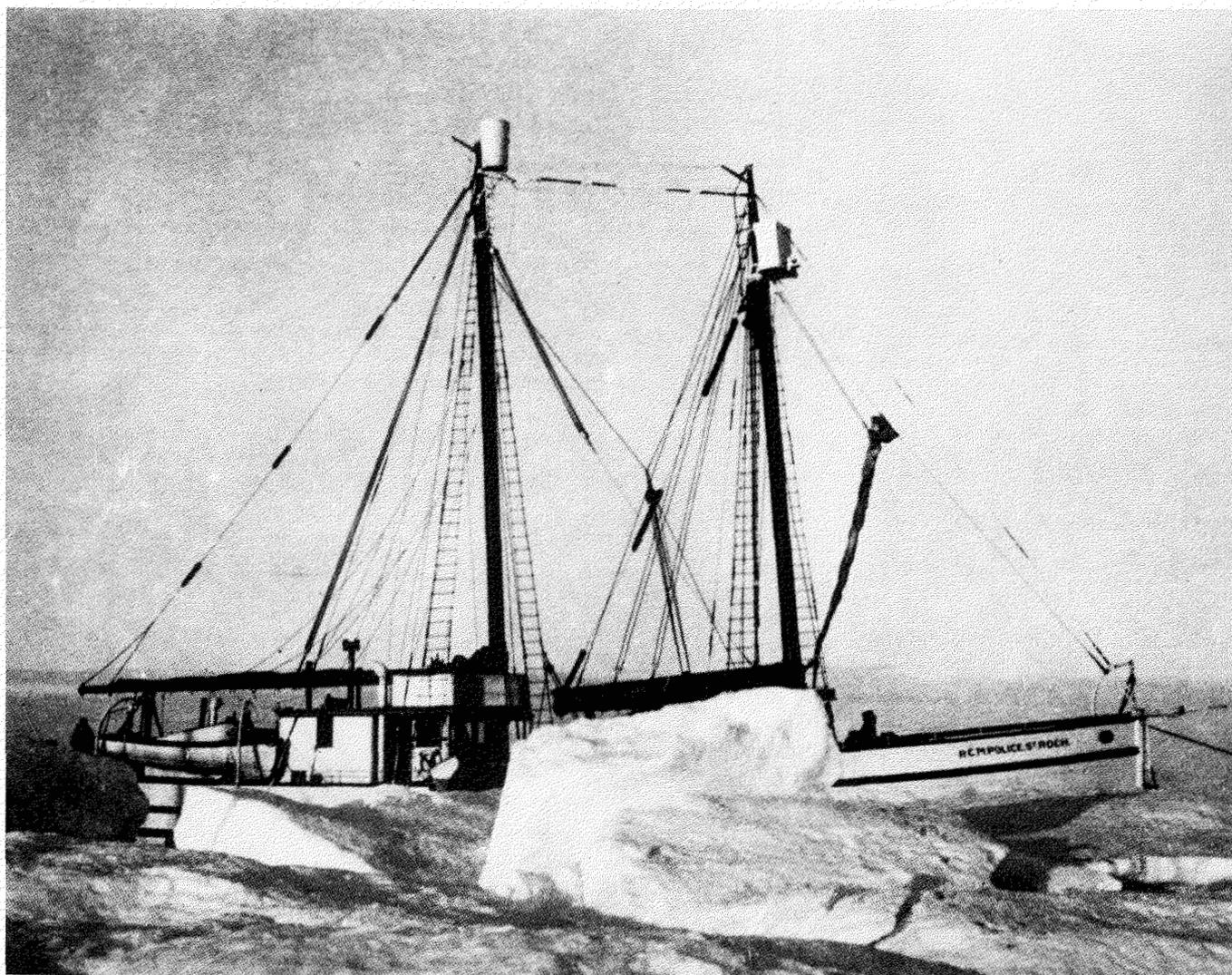


## Why the *St. Roch*? Why the Northwest Passage? Why 1940? New Answers to Old Questions

For almost half a century, the reasons behind orders sending the RCMP schooner *St. Roch* through the Northwest Passage during the Second World War have puzzled historians and other scholars. True, there were rumours of a defence-related mission, but there was no hard evidence, no tangible proof. Nor did the captain, Sgt. Henry Larsen, provide many clues other than "Canada was at war and the government had realized the need to demonstrate the country's sovereignty over the Arctic islands" (Larsen, 1967), a statement not verified in official documents. Then unexpectedly last year, during research on Canadian wartime relations with Greenland, two memos were found in RCMP archival files that directly linked the voyage

of the *St. Roch* to a government plan to defend and occupy the island in the spring of 1940 (Caulkin, 1940; Fripps, 1940). Subsequent evidence from Larsen's personal papers confirms that the captain was fully aware of the original purpose of his mission (Larsen, 1957a,b).

Although these memos might appear to contradict Larsen's own explanation, careful study of the documents and related circumstances suggests that the reference to sovereignty in the autobiography published posthumously could also be defined in very broad terms to include security considerations. Omission of any reference to the initial motive behind the orders was entirely in keeping with his responsibility as a member of the



The *St. Roch* moored to ice in the Western Arctic in the mid-1930s. According to Henry Larsen, the only major changes made to the ship in 1940 were the addition of "a little auxilliary engine to charge the bank of batteries" and new shoeing around the stem to create a "knife sharp bow" (Larsen, 1967). Refitting at Halifax during winter 1943-44 made other changes. Credit: Parks Canada, *St. Roch* National Historic Site Division.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police to maintain a confidence in the national interest. Today, the rationale for that secrecy is no longer valid, and the once-secret documents explaining the circumstances and events are now accessible to the public. Perhaps it was a stroke of fate that this information should come to light during the 50th-anniversary celebrations of the venerable ship's historic voyage through the Northwest Passage. Along with pride of achievement is now added new pride of a greater purpose.

What was the crisis that triggered Canadian plans to occupy Greenland, and what possible role was the RCMP expected to play? These questions involve a much longer narrative, already related by James Eayrs (1965:169-171) and C.P. Stacey (1970:367-370), whose accounts were based primarily on files originating with External Affairs and National Defence respectively. The RCMP commissioner's files do not contradict these narratives, but they do add further details of police involvement. A synopsis of events provides background to the involvement of the *St. Roch* and explanation of the secrecy surrounding her mission.

In the winter and early spring of 1940, public attention was focused on events abroad as Germany advanced across Europe. When Denmark fell on 9 April 1940, British and Canadian military strategists were understandably concerned about the future of the Danish colony of Greenland. In light of the increasing German U-boat activity in the North Atlantic, defence of the large ice-covered island was considered a matter of high priority, partially because of its location on the periphery of North America and its excellent harbours for submarine bases, but also because of the cryolite mine situated on the shores of an isolated 12-mile fiord in southwest Greenland.

Cryolite was crucial in the production of aluminum, and this one mine represented the only natural source available to the Allied war industries. Although a synthetic substitute had recently come on the market, the Greenland mine was the only known sources of the raw mineral, with the only refineries being in Denmark, the Penn-Salt Company in the United States, and the Aluminum Company of Canada, located at Arvida, Quebec. Previously, Britain relied on production from Danish smelters, and to a lesser extent upon Norwegian refineries that used the synthetic alternative. With both countries now in German hands, the Allies were dependent on United States and Canadian production. As long as the United States remained neutral and was utilizing vast quantities of aluminum for its own war industry, it was considered urgent that ALCAN gain assured access to the Greenland cryolite. Should Germany have decided to take over or merely sabotage the mine, the effect would have crippled the British and Canadian war efforts (Department of External Affairs, 1940a,b).

Adding to the urgency were "reports of enemy ships heading in the direction of Iceland and Southern Greenland" (Secretary of State, 1940) and requests from the United Kingdom "of utmost importance to obtain maximum possible tonnage of aluminum from Canada" (Department of External Affairs, 1940a). Encouraged to take action by officials of the U.K. government (Massey, 1940) and the Aluminum Company of Canada (Bruce, 1940a,b,c), it is not surprising that Canada would seriously consider all means to protect Allied interests. At first hesitant to commit forces and concerned about the "danger of disturbing American opinion," Mackenzie King finally agreed, with the proviso that Canada was merely looking into the defence of Greenland in cooperation with British

forces, otherwise Canada would be "blamed for taking over" (Skelton, 1940a).

High-level discussion followed based on reports prepared by External Affairs (Skelton, 1940b). Initially, the objective was clearly precautionary: "to prevent enemy nationals gaining a foothold there and giving them an opportunity to sabotage the cryolite mines." In the Royal Canadian Navy's (RCN) estimation, only a small force would be required to occupy the island "and a small police detail at the two or three more important centres is all that will be necessary to maintain." Whether this was a realistic assessment or not, the navy did not have frigates or destroyers available for the mission, nor would "any of these ships be risked in the ice conditions prevalent in the Davis Strait." Instead, it was suggested that the CGS *N.B. McLean* could "easily be armed with 4 in. guns" (Department of National Defence, 1940a).

On 14 April, a sub-committee meeting chaired by the director of Military Operations and Intelligence supported plans for defence of the mine and occupation of the former Danish colony, with the recommendation that an advance party of 100 — including 12 RCMP officers and constables — proceed to Greenland in early May aboard the icebreaker CGS *N.B. McLean*. The expedition was given the illustrious name of "Force X," and all supplies and participants were to be mobilized and ready for departure within two weeks. Their task was to select gun sites and lay out a military camp in preparation for the arrival of the main contingent. Clearly, though, RCMP detachments were considered critical to the success of the mission (Department of National Defence, 1940b,c).

The Chiefs of Staff Committee subsequently issued a formal document that expanded on the details to include specific lists of participants and necessary equipment. The main body of the occupation force would constitute an army unit of approximately 250 to arrive in early June. In addition to the mine location, small occupation forces would be posted to the two Danish administrative centres, Godhavn and Godthaab, on the west coast of Greenland. The cost of establishing and maintaining the occupation forces for one year was estimated at \$585 000, excluding purchase of armaments and RCMP expenses (Department of National Defence, 1940d,e).

After the 14 April meeting, Insp. T.B. Caulkin, A/A/C "G" Division, sent a memo to the commissioner suggesting the names of four officers for Greenland duty. He also raised the question of employing the *St. Roch*:

It is considered that the R.C.M.P. schooner *St. Roch* would be of inestimable value to our Personnel stationed at Godhavn and Godthaab and would be in communication with the Force Headquarters by wireless.

If approval is given to have the *St. Roch* proceed from the Pacific to the Eastern theatre, I feel confident that Sergt. [sic] Larsen would prove a valuable man in that area in several different ways.

If the *St. Roch* should go, consideration might be given to increasing the personnel on the boat, also whether she should be armed with at least a machine gun.

Further, arrangements would have to be made for some fuel to be sent in for her, such as diesel oil, etc., this could be despatched from Montreal later [Caulkin, 1940].

Considering that in 1940 Canada had no arctic airstrips and no RCN vessels available for polar navigation, the RCMP schooner was a logical support ship and patrol vessel.

After retirement of the CGS *Beothic* in 1932, the Canadian government had rented space on the Hudson's Bay Company

ship the *Nascopie* for the Eastern Arctic Patrol, which supplied the RCMP posts and provided medical aid to the isolated communities. While the *Nascopie* was also participating in the war effort, it was still needed to supply the company's fur trading posts. Thus it was logical that the RCMP should have its own means of supply and transportation in the Eastern Arctic quite apart from other duties it might fulfil as part of security measures. The *St. Roch* was the only ice-capable police vessel of any appreciable size available for arctic patrols and, if necessary, to serve as a communications and supply link with the proposed Canadian occupation forces in Greenland and the newly established consulate. The ship's home port was Vancouver, as its primary function since 1930 had been to supply and patrol the Western Arctic. The plan to bring the ship to the Eastern Arctic through the Northwest Passage seemed a logical solution, since a southern route through the Panama Canal would have destroyed any attempt at keeping the mission secret.

As a consequence, on 16 April Commissioner Wood wrote to Insp. James Fripps, of the west coast "E" Division, with explicit instructions to contact Sgt. Larsen and discuss the matter. Fripps's reply was:

Strictly Confidential Vancouver, B.C. 22. April. 1940.

Re: Schooner "St. Roch" — R.C.M. Police,

1. This will acknowledge receipt of your letter dated the 16th inst., on the 19th. inst. I proceeded to Victoria and on the 20th inst. I discussed the matter with Sgt. Larsen that it was your intention if possible to have the schooner "St. Roch" proceed through the North-West Passage to Greenland after she had discharged the supplies for Coppermine and Cambridge Bay Detachments. Sgt. Larsen stated he would be pleased to make this proposed patrol as he always had a desire to travel through the North-West Passage. He recommended that the *St. Roch* should pass through the North-West Passage during the month of August, not later, and to do this it was absolutely essential that the "St. Roch" depart from Vancouver not later than the 20th. of June next.

2. Further he recommended that no extra duties should be given to the "St. Roch" other than delivering supplies to the Detachments. Sgt. Larsen will require an Admiralty Chart of Greenland and the North-West Passage. This would include Baffin Island.

Fripps concludes the memo with "I impressed upon Sgt. Larsen that this matter was to be treated strictly confidential and not to be discussed with any other member of the Force." He also refers to a previous request for a "sea skiff" and outboard motor made by Larsen to Insp. Caulkin while in Ottawa (Fripps, 1940).

Together, these two memos testify that approval for the *St. Roch*'s voyage was not confirmed until mid-April, that approval was related directly to the proposed occupation of Greenland, and that besides Larsen and Commissioner Wood, both Insp. Fripps and Insp. Caulkin were fully informed of the plans. The second memo also confirms, however, that Larsen was indeed in Ottawa in early spring and, as suggested in his autobiography, may well have discussed the feasibility of taking the ship to the Eastern Arctic with his commanding officer and perhaps informally with the commissioner. Formal approval came later.

Additional evidence supports the contention that Larsen was fully aware of the primary purpose of the voyage. In correspondence with the current RCMP commissioner in 1957, Larsen defended himself against implied criticism by the captain of the *Nascopie* and explained the circumstances leading to the *St. Roch*'s voyage through the Passage in 1940-42:

Royal Canadian Mounted Police

"E" DIVISION,

Ref. No. Vancouver, B.C. 22nd. April, 1940.

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

BY AIR MAIL  
PAR AVION

The Commissioner,  
R.C.M. Police,  
Ottawa, Ont.

Sir,

Re: Schooner "St. Roch" - R.C.M. Police.

1. This will acknowledge receipt of your letter dated the 16th. inst., on the 19th. inst. I proceeded to Victoria and on the 20th. inst. I discussed the matter with Sgt. Larsen that it was your intention if possible to have the schooner "St. Roch" proceed through the North-West Passage to Greenland after she had discharged the supplies for Coppermine and Cambridge Bay Detachments. Sgt. Larsen stated he would be pleased to make this proposed patrol as he always had a desire to travel through the North-West Passage. He recommended that the *St. Roch* should pass through the North-West Passage during the month of August, not later, and to do this it was absolutely essential that the "St. Roch" depart from Vancouver not later than the 20th. of June next.

2. Further he recommended that no extra duties should be given to the "St. Roch" other than delivering supplies for the Detachments. Sgt. Larsen will require an Admiralty Chart of Greenland and the North-West Passage. This would include Baffin Island. We do not know the numbers of these charts but no doubt they can be obtained at Ottawa.

3. Sgt. Larsen also requests that the authority for the purchase of a "sea-skiff" from Armstrong Bros. at Victoria be expedited. He also requests authority to purchase an outboard motor. When he reported at Ottawa to Asst/Com'r. Caulkin he mentioned these two articles specially as it is very essential that the "St. Roch" be supplied with this equipment.

4. I impressed upon Sgt. Larsen that this matter was to be treated strictly confidential and not to be discussed with any other member of the Force.

J/F

J. Fripps, Insp.  
Commanding "E" Division.

Memo with instructions for the *St. Roch* to proceed through the Northwest Passage. Source: National Archives of Canada, RCMP records.

The reason for this, I believe, was that prior to the "St. Roch" leaving Vancouver on its eastward journey through the Arctic, Denmark had been invaded and Greenland was more or less left on its own. Had the "St. Roch" managed to navigate the Northwest Passage that year it is my understanding that our Government was planning to send her to Greenland. I believe also that a Canadian Consulate was established in Greenland about that time, and I understand this was one of the reasons why the "St. Roch" was instructed to proceed eastward in 1940 [Larsen, 1957a].

The last statement is particularly important, since discussion of a Canadian Consulate in Greenland did not arise until April 1940 and was not approved until mid-May. This reference to the consulate partly explains continuation of the voyage after the "occupation" plans were cancelled. Larsen also claimed that the fuel left at Pond Inlet by the *Nascopie* in 1940 was for use by the RCMP ship that was expected to winter in Greenland (Larsen, 1957a) or "some designated spot in the Eastern Arctic" (Larsen, 1957b). The question of who would protect or defend Greenland was not officially decided until the following year. In the same letter, Larsen also alludes to sovereignty reasons and, "being utilized to advantage in the Eastern Arctic," with specific reference to the closure of the police posts at Dundas Harbour, Craig Harbour and Bache Peninsula (Larsen, 1957b). This rationale was likely part of earlier informal discussions, since sovereignty concerns *per se* do not appear in the memos confirming approval and instructions in mid-April, unless defined to include national security and defence. When

considering the 1940 police memos together with Larsen's later explanations, it appears there may have been multiple reasons for the voyage, perhaps shifting in priority relative to changing circumstances in 1940.

In wartime especially, events rarely happen as planned, and the Canadian strategy to occupy Greenland was no exception. The initial rationale for "Force X" was the mistaken belief that a small Canadian occupation force would be more acceptable to the neutral United States than British intervention, which would have clearly violated the principles of the Monroe Doctrine (Skelton, 1940b). This opinion could not have been further from the truth.

At a meeting between Prime Minister King and President Roosevelt on 2 May 1940, Roosevelt made it clear that the United States wished no occupying force on Greenland, but admitted that if there were a German attack, then "it would be necessary for Allied Naval Forces to take action." Secretary of State Hull seemed to be of a different mind, referring to considerations of the Monroe Doctrine (Skelton, 1940c). That same day, the acting minister of National Defence abruptly ordered the demobilization of "Force X" and "all action in connection with it suspended" (Department of National Defence, 1940f). Supplies already in storage were dispersed and mobilization orders cancelled.

As explained in confidential memos and minutes, the U.S. Secretary of State was "insistently anxious" that any plans to occupy Greenland be dropped (Reid, 1940b). The ensuing discussions and debates clarified the State Department's contention that the current interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine rejected the right of *any* third party to interfere in the political or military affairs of Greenland. As an alternative, the State Department believed the mine could be defended by local residents with armaments supplied by the United States. Pressured by British officials to take action, yet unwilling to oppose the firm wishes of the United States, Canadian officials were caught in a dilemma (Eden, 1940; Department of External Affairs, 1940b,c).

One might well ask why, if "Force X" was cancelled, was the *St. Roch* still proceeding to Greenland? When viewed in retrospect, the emotions and fears attached to Germany's march across Europe may seem unwarranted, but in the summer of 1940, the security of Greenland and the Eastern Arctic was considered critical to prevent the spread of hostilities to North America. And as Canadian fears mounted, a number of defensive contingency plans were hastily set in motion in an effort to stem the advance of the aggressors. With increasing enemy activity in the North Atlantic and without a firm commitment by the United States to defend Greenland, the decision to have the *St. Roch* on standby in the Eastern Arctic seems logical. Whether it was feasible depended on the ability of the captain and the *St. Roch* to navigate the Northwest Passage.

As events unfolded, the governors of North and South Greenland claimed constitutional powers to take absolute control in the event of an emergency, yet were without military capabilities to defend against an enemy attack. The Danish minister in Washington, meanwhile, claimed that he in turn represented the two governors and established the American-Danish Greenland Commission to act as an advisory body (Department of External Affairs, 1940). In 1940, neither the United Kingdom nor Canada was prepared to challenge the legitimacy of these actions. Still at issue was the status of existing contracts for the cryolite production.

Prior to the fall of Denmark, the Penn Salt Company of Philadelphia had retained a monopoly over the North American market, which involved one-third of the mine's exports. The Aluminum Company of Canada, however, had hoped to acquire the European contracts with the Danish refineries, assuring Allied control of all exports not under contract to Penn Salt. In addition, this would strengthen the wartime economy by adding revenue to the Canadian treasury. The proposal was presented at a meeting attended by representatives of the Canadian and U.S. governments, the chairman of the American-Danish Greenland Commission, and the presidents of Penn Salt and the Aluminum Company of Canada. As expected, the American representatives refused to entertain any proposal that did not give the United States company clear access to the mine's postwar production (Department of External Affairs, 1940c).

While negotiations continued in an attempt to resolve the impasse, the *Nascopie* had departed from Halifax without fanfare and was heading northward to Greenland, ostensibly "to deliver staple supplies" as a relief measure, but with the expressed hope that "arrangements could be made also for return cargo of about two thousand tons" of cryolite. On board was the Canadian vice-consul to Greenland, A.E. Porsild (Skelton, 1940d). Others included Canadian artillery officers, mining engineers, and RCMP officers. At the same time, another vessel, the *Julius Thomsen*, was en route to Greenland from England, carrying the new Canadian consul and senior diplomat, K.P. Kirkwood, along with several British naval officers (Reid, 1940a).

Also heading for Greenland and several days in the lead was the United States Coast Guard cutter the *Comanche*, carrying armaments and the newly appointed U.S. consul. First on his agenda was a tour of the cryolite mine, which would also allow the American ship to guard the fiord against any uninvited "visitors" who might wish to assume control of the mine (Skelton, 1940e). In Vancouver, meanwhile, the *St. Roch* continued preparations for its voyage through the Northwest Passage.

The arrival of the *Nascopie* and the *Julius Thomsen* in Greenland did not escape the attention of the outspoken assistant U.S. secretary of state, Adolf Berle, who called two emergency meetings on 3 June — first with British diplomats, then the Canadians. In his view, the presence of Canadian and British military officers aboard the two ships represented a blatant attempt by the Aluminum Company of Canada to secure possession of the cryolite mine. Admitting he was dispensing with diplomatic niceties, Berle declared that the president had been notified of Canada's actions and had stated he would be "very angry" if Canada attempted to occupy Greenland. The assistant secretary went on to say that "this was not the time for this type of 1890 imperialism and that the days of Cecil Rhodes had passed." In his opinion, this incident only confirmed his belief that "the Aluminum Company of Canada was trying to take advantage of the present situation in order to get control of the cryolite mine." Canadian officials were given a clear warning that defence of the mine was not their responsibility and that access to the cryolite was dependent upon cooperation with the United States (Department of External Affairs, 1940d).

Three days later, the question of Greenland's and Iceland's futures evoked a long and heated debate in the United States Senate. Citing the Monroe Doctrine as the basis for the U.S. right to intervene, the Senate was also told of Greenland's economic importance, not just because of the cryolite but for

its potential resources of mica, graphite, gold and hydro-electric power. Also discussed was the possibility of negotiating a purchase or takeover of the island (United States Government, 1940). Yet regardless of the urgency expressed in the debate, it was almost a year before the United States would formally and unilaterally assume full responsibility for the defence of Iceland and Greenland. At that time, the United States again firmly rejected Canada's offer of assistance, stating that its participation was "not required" (Department of External Affairs, 1941).

Although ice-bound in the Western Arctic the first winter, the *St. Roch* continued to plough eastward on its voyage through the Northwest Passage, apparently still under secret orders and with extra supplies for the next year picked up at Tuktoyaktuk. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the schooner was again stuck fast in the ice, this time just south of Boothia Peninsula. Now well past the halfway mark, there was no recourse but to continue. According to Larsen, by the time they had reached Pond Inlet, the Americans had "pretty well taken over in Greenland" (Larsen, 1957a). As the fortunes of war continued to favour the Allies in the North Atlantic, the *St. Roch* was ordered to return west in 1944, this time via Lancaster Sound.

Given that the 1940 voyage of the *St. Roch* was approved initially because of Canadian plans to occupy Greenland and continued for a number of wartime-related considerations, there are still a number of questions outstanding. Why, when acknowledging the fact to his commanding officer in 1957, would Larsen fail to mention the defence of Greenland in his autobiography? Why mention an earlier discussion with the commissioner in Ottawa, if the orders were not finalized and approved until mid-April? Why was the manuscript of the autobiography not published during his lifetime? Are there logical reasons to explain these actions by a man known for his honesty, integrity, and loyalty to the traditions of the Force? There are reasons — some more obvious than others.

In the first instance, the proposed Canadian occupation of Greenland was "top secret" and Larsen was specifically warned that "the matter was strictly confidential and not to be discussed with any member of the Force" (Fripps, 1940). Indeed, one account alleged that even his wife did not know of the ship's destination (Tranter, 1945:2). Initially a military secret, diplomatic concerns compounded the potential sensitivities that might result from inopportune disclosure of the Canadian plans. Thus it was expected that Larsen and his superiors would be bound by their strict code of ethics to maintain that confidence.

But why was it important to maintain the secrecy about "Force X" over 20 years after the fact? As noted above, both James Eayrs in 1965 and C.P. Stacey in 1970 freely discussed the plans to occupy Greenland in their respective publications covering the events of World War II. Here, too, there is a logical explanation, particularly obvious to an historian, concerning the 25-year rule restricting public disclosure of confidential government documents relating to Canadian-American relations. The fact that Larsen did not submit his manuscript for publication during his lifetime may suggest he had valid reasons. Henry Larsen died in September 1964 — one year short of being released from the limitation of the 25-year rule. Would the manuscript have been changed otherwise? Only Larsen could have answered that question.

Was Larsen less than truthful in his autobiography? Hardly. In the first place, if there were omissions or "poetic licence," it was only in an unpublished manuscript that continued to

"maintain the confidence," as instructed in April 1940. Likely Larsen and the commissioner did discuss sovereignty concerns and possible plans for the *St. Roch* in the Eastern Arctic as suggested, but apparently without final approval until the Greenland situation became critically unstable. In an earlier report, Larsen did state that it was "the spring of 1940" when they received their assignment from Commissioner Wood (Larsen, n.d.). If there were discrepancies, they were rooted in the code of ethics governing RCMP actions in "national interests" — and a tribute to an officer of the highest integrity.

The *St. Roch*'s two voyages through the Northwest Passage were just cause for celebration in a war-weary Canada — a truly notable achievement by a Canadian ship in her own arctic waters. This venture was not "something of a stunt or a trip to compete with the *Nascopie*" (Larsen, 1957b), as implied by the Hudson's Bay Company captain, but a fitting tribute to the prowess of the hardy *St. Roch* and the able men who sailed her into the annals of history half a century ago. As for Henry Asbjorn Larsen? In his words, "had it not been for the war, we would never have had the occasion or opportunity to make this passage" (Larsen, 1957b). Yet those who knew him also knew he was "delighted to have the opportunity. . . . A correct and careful police officer, he was an adventurer at heart" (Roots, 1992).

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