
SCENE**17**

**CG CUTTER *NORTH STAR*—1941-1942 (GREENLAND PATROL /
SLEDGE PATROL / WORLD WAR II)**

My transfer orders to the *North Star*, also based in Boston, directed that I report "...on commissioning of that vessel," but gave no date. I wanted to visit home, so I applied for three weeks of leave en route. My leave request came through approved about 11:30 p.m. I worked all night packing, stowing gear in Navy Yard facilities, parking my Studebaker "double-date" coupe in the long-term lot, and on May 8 I caught the first train out for Los Angeles. The train to Chicago was smooth and comfortable but west of there it was slow and dirty. The traveling companions were a jolly bunch, however, and by the time we reached Los Angeles we were all "cousins."

The next two weeks were filled with activities, including Catalina in my brother's boat *Dagge*, outdoor ice skating in the sun in Westwood, the Sea Scout mountain cabin which my group had built in one weekend, yacht racing, and visiting with the few old friends still around Santa Monica.

In conversations with other military men on the train, I learned that I qualified for space available on military aircraft. Maybe I could find one going my way. I didn't know how to find a ride, but by phoning around to military airfields I lucked out. There was a flight leaving for Pensacola in a couple of days out of Burbank. I met the schedule and it was great—a commercial Navy transport, plush seats and all!

The chances of getting out of Pensacola looked bleak, so I took an ancient southern train to Air Force Maxwell Field, Alabama, where I caught an Army transport plane to Patterson Field in Ohio (not exactly on course to Boston). With the Memorial Day

weekend coming up, I decided to take trains the rest of the way. All in all, it was a *great* experience and saved a little money.

I found the *North Star* in the Boston Navy Yard and in a state of chaos. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Commander Frank Meals, a “mustang,” had orders to prepare for sailing to Greenland on June 1. That was *clearly* impossible, but he stubbornly held to that date. I was to be assigned as Commissary Officer, but since I had not yet reported aboard, he gave the initial provisioning chore to the Navigator, who was loaded with his own preparations. He turned to the Navy Cookbook, where he found an inventory list giving the amounts of provisions per man for thirty days. He multiplied those figures to cover ninety days and one hundred thirty men! I went to bed just as the crew was starting to unload canned tomatoes from a railway boxcar. When I woke up the next morning there were cases of tomatoes all over the main deck. They had run out of space below. We returned most of those tomatoes, but we were stuck with tons of produce. To explain I must first describe this unusual ship.



CGC *North Star*, supply ship to Greenland Patrol vessels

The *North Star* was a 240-foot wooden-hull little freighter. She was not an icebreaker but was ice-protected with an ironwood band at the waterline. She had a well-deck forward with cargo booms to the hold. The 'tween-deck spaces were converted to the crew's living quarters. The officers' quarters were in the deck house. Mine was a nice little cabin furthest aft on the starboard side, with a large view window. The built-in bunk

had a curtain around the open two sides to keep out the midnight sun. The *North Star* was single screw, powered by a diesel engine.

She had served in Alaskan waters for many years for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. More recently, she made two expeditions as a supply ship for Admiral Byrd to the Antarctic.

We missed the sailing date of June first by almost a month, leaving just before the Fourth of July celebrations. During this time, the Boston weather remained steamy hot and sultry. An alert engineer feared the fresh produce would suffer, so he turned on the cooling system. It *worked...too well!!!* Heavy ice formed on the tubes. Now afraid the produce would freeze, the engineer turned off the system. The ice thawed and drenched everything!!

A strange feeling of relief rippled through the ship as we left the tensions of the long preparation days behind us. The sea breeze smelled sweet. All was quiet except for the monotonous hum of the engine. No workmen drilling holes. No welders. *And* I no longer was the boot Ensign. I was now a Lieutenant Junior Grade! *And* I had a little stature, having recently been to Greenland and learned a lot I could share. I was assigned the 8-12 a.m. and 8-12 p.m. underway watches.

On the second morning out, the Captain had the crew assembled for a briefing. We knew we were headed for Greenland, the largest island in the world, but did not know what an important role we would play in the war now raging in Europe. He made it clear.

Germany, under Hitler, was conquering Europe in all directions. His western front had just taken Denmark, the motherland of the Greenland colony. President Roosevelt knew he must act fast to confine the Axis powers to Europe. Our Army and Navy together with British forces moved the Allied defense to Iceland. We needed Greenland to build airfields for ferrying fighters and bombers. We needed to keep the Axis forces from establishing U-boat bases in Greenland. *And*, very important, we needed the cryolite (used in making aluminum) from the world's largest mine in Ivigtut for our aircraft factories that were building thousands of warplanes. *And* to prevent the Axis forces from having weather stations in Greenland. The weather generated in Greenland would be extremely important to General Eisenhower for planning to attack the Nazis.

The fjords of northeast Greenland are the most beautiful in the world. They are deep, long, and navigable with towering cliffs of colorful treeless rocks. It is isolated from the world by the barrier of Storis ice, previously mentioned. There are no villages in the region. It was not "occupied" by the Danes. A few Norwegians lived in the area for trapping polar bears and white fox. They claimed it was their land. In 1931, Denmark filed a suit in the Permanent Court of International Justice (World Court) countering claims by Norway for eastern Greenland. The court ruled that Denmark must "occupy" the territory to maintain their claim. To do that, the Danes establish outposts at about two-hundred-mile intervals.

Our mission was to give support to those stations and provision them for two years (some years supply ships cannot get through the ice). We were to inspect fishing camps to ascertain their real mission, and to destroy weather reporting facilities.

As we rounded Cape Farewell and headed north up the Denmark Strait, we began a whole new experience for me in polar navigation. As we entered the Greenland Sea, we encountered scattered ice floes and a few icebergs. About halfway up the east coast the ice began to pack too heavy for us to penetrate. We skirted to the east by heading north when possible. We needed to reach latitude seventy-four degrees north before heading west back to land. When we did, our longitude was twelve degrees west, and we were one hundred eighty miles off the coast. We turned west and entered the ice pack.

Remember, *North Star* is not an icebreaker. All we could do was follow leads in the ice and push aside ice in our way, or redirect our course around the big chunks. We were in twenty-four hours of daylight now, but fog and icebergs obscured our vision much of the time. One way to find a lead in the ice was to look for a dark line on the underside of the overcast.

On July 23, we moored to a large ice floe. In its center was a fresh water pond made by thawing snow (not saltwater ice). With our portable pumps, we skimmed off some five thousand gallons of fresh water into our ship's tanks.

LAND-HO!! Our Navigator allowed for the southward drift of the *Storis* that we had been working in for six days, and we made a perfect landfall on Cape Hold-With-Hope!

Almost coincidental with our landfall, the American naval forces congregating around Greenland were organized officially into the **Greenland Patrol**. The mission was outlined as follows:

- To support the Army in establishing in Greenland airdrome facilities for use in ferrying aircraft to the British Isles.
- To defend Greenland and specifically to prevent German operations in northeast Greenland.

With the mission firmly in mind, we cruised the beautiful fjord region in unbelievably good clear weather! We visited the Danish weather stations at Ella Island and Eskimonaes. We learned that wintertime, when the coves are frozen, is visiting time by dog sledge, being faster and easier than summer commute by motorboat. Since there are no trees, the dogs are tethered in a fan pattern rather than in tandem. The Greenland breed are smaller than huskies, they pull harder and eat less.

We re-provisioned one Norwegian man-and-wife camp that had operated for years and were allowed to remain. And we found one abandoned camp where we destroyed remaining radio equipment.

One of the Danes stationed at the Ella Island weather station was out working his trap line when he saw a trawler up a narrow fjord. He hurried back and reported to us. We

immediately went up that fjord and found that the vessel had left. They had, in fact, steamed right into the hands of the **Coast Guard cutter *Northland***. It was a Norwegian trawler named the *Buskoe*. There were twenty-seven persons on board, most of them Danish hunters and Norwegian trappers, and one woman who said she was a nurse. Also found were up-to-date radio transmitting equipment, which may have been used for sending weather reports and information on Allied shipping to German U-boats and Axis-controlled territory.

The *Northland* immediately put a prize crew aboard and directed the old **Coast Guard cutter *Bear***, now with all Navy crew, to tow the *Buskoe* to Boston. The most complete book on “The U.S. Coast Guard in World War II,” published by the United States Naval Institute, states the “CGC *Northland*, 12 Sept. 1941—Seizes *Buskoe* (Nor). First Naval Capture World War II.”



Many of the Officers and crew were permitted to grow beards while on Greenland Patrol

Here are a couple of Arctic tricks I experienced. The famous quote from the “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” about “water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink” can be paraphrased for winter in the Arctic to read “frozen water everywhere, nor any drop to drink.” But we were there just before the freezing season. This is how we topped off our drinking water tanks: we scrubbed out a lifeboat and towed it under a cataract waterfall until full and used a portable fire pump to transfer the water to our tanks.

And where there was no handy cataract, we towed the scrubbed-out boat to a fresh water stream, pumped water to fill (but not ground) it and towed it back to the ship for transfer. There was one hazard—polar bears! They were seen around the area, and

they are not afraid of humans. Our men on the detail were armed and snipers were alert from the ship's bridge.

Anchored off Blomster Bugt (Bay of Flowers), another officer and I got permission to go on a hike. We strapped on side-arms (45s) because we knew there were musk ox nearby. We hiked to a rather flat area and when we came over a small rise we encountered a small herd of six or seven. We didn't need to fire to alert them for they were already in their defense position. That consisted of facing us in a tight shoulder-to-shoulder line with the calves and cows protected by a bull at each end. The procedure, we had been told, was that one bull at a time would charge if threatened, making his thrust and returning to the herd and another would do the same. We wanted none of that, so we each fired one round and watched them saunter off.

My ship, the *North Star*, was the last to leave northeast Greenland. Our patrol mission to clear the territory of unwanted people and silence unwanted radios was completed. The Danish weather stations were re-provisioned. The men were assigned to the newly established **Sledge Patrol** and given military status. The traditional shipping season closes on September 1 due to the consolidation of the Storis and the freezing of the fjord ice. We stayed until October 1, taking a risk but to make sure no Axis ship was planning a late arrival.

We made a final cruise to our northern-most latitude of seventy-eight degrees north, then south to Scoresby Sound at the southern end of the region. There we learned that a German reconnaissance aircraft had searched the area. After one night, we departed for **Iceland**.

By this time, I had jettisoned all the vegetables and fruit that had been rotting in the chill box, but still had tons of potatoes and dozens of eggs. I thought maybe some Navy ship could use them.

We were greeted upon arrival at **Reykjavik** by a naval patrol craft. The officer said (somewhat disappointed it seemed) that we had just passed over the newly established minefield that guarded the entrance. He thought our wooden hull must have saved us!

I naively called the Army base to see if they would like potatoes and eggs. I was turned down emphatically. So I boarded an American battleship (I've forgotten the name) and offered them six thousand pounds of potatoes and eleven hundred eggs. No dice. I was told I had more potatoes than a battleship. They are happy to rely on their biweekly supply "train." My first act on leaving Iceland was to dump eleven hundred eggs and six thousand pounds of potatoes overboard!

All was not peaceful in the harbor. There were too many ships anchored every which way, and gusty winds and rain arrived at dusk. A trawler dragged anchor and drifted into us. We, in turn, trying to avoid it gently rammed a corvette and one of the old four-stack destroyers we gave to the British. Dawn was breaking as the last squall lifted. We found a safer place to anchor and enjoyed liberty and a restful day awaiting our next orders.

Our Captain returned from making official calls with details of our next assignment. A Navy survey team had selected a site on a small island near the mouth of Tenuglliarlik Fjord for installing a radio direction-finding station. A small number of construction workers and crates of equipment and supplies would arrive by Navy tanker in a few days. Because we were a little freighter with cargo booms, we were selected to take the men and cargo aboard to relieve the tanker for other duties and to assist in getting the station equipment to the site ashore. We were into November now, with long nights and short daylight hours. It was going to be a tough assignment. We named it “**Boxes for Boston**”!

We waited for the tanker to arrive by anchoring in a rockbound cove we had visited before. We named it Nordstjerne Havn. It opened to two channels: one from the west which was too narrow for safe navigation by a ship our size but used by our smaller cutters, and a safe entrance from the south, which we previously had used.

It was a dark moonless night when I came off watch at midnight with a strong breeze from the east. I headed straight to my bunk. About 3 a.m., I awoke to the tune of the engine racing first ahead, then backing. I peaked out my window and my gawd the rock shore was close! But we were pulling away towards the center of the cove. Back to my bunk, but I stayed fully dressed.

There goes the engine again—ahead—now astern. With this engine, it is stopped and started in reverse, then stopped again and started in ahead. Each start is by compressed air. When the engine is running, it recharges the compressed air bottle. If they shift too many times, we may run out of air and be helpless!

I was almost back in bed when five blasts were sounded on the ship’s whistle: *Collision/All Hands On Deck!*

Can you believe this: our stern fetched up on the rocky shore and the wind caught the bow and pivoted us around until we were aimed at the south channel. We took it and got the heck out of there, then cruised around in open water for the rest of the night. *Thank you, Lord!*

The next day, we found the tanker anchored near the site selected for the station. We moored alongside and went to work to transfer the cargo. The crew enjoyed the hard labor after being cooped up aboard ship so long. But the boxes kept coming and coming. Our excitable Executive Officer took charge. I soon realized they were sending big items down to the bottom of the forward hold where my commissary provisions were stowed. *That would cut off the food to feed the entire ship’s company!*

I pointed this out to the Exec, but he said it would only be for a day or two and we could make do. I objected louder. He said, “If we run out of food we can feed them bread and water!” That did it! I went straight to the Captain, over the Exec’s head. (A NO-NO.) Needless to say, the Captain called in the Exec and we discussed the matter calmly and found a way to serve both causes. We would make like an elevator shaft, down which the Jack-of-the-Dust could go for the food items needed, and up which he could pass

food items with the help of mess cooks. (The Exec never said a word to me about it.) The job took about three weeks during which something changed our lives.

We were seated in the mess deck for the evening movie. The Captain was in his reserved chair with officers around him, and the enlisted men were seated wherever they could find a space. The messenger came in with clipboard and flashlight in hand. He illuminated the clipboard with the flashlight and thrust it in position for the Captain to read. There must be a reason for this unbecoming conduct. We craned our necks to read over the Captain's shoulder but he quickly took the message off the board, folded it and put it in his cap. When the movie ended, he told the officers to remain and he read to us the message: "**AIR RAID ON PEARL HARBOR X THIS IS NOT A DRILL.**" The date was December 7, 1941.

That job of two or three days turned out to be two or three weeks, but it got done and we got released to head for Boston. We might be there for Christmas after all.

After cruising around outside the entrance torpedo net trying to exchange recognition signals, we were finally admitted and moored at the Navy shipyard at 2230 hrs, 23 December 1941. We had won our prize of Christmas in the States!

All hands were granted forty-eight hours liberty with orders to return sans beards and sans civilian clothes. We were now **AT WAR.**

In the mail, I found an invitation to attend an anti-submarine training course in San Diego. I could visit home, this time transportation at government expense. I, of course, jumped at it and made reservations for the first airplane out of Boston to New York. But come morning, a heavy snowfall cancelled all flights. I took the train to Pennsylvania Station where there was an airline ticket counter. It was so crowded I couldn't get to the front to revise my ticket. Time was short so I went across the lobby to a telephone booth and telephoned the counter, told them my rush and military priority and they saw that I got to the head of the line. Whew! Here is the neat part—I was booked to depart at 11:30 p.m. on a "**skysleeper.**" (Who have you ever heard of that has flown coast to coast in a sleeper plane?) It was a **Boeing Model 307 Stratoliner**, the first with a pressurized cabin capable of flying above most weather. The berths were like on a Pullman railroad train. It was also neat to have a pretty stewardess duck under the curtain to wake me up!

My leave was spent much the same as earlier ones, but all too soon I was on a flight back to Boston. Again, it was a **sleeper** but in a **Douglas DC-3**, so a much smaller berth. We landed several times for fuel and bounced around in the clouds, not over them. I had the upper berth. My compartment companion with the lower berth was President Roosevelt's "my son James," Captain USMC. Across the aisle were movie executives. They visited about training films they were making for the military. I sat and quietly listened (I should have given them some sage advice).

My schooling was preparation for the orders that were awaiting my return to Boston assigning me to the **Coast Guard cutter Mohawk** (WPG-78), also based in Boston and

preparing to join the Greenland Patrol. I was now a full Lieutenant, having been a junior grade just six months. I would be the Navigator and be leaned on for my “knowledge of the Arctic.” See Scene 18.