

EXPLORATION IN 1961

The 1961 operations of the Department of Transport's Canadian Marine Service fleet were the most notable in the history of the service. The fleet's icebreakers, carrying scientific research parties from a number of other government departments, worked extensively in Arctic waters previously uncharted. These ships, operating as part of a departmental supply fleet of 28 vessels, including 11 chartered commercial ships, performed their scientific and exploratory tasks in addition to the job of carrying 110,000 tons of cargo to Arctic ports of call. The Department's own ships travelled a total of 161,354 miles during their northern operations, which began at the end of June and ended in mid-November.

CMS "John A. Macdonald" pushed northward beyond Eureka, Ellesmere Island, into the waters of Nansen Sound, farther north than any Canadian ship had ever penetrated. *En route*, she carried a joint Transport Department and United States Weather Bureau meteorological crew to Sherwood Head, on the south end of Axel Heiberg Island, where they installed the world's first automatic weather-recording station, powered by radioisotope fuel and capable of operation unattended for two years.

The vessel was subsequently engaged in oceanographic and hydrographic undertakings in the channels among the islands north of Viscount Melville and Lancaster Sounds, at one time penetrating northward into Penny Strait between Devon and Bathurst islands, where no ship had travelled since the early explorers first went into the area 100 years ago.

HUGE ICE BARRIER

At the point where the ship finally turned back, Captain Cuthbert found himself faced with a barrier of polar ice piled to a height of 80 feet by wind and tide. Ice conditions in that part of the Arctic were worse than usual, though in other areas, where the Department's supply convoys customarily travel, there was less ice than in most years.

The vessel went westward to Winter Harbour on Melville Island and carried out scientific undertakings there and at the entrance to McClintock Channel, on the east side of Victoria Island. Soundings were taken in Byam and Austin Channels and the ship later proceeded through Prince Regent Inlet and into the Gulf of Boothia, where extensive hydrographic and oceanographic work was completed.

The "John A. Macdonald" then returned south by way of Fury and Hecla Strait into Foxe Channel and thence to Hudson Strait, thus circumnavigating Baffin Island. In all, she steamed 17,173 miles in a 75-day voyage.

RELICS OF THE PAST

CMS "Labrador" travelled west through Lancaster and Viscount Melville sounds to McClure Strait. The ship reached longitude 116 degrees, 22 minutes West, almost to Mercy Flay on Banks Island, where the early explorer Robert McClure was forced to abandon his ship the "Investigator" in 1851 while trying to sail the Northwest Passage from the West, in search of the ill-fated Franklin expedition.

The "Labrador" later carried out research projects in that area and then worked south into Prince Regent Inlet and the Gulf of Boothia. In these waters, the vessel stopped at Victoria Harbour, where relics of the Sir John Ross expedition of 1829-32 were recovered. These included two anchors and parts of the steam engine discarded from Ross's ship "Victory", which was abandoned there in 1832.

A second stop was made at Fury Beach on Somerset Island to recover two anchors believed to have belonged to HMS "Fury", one of the vessels (the other being HMS "Hecla") of the second Parry expedition. "Fury" was destroyed by ice in 1825.

The "Labrador" next carried out extensive hydrographic and other scientific work eastward toward Greenland and south through Davis Strait, before returning to her base at Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

CMS "N.B. McLean", veteran of the Department's icebreaker fleet, steamed westward, escorting a commercial vessel that was delivering oil-drilling equipment to White Harbour. There Captain Gagne and his crew went ashore and found a wooden hut, a quantity of traps, ammunition and other articles left by the Canadian expedition under Captain Joseph Bernier of the old Canadian Marine Service, which wintered there in 1908-09. Since that time there had been only one caller at Winter Harbour, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police schooner "St. Roch", which visited the spot briefly while navigating the Northwest Passage in 1944.

The "N.B. McLean" carried out duties throughout the Hudson Bay area and the High Arctic during this summer, escorting the Department's supply convoys and commercial shipping and herself performing some supply undertakings. In all, she steamed 10,950 miles.

RELICS PLACED IN MUSEUM

The historic relics brought south aboard the three icebreakers were forwarded by the Transport Department to the Maritime Museum of Canada at Halifax.

The other icebreakers engaged in the Department's Arctic tasks played an important part in escorting supply convoys to weather stations, defence installations, Eskimo communities and other outposts throughout both the Eastern and Western Arctic. CMS "d'Iberville" carried out an important scientific programme that saw her transformed temporarily into a floating research laboratory.

Icebreaking, escort duty and some cargo-carrying tasks were undertaken by CMS "Montcalm" and CMS "Sir Humphrey Gilbert". Similar work was carried out along the Western Arctic coast by CMS "Camsell". Among that vessel's notable achievements was the rescue of the crew of the Hudson Bay vessel "Fort Hearne", when that ship was damaged by ice and sunk. "Camsell" succeeded in towing the hulk to a point where it could be beached in shallow water and some of the cargo saved.

The cruise of CMS "Montcalm" covered 11,044 miles, while the other two ships logged 7,323 miles and 8,163 miles respectively.