

The Galloping Ghost of the Alaskan Coast

Paul Perreten

Paul Perreten interviewed his Hastings High School friend, Jared Myers, about his historic journey.

The Cold War

Sixty years ago, in 1957, the Cold War between the West and Soviet Russia was escalating. Across the world the U.S. and other NATO members searched the skies for incoming Soviet bombers, which sought to penetrate the arcs of defense along the shores of the North American continent.

The land based DEW (Distant Early Warning) line of radar and support stations was constructed from Alaska east, across Canada to the Atlantic Ocean, a distance of 4,000 miles. Their purpose was to detect Soviet planes, and then warn the Air Force and Naval Air, so they could be intercepted and destroyed before bombing our cities and military facilities.

Eventually there were 6 main radar stations supported by 23 auxiliary and 28 intermediate stations, employing about 7,600 military and civilian personnel.

How to support and supply these facilities was an ongoing puzzle, due to the non-existent roads and airports, the hazardous Arctic weather with its notorious cold, gales, icebergs, treacherous seas, and sunless days most of the year. It became obvious that the only route to points near these bases was by supply ships in the summer months when the Arctic Ocean, sea passages, coves and straits were mostly free from ice.

A former longtime Hastings resident, Paul Perreten now lives in Old Saybrook, CT. He graduated from Hastings High School in 1951.

The United States required an alternate passage from the Pacific along the Alaskan coast, as well as from Baffin Bay to the interior coastline. In those days no charts existed of the coastline to enable mariners to pilot and navigate the frigid and dangerous waters. There were no navigational aids such as buoys and landmarks to aid a navigator in plotting his ship's course.

So, the famous Northwest Passage was still an uncertainty for sailors and ships at sea. The route was long sought by famous explorers such as Columbus, Cook, Hudson, Franklin and others, with tremendous sacrifice and loss of life. In the 1950s the U.S. Coast Guard was assigned the mission to unravel the mystery and create the route through this watery world—to enable freighters and supply ships to resupply the DEW Line facilities and men. Specifically, its mission became three-fold: (1) to find and chart a usable, deep draft (18 ft.) passageway; (2) conduct a hydrographic survey to complete the survey started in 1955 and 1956, and (3) mark the passage with aids to navigation (buoys and land towers).

Thus, on July 1, 1957 an epic story of maritime adventure began from Seattle, Washington into the Northwest Passage when United States Coast Guard Ensign Jared Y. Myers, from Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, Deck and Watch Officer, set sail aboard USCGC STORIS, W-38.

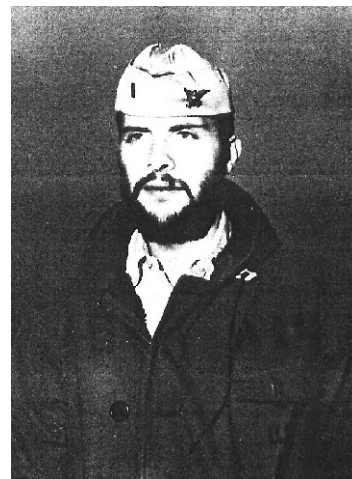
The Galloping Ghost

Affectionately known as "The Galloping Ghost of the Alaskan Coast", the Coast Guard Cutter STORIS (W-38)¹ had a long and distinguished career. She was

launched in 1942 with a length of 230', a beam of 43', with a draft of 15', one electric motor, driven by 3-8 cylinder diesel engines, single screw with a top speed of 14 knots. After WWII, her armament was modified to peacetime uses, a helicopter assigned and landing platform installed, and other modifications and improvements completed. Bow reinforcement was undertaken in the 1950s for better safety in the iceberg waters of the Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean when she was assigned to special duty in the Northwest Passage.

The Sailor

Jared Y. Myers graduated from Hastings High School in 1951² and then from Columbia University in 1955. He was ac-



Jared Myers

cepted into the Coast Guard's officer training four-month OCS program which led to a commission as Ensign and active duty. Jared was ordered aboard STORIS, reporting for duty in September, 1956, in Seattle, WA His brother, Richard graduated in 1947 from HHS where their father had been principal and their mother was em-

ployed as a member of the office staff.

Outward Bound

“Outward Bound” signifies the moment when a ship leaves her mooring and commits herself to open sea, with all its unknown hazards and adventures. It is a reoccurring demonstration of human nobil-



USCGC STORIS, W-38.

ity—out of desire to seek and determine our own destiny, no matter what the challenge. –Anonymous

STORIS, in company with two smaller sister cutters, BRAMBLE and SPAR, got underway from Seattle on July 1, 1957. The Captain of STORIS and flotilla commander of the three ships, was Commander H.L. Wood. STORIS had a crew of 10 officers, 115 enlisted and Captain Wood's 13 year old son, Timothy. BRAMBLE and SPRAY each had six officers and 64 sailors aboard.

Jared describes the first leg of the journey in a letter to his mother in Hastings dated July 11, 1957:

Trip from Seattle to Unimak Pass in the Aleutians was fairly good for a change. Was only rough for a couple of days, or maybe I already told you. Ice conditions were good so we didn't stay. Anyway we went through Unimak on the 8th, Bering Straits on the 10th. Will be at Pt. Barrow tomorrow.

Winds have been favorable and it looks like we won't have to break any ice till we get to Herschel Island.

He gives us a sense of the sun's constant presence at that time of year:

Sun didn't set till last night. Won't again until the middle of August. It's now 10:30 PM and the sun is high in the sky and the temperature is in the 50s.

Easterly beyond Pt. Barrow he recalled that “the significant area of operation was in the Beaufort Sea, Coronation Gulf, Simpson Strait, Boothia Peninsula and Bellot Strait. There it is, that's the Northwest Passage.”

On July 17, STORIS led the task force into Amundsen

Gulf. The ships made and recorded soundings, courses and depths, making their way easterly along the coast. By July 23 and until August 2nd, the flotilla barely made headway through heavy ice in Dolphin Strait, Union Strait and Queen Maud Gulf. During that stretch a near miss and collision took place on July 29th.

Ice pressed against STORIS, pushing her upwards against SPAR, holding the two vessels together. Jared reported:

One morning I woke up and heard a boat right outside my port-hole - so I go out and look and SPAR is trying to back away.

Another view with potential danger to life and survival from SPAR's logbook:

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 ships were so close together that sailors were passing cigarettes from one ship to the other. The ice had pushed SPAR up and into STORIS' hull. The next day STORIS was freed up by the force of wind and water, pushing the vessel off the ice.

Then on August 1, the DEW line became operational. The vessels proceeded through Dolphin and Union Straits on August 5th and then Deare Strait on the 6th, through breaks in the ice near the shoreline of Victoria Island. Canadian authorities then permitted the crew to go ashore at Cambridge to visit a Hudson Bay Trading Post and RCMP outpost, two missions and a native village close by.

Once the flotilla got underway after the crew's visit ashore, soundings, sun sites and radar



STORIS and SPAR locked together in the ice.

fixes continued enabling the plotting crew to create new charts for navigation. Jared explained the mechanics of their effort:

The way we got these charts done is that we would try to fix a position and send a boat out on tracks; we would coordinate a radar fix with the sounding (by the boat crew). They would then bring back the data and the hygrometer guys would plot it out. We would make copies of the new chart and distribute them to the MATS freighters behind us, the ones following our lead through the most



Cutting through the ice.

dangerous shallow and narrow passages.

Another danger always lurked—running aground in the shallow waters near the coastline. According to Jared:

There was another night I was running tracks (as Watch Officer on the bridge) back and forth. Again, the hygrometer (instrument that measures depth of the water) started coming up and I backed off; it's the middle of the night, so I sent the quartermaster down to get the Captain. The guys down on the mess deck said you could hear a thunk. You could see mud boiling. I just backed the ship. I was scared to death.

The quartermaster returned to the bridge and told me the Captain sat up with his legs over his bunk, but then went to bed. I guess he trusted me, but I was scared so much that, can you believe, I actually got lost. The land masses were not where they were supposed to be. The Executive Officer came up later in the morning to see how I was doing. I said "Sorry, but I'm lost. I don't know how to get to where we're supposed to be." He finally figured it out.

He may have been scared, but he pulled the ship from a very dangerous situation in a seamanlike manner and called the Captain—very cool.

Those were the days, six decades ago, before GPS and instan-

taneous fixes of longitude and latitude, the days when sea captains and crew still navigated in the 18th and 19th century mode; when, to find a position at sea, the navigator used a sextant, stars, moon and sun tables, and then plotted the points on a chart. The STORIS crew did it the old-fashioned way. They went ashore at various landings when available to build navigation towers so a ship's navigator in the future could take bearings on them while piloting along the coast.

Homeward Bound

Finally on September 6, the three ships completed their hydrographic soundings in James Ross Strait and the western approach to



Map of the trip of the STORIS

Bellot Strait. HMCS LABRADOR, a Canadian Arctic patrol ship escorted them into the ice free waters of the eastern side of the Northwest Passage. The three ship convoy STORIS, BRAMBLE and SPAR proceeded through Baffin Sound, and down the eastern seaboard. SPAR sailed directly to her homeport in Bristol, R.I., while STORIS and BRAMBLE sailed to Boston. On September 24, 1957 a ceremony was held at the Charleston Navy Shipyard where

they were welcomed with great joy and acclaim.

Not long afterwards STORIS got underway for New York City, where a grand reception awaited her and the crew. To complete the circumnavigation of the North American Continent, she set sail on her final leg down the East Coast, through the Panama Canal, and up the West Coast, arriving back at her home port in Seattle.

STORIS and crew had sailed forth to complete her surveying mission. In doing so she accomplished two notable maritime achievements following in the wakes of the greatest Arctic explorers of the past: the first American ship to transit the Northwest Passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic, a 4,000 mile adventure, and the circumnavigation of the North American continent.

*Semper paratus!*³

Footnotes

1. STORIS is pronounced Store-iss, like in 'hiss'. It is a Danish word meaning Big Ice. A friend of mine whose first language is Danish says the word is pronounced "Store-ease" in Danish.
2. Full Disclosure: we were classmates in high school and he was your writer's godfather in 1949 when I was baptized at Grace Episcopal Church, Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., a sailor's church if there ever was one. The historical building was funded in part from a gift, by Admiral David Glasgow Farragut, the source being a portion of his prize money from the Battle off Mobile Bay during the Civil War. Jared and I have kept in touch over the years.
3. The Coast Guard motto meaning "Always Ready."

Sources

4. Interview with Jared S. Myers at his home in Elmira, New York on July 24, 2016.
5. Personal Journal of Jared Y. Myers containing photos, letters, news articles and memorabilia.
6. U.S. Coast Guard - STORIS history
7. *Across the Top of the World - USCG Northwest Passage, 1957* by Senior Chief Petty Officer P.J. Capelotti, Ph.D., USCGR, USCG Historian's Office.
8. *The Poles*, Life Nature Library, 1962.
9. *Essential World Atlas*, 3rd Edition, Oxford, 2001.
10. *The Discoverers*, Daniel J. Boorstin, Random House, 1985.