



# Navigating 'Panama Canal North'

By Usha Lee Mcfarling  
Los Angeles Times

**UFOs, or 'unaccustomed floating objects,' are an increasingly common sight in the fabled Northwest Passage**

**R**ESOLUTE BAY, Canada — For 500 years, explorers nudged their ships through these Arctic waters, vainly seeking a shortcut to the riches of the East. The Northwest Passage, a deadly maze of sea ice, narrow straits and misshapen islands, still holds the traces of those who failed.

There are feeble cairns, skeletons lying face down where explorers fell, makeshift camps piled high with cannibalized bones and, on one rocky spit, a trio of wind-scoured tombstones. Whole expeditions, hundreds of men and entire ships, are missing to this day. The first explorer to survive a crossing, in 1906, spent several winters trapped by ice.

Despite that — or maybe because of it — Canadian Mountie Ken Burton wanted nothing more than to join the pantheon of polar explorers who had threaded their ships through the passage's narrow ice leads and around its shimmering blue-green icebergs.

In the summer of 2000, Burton gingerly nosed a 20-metre aluminum patrol boat into the heart of the Northwest Passage. Ice floes could crumple the boat like paper. Even the smallest iceberg, a growler, could rip apart its delicate hull.

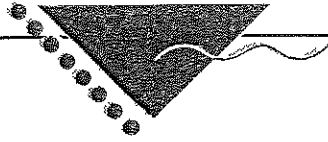
But there were no bergs. No growlers. No thin cakes of pancake ice. To his surprise, Burton found no ice at all. A mere 1,500 kilometres south of the North Pole, where previous explorers had faced sheets of punishing pack ice, desperation and finally death, Burton cruised past emerald lagoons and long sandy beaches. Crew members stripped and went swimming. Burton whipped through the passage, "not hurrying," in a mere 21 days.

"We should not, by any measure, have been able to drive an aluminum boat through the Arctic," said Burton, still astonished and just slightly disappointed. "It was surreal."

It was also a glimpse of the future. For several summers now, vast stretches of the Northwest Passage have been free of ice, open to uneventful crossings by the flimsiest of boats. Climate experts now predict what once was unimaginable: In 50 years or less, the passage will be free of ice throughout the summer, a prospect that could transform the region and attract a flotilla of cruise ships, oil supertankers and even U.S. warships.

*(continued on following page)*





## Navigating 'Panama Canal North'

"It's something no one would have dreamed up for our lifetime," said Lawson Brigham, deputy director of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission and former captain of the U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker Polar Sea, which made it through the passage in 1994.

The parting of the ice is the product of natural, long-term atmospheric patterns that have warmed the Arctic in recent decades and, to a lesser extent, the gradual heating of the planet by greenhouse gases.

The planet's temperature has risen one degree Fahrenheit over the last century. In the Arctic, temperatures have risen three to four degrees. In these northern seas, at the boundary between water and ice, that small difference has changed the landscape for thousands of miles.

"The image of the Arctic was always one of an ice-locked, forbidden spot," said James Delgado, director of the Vancouver Maritime Museum and author of *Across the Top of the World: The Quest for the Northwest Passage*. "If we as a species have wrought this change, it's humbling, given its history as such a terror-filled place."

The receding ice is throwing open a gateway to the Far North, a region long defined by its isolation, sparse population and stark, simple beauty. Ship traffic could carry with it a rush of civilization and commerce.

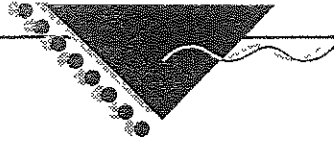
"It's not just about transport; it's about the whole development of the Arctic frontier," said Lynn Rosentrater, a climate-change officer with the World Wildlife Fund in Norway. "It's going to happen, so we need to plan for it."

The once-deadly route has been rechristened "Panama Canal North" by shippers eager to shave nearly 8,000 kilometres off the trip from Europe to Asia. Already, a parade of strange ships and faces is streaming through the passage. Canadian transit officials who monitor the route dub the newcomers "UFOs," for "unaccustomed flying objects."

These have included, in the past few years, a Russian tug that dragged a five-story floating drydock through the passage, adventurers skimming through in sleek sailboats and a boatload of Chinese sailors that arrived unannounced in the Arctic village of Tuktoyaktuk, disembarked to take photographs and left abruptly when a local Mountie arrived.

This summer, the Canadian navy sent warships north of the Arctic Circle for the first time since the end of the Cold War. And U.S. naval officers are circulating a report

*(continued on following page)*



# Navigating 'Panama Canal North'

called "Naval Operations in an Ice-Free Arctic" that discusses, among other things, the need for a new class of ice-strengthened warship to patrol newly opening Arctic waters.

With each summer warmer than the last, and with species such as dragonflies and moose showing up for the first time, many here are bracing for a stranger, warmer world. Unlikely as it seems in a town where residents still skin and dry seals in their front yards, some of those taking a long-range view hail this remote outpost as the next Singapore.

"If it's handled correctly, you sit on an international strait, take a proactive stand and profit nicely," said Rob Huebert, the associate director of the Center for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary.

The passage wasn't transversed until 1906, when legendary Polar explorer Roald Amundsen completed the trip in three years. The feat was not accomplished again until Canadian Mountie Henry Larsen took a schooner with a hull made of two-foot-thick Douglas fir through the passage and then back again in the 1940s.

Although common sense mandated that the passage could never be practically used, the siren call of the shortcut has never been silenced. The first contemporary test of the passage for commerce was prompted by the modern-day equivalent of spice: crude oil. In 1969, Humble Oil & Refining Co. sent through a mammoth 114,000-ton supertanker. Double-hulled and ice-strengthened, the Manhattan became the world's biggest ice-breaker.

The 43,000-horsepower monster easily cruised through 15-foot-thick piles of ice and would reverse, gather steam and try to plow through 40-foot ridges of ice. But it ground to a halt several times and broke free only with the help of a Canadian ice-breaker. The ship eventually reached Prudhoe Bay with several holes in its hull.

"When all was said and done, economically, it didn't make sense," Huebert said.

That was before the ice started its retreat.

The Canadian Ice Service reports that Arctic ice has disappeared at a rate of about 3 percent each decade since the 1970s. It is getting thinner as well. Ice sheets that used to be 10 feet thick are now less than 6 feet from top to bottom. Last month, scientists at the National Snow and Ice Data Center in Boulder, Colo., announced that Arctic sea ice had reached a record low since satellite measurements started 24 years ago.

*(continued on following page)*



# Navigating 'Panama Canal North'

"In some years now, you can do the Northwest Passage almost in a rowboat," said the Canadian Ice Service's Lionel Hache.

The passage remains notoriously unpredictable from year to year, and even from week to week. Last August, it was clogged with some of the thickest ice seen this decade, said J.P. Lehnert, the officer in charge of the Canadian Coast Guard station in Iqaluit.

To those who have been watching the passage, it seems only a matter of time before all manner of ships, from supertankers to sailboats, start transiting these once formidable waters.

A few new ships test the waters each year. A hardy breed of tourists has begun disembarking from massive icebreakers in the few small towns along the passage. They could soon cruise through on skimpier vessels. A sailboat from New Zealand recently made the transit.

There are no traffic jams yet. But shipping companies in Europe and Asia are quietly sniffing out opportunities.

"The incentive is there," Huebert said. "You cut a huge amount of travel time, and in international shipping, time is money."

The largest supertankers, which don't fit through the Panama Canal and must go around South America, would save even more time.

The discovery of mineral resources in the far north, like the diamond strikes of the Northwest Territories, could spur efforts to export such riches by ship. Canada's vast stores of fresh water may one day be valuable enough to export to drier regions.

The most northerly human settlement on the passage, and in all of Canada, is Grise Fiord, about 900 miles from the North Pole. The Inuit call the town Ajuittuq, for "place that never thaws out." Even the Inuit have standards when it comes to suffering. These bleak shores were not settled voluntarily.

During the Cold War, the Canadian government decided to relocate a handful of Inuit families from the relative warmth and good hunting grounds of Northern Quebec to the country's northern reaches: the bleak, rocky shores of Ellesmere and Resolute Bay on Cornwallis Islands, where there is little to hunt and even less to gather.

*(continued on following page)*



## Navigating 'Panama Canal North'

So many American military personnel had flooded into the Arctic, to monitor Russian threats by air and sea from stations at Eureka and Alert that the Canadians feared losing control of their northern flank. The Inuit were human flagpoles, dispatched north to establish Canadian sovereignty.

Since then, the Canadians have considered the frozen archipelago of ocean, ice and islands to be their land and the Northwest Passage to be their internal waterway. "It's ours," said Colonel Kevin McLeod, commander of the Canadian Northern Forces.

Any waterway that connects two oceans is considered international waters, but with the passage impenetrable, no countries had pressed Canada on the issue. With an open passage, all that has the potential to change. "Our sovereignty," said passage expert Huebert, "is on thinning ice."

Since an open passage would link two oceans, U.S. State Department officials argue it should be treated as international waters, open to all who wish to pass. "It's one of those issues on which we've agreed to disagree," said a spokesman at the U.S. Embassy in Ottawa.

With the waters open to new traffic, Canadians are taking a renewed interest in their Arctic back yard.

"I never imagined I'd be this far north, but these are our waters and we should know what's going on in them," said Lieutenant-Commander Chris Ross as his warship, the Goose Bay, stood anchored in Frobisher Bay outside Iqaluit, the first warship to pass this far north in 14 years.

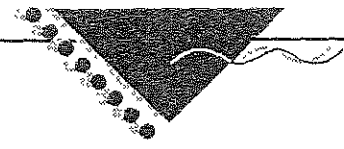
A prominent concern is illegal fishing. As ice recedes, rogue vessels have been moving into the area, lured by the rich Arctic seas, which are almost wholly unregulated.

"They're just scooping the shrimp up. They're scooping the turbot up," said Lieutenant-Commander Scott Healey, a Canadian navy officer who spent 10 years aboard coastal patrol vessels out of Halifax and watched the once-rich North Atlantic fishery collapse.

International waters elsewhere also have been plagued with modern piracy and frontier lawlessness. "You become a magnet for smuggling humans, diamonds, guns, drugs," said Huebert. "We're blind if we think that just because we're Canadian it's not going to happen."

*(continued on following page)*





# Navigating 'Panama Canal North'

How best to patrol the passage remains a question. It all depends on how quickly the ice melts and how brave interlopers are. "I don't want to scream, 'The sky is falling and we have to build a nuclear-powered ice-breaker in the next 18 months,'" McLeod said. "But we don't want to get behind the eight ball."

U.S. Navy officials are worried about falling behind as well. Their new report on the challenges of an ice-free Arctic cites the potential need for an entirely new class of navy ships — ice-breakers — and a new focus on a harsh part of the globe the military has been able to ignore since the Soviet Union broke up.

"There's no logistics base up there. There's no place to get re-supplied. There's bad weather. The charts are woefully bad," said Dennis Conlon, an oceanographer with the Office of Naval Research, which commissioned the report. "It's your basic nightmare in terms of running an operation."

If the ships come, so will the infrastructure: hotels, bars and even stoplights.

The vision is almost unimaginable to the Inuit, who are still reeling from the first wave of change: the trickle of explorers, whalers and soldiers who penetrated this frozen realm and altered it forever.

"We didn't know what a cold was — or what measles were — until the whalers came. And we had no problems with alcohol until 1940," said Dinos Tikivik, a 39-year-old corrections officer who also serves with the Canadian Rangers, an Inuit and Indian reserve force that patrols Canada's most remote regions.

## teacher notes