force 5 under the command of Rear Adm. Henry S. Persons, USN, the commander of the MSTs Pacific Area. Task Force 5 was responsible for the supply of DEW Line stations on the Pacific side of Bellot Strait. The Coast Guard element itself was designated as Task Unit 5.1.5, and operated under the command of Capt. Harold Wood, the skipper of Storis.

Rybacki recalled the first meeting between





a stoic, pipe-smoking Capt. Wood and Adm. Persons, the overall task force commander. When the Coast Guard officers entered the room, Adm. Persons quipped that it was “good to have the Hooligan Navy here at the meeting.” Wood, in a laconic reply his officers would retell for years when speaking of him, answered “We don’t mind you calling us ‘hooligans,’ but it’s the ‘navy’ part that we find objectionable.”

After a U.S. Navy hydrographer reported on board Spar from the cable-laying ship USS Thor (ARC-4), the new task unit steamed north making approximately 250 miles per day. Kubeck remembered diving to check on some minor damage to Spar’s prop after meeting some ice near the Aleutian Islands. The decision was made to continue on. “As I recall, the Russians intercepted our communications and cordially invited us to use their dry-dock facilities in Siberia, and we told them, ‘thank you, no thank you.’”

On Wednesday, July 10, the convoy crossed the Arctic Circle (66° 33’N) and arrived off

Point Barrow, Alaska, on the morning of July 12. There they made a rendezvous with the icebreaker USS Burton Island (after 1966, a Coast Guard vessel), and made preparations for steaming to the east. Throughout July 12, Bell helicopters flown by U.S. Navy pilots from Storis and Burton Island carried mail, personnel and equipment to the four vessels offshore.

At this point, Spar had already been away from Bristol for 40 days, and steamed for over 8,600 miles. The weather was good, and only scattered ice dotted the seas north of Point Barrow. But the crew could see the polar ice pack looming on the northern horizon, so it was no doubt with renewed seriousness that they sat through a training film titled “Cold Weather Operational Problems.”

The task unit was put to work immediately, cruising six miles northeast of Point Barrow to conduct a series of soundings of a reported shoal. Charts of this survey were forwarded to the MSTS DEW Line fleet for use in its supply runs later that same month. Both the

Burton Island and Storis were equipped with helicopters for ice reconnaissance; on July 13 they led the Spar and Bramble into the ice fields of the Beaufort Sea.

Burton Island assisted the three Coast Guard vessels in breaking through the solid field of ice that began about six miles east of Point Barrow. Continuous daylight made for generally mild weather conditions, and the cutters began what would become their regular routine of following narrow openings, or leads, in the ice fields. Following these leads, often discovered by the helicopters scouting ahead of the convoy, initially allowed the vessels to maintain regular daily mileage toward the east.

On July 17, an ice reconnaissance flight from the airstrip at Cape Parry had revealed severe ice conditions to the east. After taking on nearly 20,000 gallons of fuel from Burton Island, the Spar launched its small boat so Cowing could join Carter in a conference with Capt. Wood on board Storis. As the Burton Island left the convoy and returned to Point Barrow, Storis cautiously led the task unit into the Amundsen Gulf.



## Chapter 5

*“He that will not sail till all dangers are over must never put to sea.”*

*-Thomas Fuller*

**F**or the next week, Spar began her oceanographic work of recording currents and seawater temperatures and depths. Meanwhile, Storis and Bramble lay in thickening ice at 70°04’N, just off Mackenzie Bay, Canada. Often, the two cutters drifted in ice-free lakes, or polynias, dodging small chunks of floating ice known as growlers and small icebergs called bergy-bits, while surveying the ice conditions ahead and waiting to continue the expedition eastward.

When progress along the northern coast of Canada did commence, it was slow and at times extremely dangerous. On an expedition when the daily miles made good averaged between 50 and 100, Bramble reported only five miles of progress on Aug. 1. Sailors recalled the sensation of standing watch on the bridge of Storis at midnight, watching the midnight sun go down not quite to the horizon, before it stopped and started to rise again.

From July 23 through Aug. 2, as Spar continued her soundings, the three ships struggled to maintain headway through heavy ice in Dolphin and Union Strait and Queen Maud Gulf. The situation came to a near-crisis on July 29, when Storis, ramming through ice floes, met hard, fast ice that would not be moved. Spar, just astern, slowed to avoid a collision, and Bramble in the rear stopped as well, trapping all three vessels for two days.

As northerly winds pushed more ice down onto the immobile vessels, ice floes forced their way under the Spar, the rudder jammed and the ship lost its steering control. Ice continued to press into Spar, pushing the cutter upward and into the hull of Storis. Spar’s logbook recorded the scene on the morning of July 30: “Extreme ice pressure

holding Storis in contact with this vessel’s port side. Fenders rigged. Unable to maneuver. Propellers and rudders blocked by ice.” The floes pushed the two vessels so close together that men were passing cigarettes back and forth to each other.

On board Storis, the crew attempted to maneuver the larger ship to keep from crushing Spar. “We were stuck,” recalled Loback,

*July 30: Extreme ice pressure holding Storis in contact with this vessel’s port side. Fenders rigged. Unable to maneuver. Propellers and rudders blocked by ice.*

“and there were rumors that they were going to start taking people off.” Rybacki – who kept a personal diary of the expedition and still has it in his possession, almost 20 years after his retirement as a rear admiral – remembered the day vividly. “One of the lessons we learned along the way is emphasized in the notes I kept throughout the trip. And that was the power of the wind on the ice, and the fact that if you watched it carefully you’d be able to take advantage of the weather. It would make it a lot easier on you and the vessel, rather than just putting your head down and battering your way through the ice. The wind and the weather had such a great impact on the forces of the ice.”





Kubeck remembered the 20-degree list making it very difficult to walk the Spar's decks. "I think if that happened to me today I'd be very concerned, but back then I had maybe the right attitude that nothing can happen to me; nothing is going to happen to any of us."

But Storis was having problems of its own. As it attempted to move off, ice jammed Storis' rudder first at 30 degrees left, then 5 degrees left. "We were at 'all stop,'" said Loback, "since the screws wouldn't turn over. One of the privileges of being a first class petty officer on board Storis was the chance to stand ice watch on the stern. Any time ice got too close to the prop, you'd notify the bridge and they'd stop the engine. These watches would last for an hour at a time. All of a sudden we were stopped and couldn't use the screws, and the rudders were frozen in."

One of the gunner's mates appeared with dynamite charges and attempted to blast Storis free. "I don't think they were that familiar with the dynamite," remembered Loback, "because they set the charges off quite a ways from the ship — which we were grateful for." In the afternoon, Rybacki recorded in his private log that the weather had cleared

enough for a mail plane to deliver correspondence to the ship. He wrote: "Lucky as I am, I received three letters from my wife and one from my mother. Had the 8-12 watch today, so I went on watch immediately following the movie "Davey Crockett." Had a fair watch, busting the Spar out of the ice in which she was stuck. I learned what an amazing effect tide has on ice while chopping out the Spar."

Storis was not able to free herself until the afternoon of July 30. Rybacki noted in his private log that he slept in until 1000, sewed a patch on his shirt and even did a few exercises. So while the Storis was pinched in by ice, life went on. Nevertheless, discussions took place just in case life couldn't go on. "We talked about that," remembered Rybacki. "I think we all felt that we would be able to get out. My log shows that we were waiting for either the wind to shift or for the Burton Island to arrive and break us free. I think the concern was whether we would be able to break out and go east, which was our mission. We always felt we could break out and return west."

When Spar restarted her engines and turned her propellers, the crew felt a shimmy throughout the stern of the ship, evidence of a broken prop blade. Limping through the pack



ice, Spar followed Storis on Aug. 1 in splitting a path in the ice to free Bramble, trapped and unable to maneuver two-and-a-half miles astern. "We had 5,000 yards to go to get to them," Rybacki wrote in his log. "At midnight, we just reached them and started chipping them out. Had a lot of fun breaking the ice, but I got stuck and had to use the boom to get out once." Re-reading his young ensign's log, Rybacki found that at the same time Storis was fighting the ice, he was involved in a tussle with his executive officer over a lock he had issued but which the XO had lost. "So those kinds of things were going on while the ship was locked in the ice." In the larger scheme of things, this was also the same day that the DEW Line was declared operational.

Lt. Cowing stopped Spar the following day to check for ice damage. Divers found that a foot and a half of one of the propeller blades had been snapped off. Ice conditions improved on Aug. 2, and the crisis abated. That same day, one of the Bell helicopters from Storis surveyed the route ahead, landing and refueling on board Spar before returning to Storis. Bramble's log recorded 54 miles made good that day.

Cmdr. Carter recalled that, after the near-entrapment, the captains decided to proceed through the ice abreast of each other as much as possible. If one of the ships was stuck, then one or both of the other ships could try and force a passage to free the trapped cutter.

The vessels were able to proceed through Dolphin and Union Strait, continuing their ocean stations and surveying a previously uncharted island, before traversing Coronation Gulf on Aug. 4 and Dease Strait on Aug. 5. Feeling their way through small leads and cracks in the ice near the shoreline of Victoria Island, the cutters arrived at the desolate outpost of Cambridge Bay on the Aug. 6. Bramble broke the ice in Cambridge Bay and led in the other two cutters.

At Cambridge Bay, local authorities allowed the men a chance to go ashore for a rather bleak liberty. After landings by LCVPs from both Spar and Bramble, a day of recreation included visits to the local Hudson's Bay Company trading post; the Royal Canadian Mounted Police outpost; and two missions, one Anglican, the other Catholic. Rybacki went ashore with his fishing tackle and caught a few Arctic char.



Twenty Inuit families lived in a native village nearby. Unlike their Coast Guard counterparts from the Greenland Patrol during the Second World War, the men of the Northwest Passage expedition were forbidden by Canadian government regulations to visit or fraternize with the native population. Loback, who did not go ashore, recalled one sailor returning to Storis and removing his watch cap to reveal a shaved head covered in mosquito bites.

The task unit charted Cambridge Bay and its approaches. Broken, concentrated ice created difficult operating conditions for the convoy's small boats, as the LCVPs from

*"I don't think they were that familiar with the dynamite," remembered Loback, "because they set the charges off quite a ways from the ship — which we were grateful for."*

Bramble and Spar led a shallow water survey with portable fathometers. "We would take continuous soundings with the fathometer," remembered Loback, "and one of the hydrographic officers and I would use sextants to take angles and plot those against our soundings. We were operating with charts of the area that did not have good soundings."

Charts from these surveys would be used by the MSTs supply ships that would follow the Coast Guard convoy later that summer. While these surveys were being carried out, another small boat from Bramble assisted divers in scuba gear as they inspected the hulls of the three Coast Guard cutters. They found a four-foot section of Bramble's port bilge keel had been badly dented, and Spar would have to limp along until its prop could be replaced.

Besides the executive officer and assistant engineering officer on Storis, two young ensigns were assigned to Arctic diving operations. Rybacki was one of them. "If you've seen the film of the expedition ["Cutters Around the Continent"], there are a couple of heroic guys in their dry suits. I was one and



my classmate Bruce Solomon, who has since passed away, was the other. We went through 'tortuous' training in order to become qualified. While in Seattle we went to the YMCA for scuba-diving classes for one week!"

During one dive underneath Storis to extract a sonar transducer from its nest in the hull, Rybacki accidentally scraped a hole in his suit. "It was like a sharp needle. The water was 29.5°F. By the time they hoisted me on board with the boom, my foot was numb."

As for their ice-breaking methods, Cmdr. Carter recalled that swinging the Bramble's buoy crane back and forth with a suspended buoy mooring weight to rock the vessel back and forth was ineffective. So was using explosives to break a path through the ice. "You had to simply wait for the wind to shift and clear the ice. It never occurred to us that we would be stuck there. We just figured that sooner or later things would open up." If they were beset in the ice, the plan was to use an onboard supply of plywood to enclose the



house and airlift most of the crew to safety. A skeleton crew would remain behind for the winter.

Leaving Cambridge Bay, the convoy continued east. The LCVPs continued their work around the ice-filled edges of tiny Arctic islands, ferrying men and supplies ashore for the construction of aids to navigation. Drilling through permafrost and rock, crews anchored steel bases for tripod towers that held navigational beacons and radar reflectors. Old buoys were repainted and reset, and new ones emplaced, including one of the spot where Storis touched bottom in Simpson Strait on Aug. 14.

"It's a very shoal body of water," Rybacki wrote in his personal log that day. "As was experienced by Storis today as we spent four hours on a shoal. Storis went aground." After they floated free, Storis completed setting a series of channel markers and then escorted the task force through the newly-marked channel.

Some towers needed removal, and one such incident remains in Cmdr. Carter's memory to this day. "We were operating in an area where the fog rolled in very quickly. Our shore parties had installed many aluminum towers for navigation, and the Storis sent us back to remove one of them. I didn't have any radar. We sent a crew ashore, they tore the tower down, came back to the ship and by then we were about 25-30 miles behind the convoy. Dense fog, no radar; so we just started plugging away. You could look over the side and see the bottom. I don't think we had more than three or four feet under the keel. So we moseyed along at about three knots and finally caught up, but I can tell you I didn't get much sleep that night."

During an LCV deployment from Bramble, Cmdr. Carter realized the quickly-changing operational environment in which he and his crew were navigating. The LCV deployed from Bramble to do some work on an island, but without supplies to sustain the crew if they were caught there. "We learned that shore parties in the Arctic have to be self-sustaining, because you never know if you are going to get them back or not. You can put them ashore and they can be working there when the next thing you know the fog shuts everything down and they can't find you. And if they can't subsist by themselves until you



find them, then you have a real problem. We came very close once. We put an LCV ashore to take down a tower when the fog shut in. They didn't know where we were, and since we didn't have radar we didn't know where they were. It could have been very dicey, but suddenly the fog lifted and they found us."

Other distractions could alter the daily routine as well. Every morning Loback would make out the daily position report, have the navigator sign it, and have it ready by 8 a.m. One morning Loback could not find the navigator. He searched the entire ship, and finally found the navigator at the Storis' fantail, intently taking pictures of a polar bear. The bears would often appear at the fantail when the ship was operating in heavy pack ice.

Rybacki recalled the roar of ice as it pressed down on Storis when the vessel was anchored in Queen Maud Gulf. "Being the OD (Officer of the Deck), I thought, 'I've got to do something quick. I don't know whether the anchor is going to hold us here.' It was a time for learning to do some significant ship-handling, learning to react quickly to what was going on."

On Aug. 15, an MSTs convoy led by the USCGC Balsam arrived in Queen Maud Gulf, and for several days the small Coast Guard

fleet exchanged mail and movies while Bramble and Spar continued with their aids to navigation work. A U.S. Navy film, "Land and Life in the Arctic," made a hurried pass through. A Coast Guard press release of the time claimed somewhat unconvincingly that such "movies were good even for the second or third time."

After refueling and re-supplying from the MSTs fleet, Task Unit 5.1.5 continued its intensive survey of Simpson Strait, while Balsam led its convoy more than 1,000 miles back to Point Barrow. On Aug. 23, Spar ran aground while surveying Douglas Bay, and Bramble towed her free. The same day, Capt. Wood made an ice reconnaissance flight from Storis all the way to Bellot Strait and back. "There were all sorts of unnamed islands in the area," recalled Loback. "So everybody was putting their own names on them, or their wife's name, but I don't think any of them ever got recorded. There's a Loback Island up there somewhere."

A week later, with their hydrographic and construction work in Simpson Strait concluded, the convoy commenced its long-awaited transit of the final leg of the Northwest Passage.





# Chapter 6

*“To accomplish great things,  
we must not only act, but also dream;  
not only plan, but also believe.”*

*-Anatole France*

The 300-mile voyage from Queen Maud Gulf to Bellot Strait was free of the perils that had thus far accompanied the expedition. Ice had moved out and “we just kind of sailed up there,” remembered Loback. A survey around the southeast corner of King William Island provided a navigational track through Rae Strait, James Ross Strait, and Franklin Strait all the way to the approaches of Bellot Strait. Waiting for the American convoy at the western approaches of Bellot Strait on the morning of Sept. 3 was the Canadian icebreaker HMCS Labrador, which was similar in design and construction similar to the

U.S. Coast Guard’s Wind-class icebreakers. On Aug. 24, Labrador, under the command of Capt. Thomas C. Pullen, RCN, had moved through Bellot Strait from east to west, preceded by a small sounding boat and two helicopters. Pullen discovered a good channel in the strait, with a minimum depth of 50 feet. Use of the strait would cut hundreds of miles off the usual Northwest Passage route around the northern end of Somerset Island. For two days after the Coast Guard cutters met Labrador, each of the four vessels operated independently, each surveying a different sector of the western approaches to Bellot Strait. When the three Coast Guard



vessels were tied up alongside the Labrador, some of the Americans went on board Labrador to enjoy the Royal Canadian Navy daily rum ration, recalled Loback.

Finally, on the morning of Sept. 6, 1957, the four ships, led by Labrador, steamed 17 miles through an ice-free Bellot Strait and anchored at its eastern end. Following a centuries-old Arctic tradition, shore parties from each vessel landed at Fort Ross on barren and rocky Somerset Island in order to place historical documents describing their achievements underneath a rock cairn.

They were standing on appropriately historic ground. Pullen’s crew discovered the cairn a week earlier, and found that it contained a series of messages from previous explorers, including one written by Henry Larsen of the St. Roch in 1942. They also located artifacts from HMS Fury, the British Arctic exploration ship wrecked on Somerset Island in 1825.

“Anchored in False Strait just north of the entrance of Bellot Strait,” Rybacki wrote in his personal log that day. “The Labrador is moored alongside to port and the Bramble and the Spar to starboard. We had all nested together the night before awaiting morning before making our triumphant transit through Bellot. It was foggy in the morning so the episode was delayed until noon. I luckily had the noon watch so I have the privilege of saying that I was the first American OOD to go through Bellot Strait. We built a cairn at both ends of the strait, placing in them the names of all officers and crew of the ships participating in this project. Now that the party’s over it’s about time to head home.”

Cmdr. Carter regretted not knowing more Arctic history before he commanded a vessel on a voyage through the Northwest Passage. “I would have spent more time looking [for artifacts of earlier expeditions]. The survey area that we ended up doing just before we went through Bellot Strait was where Franklin and his men all perished, and it would have been interesting if we could have spent more time there looking around.”

Lt. Cowing returned to Spar to write his own special entry into the cutter’s logbook. They had charted and pioneered a new route for deep-draft naval vessels through the Arctic, and in the process made Coast Guard history. Once on the eastern side of the strait, Labrador released the Coast Guard convoy

so it could proceed homeward to the United States.

From Bellot Strait, the convoy continued its oceanographic research through Prince Regent Inlet, where Cowing sent a party ashore with a plaque and a flag to mark Spar’s farthest north latitude attained on the expedition. In Lancaster Sound, Baffin Bay and Davis Strait, the crews took gunnery practice on drifting icebergs. The 3-inch deck guns made only small chips in the massive bergs.

In Baffin Bay, the crew of Spar listened to a lecture on the Arctic by Squadron Leader Scott E. Alexander of the Royal Canadian Air

*“We were never really told how significant the expedition was,” remembered Loback. “It was about 40 years later that I really understood what it was we had accomplished up there.”*

Force. The 44-year-old former Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman and Arctic expert had accompanied U.S. task force units in the Northwest Passage for three consecutive summers. Newsweek reported that during the 1956 expedition Capt. Wood of Storis had exclaimed: “Look at us. The Coast Guard leads the Navy – and who leads the Coast Guard? Why, a blankety-blank airman – and a Canadian at that.”

On Sept. 24, Spar completed her 14,000-mile circumnavigation of the continent at her homeport in Bristol, R.I., namesake city of Bristol, England, from where John Cabot had sailed in search of a Northwest Passage 460 years earlier. The Spar had been the first Coast Guard vessel to leave its homeport, and therefore the first to return. That made it the first American vessel to circumnavigate the continent. Kubeck had a special reason to feel a personal sense of triumph. “Coming into port, my mooring position was up near the bow at the anchor windlass. So I claim that, unofficially, I was the first American to circumnavigate the North American continent!”

But for other sailors, the meaning of the



expedition did not sink in for many years. Even though the *Storis* was greeted in Boston by the vice commandant of the Coast Guard, Capt. Wood was awarded the Coast Guard Commendation Medal, and a specially-commissioned bronze plaque was bolted onto the vessel to commemorate the expedition, the magnitude of the achievement was not immediately clear. "We were never really told how significant the expedition was," remembered Loback. "It was about 40 years later that I really understood what it was we had

accomplished up there."

Bramble moored back in Miami on Oct. 1, and when *Storis* completed her transit of the Panama Canal Zone and returned to Seattle later that same month, one of the Coast Guard's most complex and daring expeditions came to a quietly successful conclusion.

"Being on an operation of that significance is very much like going through daily life without being aware that you are living through historic times," said Rybacki, now a retired rear admiral, as he reflected on why



he kept a journal of the expedition. "The significance of events is generally learned by people on reflection, after study, and only the very few observant people who are especially aware of the events of the day can appreciate what is going on. Most of us have to wait awhile, mature and learn a little bit more. Certainly a young ensign or j.g., married six months to a year, could not by any stretch of the imagination appreciate the significance of this long trip we were on. But I certainly grew to appreciate its significance

over the years."

The Northwest Passage has been accomplished 11 times by American vessels, and 10 of these voyages were carried out by U.S. Coast Guard vessels, the only American naval vessels to do so. *Storis*, *Bramble* and *Spar* were the first of these 10 Coast Guard cutters to make the journey through the passage, establishing a tradition that was followed by the Coast Guard cutters *Staten Island* (1969), *Polar Sea* (1985, 1990), *Polar Star* (1988, 1989) and *Healy* (2000, 2003).





# Chapter 7

## The Skippers

*“The wonder is always new that any sane man can be a sailor.”*

*-Ralph Waldo Emerson*

*Cmdr. Harold L. Wood,  
USCGC Storis*

Born and raised in Trenton, N.J., Harold Lambert Wood graduated from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Conn., and was commissioned an ensign, on June 8, 1936. He served on a variety of East Coast cutters and reached the temporary rank of commander during the Second World War (he achieved it permanently on April 15, 1949).

His Coast Guard experiences during the war prepared him well for the 1957 Northwest Passage expedition. From July 1940, until April 1943, he was assigned as assistant to the chief inspector during the construction of the Storis in Toledo, Ohio. After the commissioning of Storis, Wood served as engineering officer on Storis as the icebreaker entered service on the Greenland Patrol. For a year and a half, Wood served as engineering officer on board the Coast Guard-manned attack cargo ship USS Aquarius (AKA-16) during a series of assault landings in the Pacific in the Kwajalein islands, Guam, Palau, and at Leyte in the Philippines.

After the war, Wood served as engineering officer on the cutter Wachusett out of Seattle, then as executive officer on the cutter Duane out of Boston. After a headquarters tour, Wood took command of Storis in Juneau, Alaska, in June 1955, and participated for three consecutive summers in the massive lift of construction and supply materials that summer for the Distant Early Warning Line radar stations in the Arctic.

Some of Wood's other Coast Guard assign-

ments included chief of operations and chief of staff for the 13th District. Upon retiring from the service, Wood worked as an engineer for Todd Shipyards in Seattle.

*Lt. Cmdr. Harry H. Carter,  
USCGC Bramble*

Born in Nebraska in 1921, Harry Hart Carter graduated from high school in Wisconsin and attended the University of Wisconsin before graduating from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and earning a commission as ensign in 1943. After serving in the North Atlantic on convoy escort duty with the cutter Argo and attending radar school at Harvard University, Carter served on board the Coast Guard-manned troop transport USS General George M. Randall (AP-115) in the Pacific.

After the war, Carter specialized in oceanography, meteorology and geophysics on board the cutter Tampa during International Ice Patrol cruises. He then reported to the Scripps Institute of Oceanography in La Jolla, Calif., where he studied for two years. Carter returned to the Grand Banks of Newfoundland to study ice from the decks of the Coast Guard's oceanographic cutter Evergreen, served with the service's oceanographic unit in Woods Hole, Mass., and completed a geophysics course at the University of California at Los Angeles. He attained the rank of lieutenant commander on Aug. 26, 1952.

Carter then served tours as executive officer and commanding officer of the patrol cutter Minnetonka in the Pacific. During this

time, his wardroom hosted a group of actors — including Walter Brennan in the role of Chief Petty Officer O'Malley — during the production of the 1954 film “Sea of Lost Ships.” After a tour with the oceanographic unit at headquarters (during which he represented the Coast Guard at an oceanographic working group meeting at the Oceanographic Institute at Göteborg, Sweden), Carter was tapped in April 1957, to command the cutter Bramble during its Arctic mission with the U.S. Navy's Military Sea Transportation Service. Leaving the service in the early 1960s, Cmdr. Carter worked as an oceanographer for the Chesapeake Bay Institute of Johns Hopkins University before moving on to the State University of New York at Stony Brook, where he retired in 1985.

*Lt. Charles V. Cowing,  
USCGC Spar*

Charles Vinal Cowing was born in Maine in 1915, and entered the Coast Guard as an enlisted surfman boatswain's mate in 1936. Prior to the Second World War, he served at lifeboat stations in both Maine and Massachusetts. From 1941 through 1943, Cowing

served in the Office of the Captain of the Port in Boston, and then earned a commission at the Fort McHenry Training Station in Baltimore, Md. Through the remainder of the war, he served at Captain of the Port offices in New York and San Francisco.

After a post-war tour as executive officer on the patrol cutter Daphne out of Alameda, Calif., Cowing served in Antwerp, Belgium, under the senior merchant marine detail officer supervising the handling and stowage of explosives. Cowing returned to the United States and between September 1946 and February 1953 served as officer-in-charge of lifeboat stations in Massachusetts and California. After a collision between the USNS Benevolence and the SS Mary Luchenbach four miles west of Golden Gate Bridge in August 1950, Cowing received a commendation for supervising the rescue of 179 survivors from the Benevolence.

After brief tours in Alaska on board the tenders Bittersweet and Sedge, Cowing took command of the patrol cutter General Greene in Gloucester, Mass., in April 1954. Two and a half years later, after being promoted to lieutenant, Cowing took command of Spar in December 1956. The following summer, Charles Cowing became the first commander of an American ship to circumnavigate the North American continent.



The four commanding officers of the vessels that comprised the convoy through Bellot Strait, on Sept. 6, 1957, meet on the deck of the Canadian icebreaker HMCS Labrador prior to their historic transit. From left to right: Cmdr. Harold L. Wood, Capt. Thomas C. Pullen, Lt. Charles V. Cowing, and Lt. Cmdr. Harry H. Carter.



# Chapter 8

## The Cutters

*“Land was created to provide a place for boats to visit.”*

*-Brooks Atkinson*

### *USCGC Storis*

Storis: A Danish word meaning ‘large ice,’ referring to old pack ice that forms in the Arctic basin and drifts southward along the east coast of Greenland.

As a Coast Guard public affairs bulletin stated at the time of the Northwest Passage Expedition, there is literally no ship like the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Storis. A prototype pocket icebreaker, Storis served not only in that capacity but also as a buoy tender, cargo

carrier, gun boat and aircraft carrier for both seaplanes and helicopters.

Storis was designed and constructed early in the Second World War as a replacement for the temporary fleet of small, hastily-converted fishing trawlers that had carried supplies from Boston to bases in Greenland in 1942 and 1943. At 230 feet long, Storis was more than 100 feet longer than the small Arctic trawlers it replaced, 43 feet wide and with a draft of 15 feet. Built by Toledo Shipbuilding in Ohio in 1942, Storis’ rounded hull

copied the most famous ice-ship in history, the Norwegian polar exploration vessel Fram, and was designed to enable the ship to rise up and avoid destruction when squeezed by ice. At the time of the 1957 expedition, Storis carried a dozen officers and more than one hundred sailors.

Storis was first assigned to guard wartime convoys steaming from Newfoundland to Greenland. During the summer months of the Second World War, Storis patrolled the east coast of Greenland in search-and-destroy missions for weather stations established by the Germans. To extend its range, the ice-breaker carried a seaplane on its deck.

In 1948, Storis was transferred to the West Coast, where Juneau, Alaska, became its homeport. During the short summer months, Storis took up a long tradition of Coast Guard vessels serving on the Bering Sea Patrol. Carrying on board a federal judge, a doctor and a dentist, the cutter became a floating courthouse and clinic. While providing healthcare and judicial services to the isolated villages of the Aleutian Islands and as far north as Point Barrow, Storis also provided

logistic support for scattered Coast Guard loran transmitter stations and lighthouses alike. Storis returned to Juneau in mid-fall to take up winter search-and-rescue work.

Storis joined the U.S. Navy’s Military Sea Transportation Service during its summer operations in 1955 and for several summers thereafter participated in the re-supply of Distant Early Warning Line sites in the far north. At the same time, with USS Requisite, Storis formed part of a unit that in 1955 began the first hydrographic surveys in the central Canadian Arctic. The 1957 expedition with Bramble, Spar and HMCS Labrador was a continuation and expansion of the sounding tracks begun by Storis and Requisite in 1955 and 1956.

After the Northwest Passage Expedition, Storis returned to Alaska where she was stationed in Kodiak and used for search-and-rescue and fisheries law enforcement patrols. In 1986, the cutter’s buoy deck was shortened to provide more space in the interior of the ship. Even after Spar was sunk off the coast of North Carolina to become an artificial reef and Bramble became a museum in Michigan,





Storis continued patrolling Alaska waters.

In November 2005, the Coast Guard announced that Storis would be decommissioned in early 2007. At the time, Vice Adm. Harvey Johnson, then commander of the Coast Guard's Pacific Area, called Storis "a gallant workhouse for the Coast Guard since World War II [that] has earned an honored place in Coast Guard history." Thus ended a long career of maritime service to America 65 years after it began, and half a century after the cutter made history in the Northwest Passage.

### *USCGC Bramble*

Bramble: A thorny plant of the genus *rubus* in the rose family. Brambles include blackberries, loganberries and other closely related plants.

In 1939, when the Bureau of Lighthouses became part of the U.S. Coast Guard, it brought with it a requirement for a new and standardized vessel for multiple missions in the coastal environment. This need for a flexible work platform with a large open deck plan for servicing aids to navigation, conducting search-and-rescue and law enforcement missions, and breaking harbor ice in the winter, led to the design of the 180-foot buoy tender.

Between 1941 and 1943, 39 of these steel-hulled vessels were built, and all were named after trees, shrubs and flowers. With a fuel capacity of 30,000 gallons of diesel, the new tenders could steam for 12,000 miles at their cruising speed of 12 knots. Lowered to 8.3 knots, this range increased to 17,000 miles. A reinforced bow and ice-strengthened waterline gave the 180s icebreaking capability; a heavy-lift crane allowed salvage operations in addition to aids-to-navigation work; and deck guns and depth charge racks enabled military operations.

The vessels initially used the U.S. Navy designation of WAGL, which stood for "auxiliary vessel, lighthouse tender." Later, in 1965, the designation was changed to WLB, "seagoing buoy tender." Both Bramble and Spar were both from the third and last class — the Iris class — of 180s, and possessed 20 percent more engine power than the original Cactus class. All but one of the 39 180s were built in Duluth, Minn., by either the Zenith Dredge Company or the Marine Iron and Shipbuilding

Company.

Bramble was built by Zenith and launched on Oct. 23, 1943, and commissioned by the Coast Guard on April 22, 1944. Bramble was briefly stationed in Cleveland, before undertaking aids-to-navigation work at her first permanent duty station in San Pedro, Calif. On March 1, 1945, Bramble was transferred to Juneau, Alaska, where she hauled supplies and serviced aids to navigation. After the war, Bramble was stationed first in San Francisco and in the summer of 1946 transferred to Honolulu, where she steamed for the Marshall Islands in support of Operation Crossroads, the atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons.

Bramble returned to San Francisco in the summer of 1947, and was reassigned to San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1949, where she engaged in several search-and-rescue operations in addition to her regular aids-to-navigation duties. After four years in Puerto Rico, Bramble headed for Florida, where on July 1, 1953, she berthed in her new homeport of Miami Beach. It was from this port, with a complement of six officers and 54 enlisted men that Bramble steamed to join Spar on the first leg of the circumnavigation of the continent and the Northwest Passage Expedition on May 26, 1957.

Five years after the expedition, Bramble was transferred to Detroit to perform search-and-rescue, icebreaking, law enforcement and aids-to-navigation work throughout the Great Lakes. After 1975, the Bramble operated out of Port Huron and served in Lake Erie, Lake Huron and Saginaw Bay. As she had during the Northwest Passage expedition, Bramble's ability to break ice allowed her to escort ships through ice and assist ships in distress. Among the many awards the cutter received during her career were the Department of Transportation Gold Medal, Coast Guard Unit Commendation, Coast Guard Meritorious Unit Commendation, Coast Guard "E" Ribbon, Coast Guard Bicentennial Unit Commendation, American Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Ribbon, National Defense Service Medal and the Coast Guard Arctic Service Medal.

Decommissioned in 2003, Bramble is now an integral part of the Port Huron museum, which also includes the lightship Huron and the Fort Gratiot Lighthouse.





## *USCGC Spar*

Spar: An acronym symbolizing the Coast Guard women's corps readiness to contribute to the war effort. It stands for "Semper Paratus - Always Ready," the Coast Guard motto.

Spar was built at the Marine Iron and Shipbuilding Company in Duluth, Minn.; launched on Nov. 2, 1943; and named in honor of the 11,000 women who served in the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II. The Coast Guard commissioned Spar on June 12, 1944. That summer, the cutter reported to her first homeport of Boston, before relocating to Woods Hole, Mass., on Dec. 1, 1946. After five years on Cape Cod, Spar was relocated to Bristol, R.I. It was from Bristol that Spar departed, with six officers and 54 enlisted men, for the Northwest Passage expedition on May 19, 1957.

After the Northwest Passage expedition, Spar went on to cross the Atlantic in 1966 and return to the Arctic. Off the coast of Svalbard, Norway, Spar surveyed ocean

topography and logged more than 17,000 miles while visiting ports in Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Germany and Ireland. In April 1967, Spar changed homeports to Boston, Mass., and then again, in March 1973, to Portland, Maine. From there, Spar worked to keep hundreds of aids to navigation on station amid the shoal waters and unpredictable weather of hundreds of uninhabited islands. Spar assisted in the massive oil spill cleanup operations after the tanker Argo Merchant ran aground off Cape Cod in 1976. In the winters, like Bramble on the Great Lakes, she carried out icebreaking operations in the Cape Cod Canal and Buzzard's Bay.

Spar was decommissioned on Feb. 28, 1997. Two days short of her 60th birthday, in 2004, the North Carolina State Division of Marine Fisheries sank Spar 20 miles offshore from Morehead City as an artificial reef. A new Spar, a 225-ft seagoing buoy tender based in Alaska, was commissioned in 2001 under the command of Lt. Cmdr. Joanna Nunan.



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IN COMMEMORATION OF THE FIRST TRANSIT  
BY UNITED STATES FLAG VESSELS OF THE  
**NORTHWEST PASSAGE**  
AND  
**CIRCUMNAVIGATION**  
OF THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTINENT

U.S. COAST GUARD CUTTERS  
**STORIS — BRAMBLE — SPAR**  
MAY-SEPTEMBER 1957

PRESENTED BY  
THE SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY  
24 SEPTEMBER 1957