

west Passage. In 1936, Larsen told his superior: "I would like one day to proceed right through the Northwest Passage with the *St. Roch*." Larsen believed the ship was built to take it and believed that she could meet the challenge.

The opportunity finally came in September 1939, when the RCMP authorized Larsen to make the Northwest Passage trip. *St. Roch* was to sail the passage from west to east, then travel on to Halifax. *St. Roch* would be the first ship to complete the passage since Amundsen's *Gjøa*, and "ours would be the first ship to conquer to Northwest passage in that direction." For Larsen, "Here it was. My great moment. Canada was at war and the government had realized the need to demonstrate the country's sovereignty over the Arctic islands."

St. Roch put into the Canadian naval base at Esquimalt, near Victoria, on Vancouver Island, for repairs to make her ready for the passage. Wartime exigencies meant that Larsen would not get the new, more powerful diesel engine he had asked for, but a new auxiliary was added to recharge the ship's batteries. The bow was sheathed in steel to better withstand the ice.

Larsen selected a southern route through the passage, following much of Amundsen's track. A devoted student of Arctic history, Larsen packed a number of books from his personal library to take on the voyage, among them an English first edition of

**Henry Larsen,
beard frozen, on
dogsled patrol.**

*Courtesy Vancouver
Maritime Museum*



Amundsen's account of *Gjøa*'s voyage. He constantly referred to it and his other books during the two-year trip.

St. Roch, the intent of her voyage a wartime secret, sailed from Vancouver in the early morning hours of June 23, 1940. On July 4, the ship cleared Unimak Pass and entered the Bering Sea, reaching Point Barrow on July 23. It was a bad year for ice. Larsen had a difficult time dodging ice floes as he pushed past Barrow and on to Herschel Island. From there, he sailed to Cambridge Bay, the ship's usual winter quarters. Larsen had hoped to reach Gjoa Haven, but, as he noted, "it was too late in the season." The thick ice, and the fear of being frozen in at a bad spot where the pack ice might push the ship ashore and crush it, sent *St. Roch* westward in retreat. Finally, the ship stopped at Walker Bay, on the western shores of

***St. Roch sheathed in ice for
insulation while wintering in.***

Courtesy Vancouver Maritime Museum

