



Sketch map of Alaska showing the various routes north described in the Commentary, and the positions of the icebound whaling ships.

Jarvis and the Alaskan Reindeer Caper

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The United States Coast Guard has announced a departure from the traditional practice of naming vessels in honour of former Secretaries of the Treasury (in effect since 1830), and hereafter will use the names of heroes. One of the first of three new 378-foot cutters bears the name *Jarvis*.

During the winter of 1897-1898, Lieutenant David H. Jarvis of the U. S. Revenue Cutter *Bear* led a three-man relief party to 265 whalers whose ships had been stranded in the ice off the northern coast of Alaska, a feat that must rank among the highest in the annals of polar history and exploration. More remarkable, it was not carried out on the high seas but instead on land; three brave men, wearing parkas and boots instead of chaps, helped to carry out a reindeer drive from Cape Nome to Point Barrow, a distance of approximately 800 miles.

By 1897, petroleum products had much depressed the market for whale oil, but whalebone (more accurately, baleen) was a most profitable commodity. Women were still trussed in whalebone corsets, and men still needed buggy whips. Thus, during the summer of 1897, whaling ships came north as usual; some ships returned south early in the summer, while others familiar with shifting ice planned to remain until early fall, normally a period when navigable water was still present. The fleet that had wintered-over at Herschel Island also delayed its departure until this "safe period".

Perhaps a sign of things to come happened during the last of July when the *Navarch* got caught in the pack-ice off Icy Cape and had to be abandoned. A little over two months later seven other whaling ships had been icebound off Point Barrow or within a 100-mile radius (see *Frontispiece*). The situation was serious. Most of the ships had supplies to last only till January, and sailing south would be impossible until the following July or even later.

Quite naturally, the whalers turned for help to the nearest point with some semblance of civilization which was the village of Utkiavik and Charles D. Brower's Whaling Station located a bit north at Cape Smythe. The only possible shelters here were an abandoned whaling station currently occupied by a naturalist and his two assistants, and a refuge for shipwrecked sailors which had not been used since the summer of 1896. In the Eskimo village there was also a Presbyterian mission maintained by the newly arrived Dr. Marsh and his wife. This was the hospitality that was to be offered to the stranded sailors during the fall of 1897.

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When reports of Eskimo hunting parties told of a developing crisis, a plan of action was formulated primarily through the efforts of Brower. The skippers to the south and to the east asked for help and were told that they would be taken care of. Sleds were dispatched to the south to pick up the crews of the two ships stranded off the Sea Horse Islands; the Captain and thirty men remained aboard one of them, and the remaining fifteen went back to Barrow. The shipboard crew was to subsist by hunting and fishing.

Brower sent his partner, Tom Gordon, and the naturalist, E. A. McIlhenny, by dog sled to the east to alert crews there of his plans. On their return, they reported sighting a ship that looked like the *Navarch* which had been abandoned by most of its crew, drifting east in the pack. Its sighting prompted Brower and a work crew to set out by sled to see if it could be "pirated", particularly for food. When they boarded her the remaining six of the crew showed marked hostility to Brower's request that they surrender food and supplies for the common good of all of the stranded seamen, but they were finally convinced by "physical psychology" and were transferred to another ship. *Navarch's* food and other supplies were sledged back to Brower's Station, but shifting winds prevented removal of any of her eighty tons of coal.

The problem facing the residents at Barrow was critical. Housing was at a premium; despite the lucky find aboard the *Navarch*, food was still in short supply. Therefore it was decided to try to notify the outside world of the plight of the stranded seamen. To insure success, two volunteers were sent "out" by different routes during October, one to the then small town of Edmonton, the other to Vancouver Island; civilization was not reached by either man until April of 1898.

Not having anticipated "wintering over" a supply of winter clothing was almost non-existent. So desperate were some of the men, that they robbed the graves of the local Eskimos, which were shallow because of the permafrost, and by tradition the corpses were completely clothed. Through the efforts of Brower, the natives remained willing to manufacture wearing apparel despite these intrusions. As time went on the lot of the stranded men even improved slightly; nevertheless, during the long, cold arctic winter the fate of the whalers hung in balance.

Coal was a problem, for there just wasn't enough driftwood to supply the needs of so many men. As if directed by providence, the coal-laden *Navarch* appeared and beached herself at Brower's Station. But before she could be offloaded, she was accidentally set afire by scavenging crewmen and burned to the keel.

When part of the whaling fleet failed to return to San Francisco by early November, an urgent plea from the people of that city to organize a relief expedition was sent to President William McKinley. A solution to the dilemma seemed impossible. The problem was to get food to an area inaccessible by ship in a reasonable amount of time. Large quantities would be required, and it would have to be transported over a cold, barren, arctic tundra where there were no roads and only a few well-defined trails. How best to do it? Borrowing proven methods used by the Texas cattlemen to transport beef on the hoof, it was decided to let the potential food move itself. Instead of cattle, though, it was necessary to use an animal species capable of surviving and feeding under the harsh conditions of the arctic winter — the reindeer. These were already in Alaska having been

domesticated for possible industry during the early 1890's through the efforts of the Presbyterian missionary Dr. Sheldon Jackson, in an attempt to strengthen and stabilize the economy of the Eskimo.

The next problem to solve was to find someone to carry out the drive or at least supervise it. But who could carry out the drive and survive the trip? Warm-blooded Texas cowpokes were overlooked, and the job was turned over to what seemed to be a totally illogical choice: a group of experienced arctic sailors, the Captain and crew of the Revenue cutter *Bear*, veterans of yearly patrols along the coast of Alaska. Captain Tuttle and his crew were known and respected by the coastal population, and their lack of experience in animal husbandry was more than made up in knowledge of Alaskan peoples, sources of reindeer and how to obtain them.

With time short, a plan was formulated which was alien to all past experience. It would be up to three men to deliver a herd of reindeer to Point Barrow. The leader of this party was to be First Lieutenant D. H. Jarvis, accompanied by Second Lieutenant E. P. Bertholf, and Surgeon S. J. Call. They would pick up the herds in northwestern Alaska and drive them overland. This would have to be done in darkness and under the worst of weather conditions because the arctic winter was approaching fast.

The *Bear* was resupplied, and in less than a month she was on her way north, arriving at Unalaska on 9 December. The next day she refueled at Dutch Harbor, and Lieut. Jarvis secured several dogs and supplies unavailable in Seattle. On 11 December, the ship left heading north, but ran into bad weather and mush ice; she had to come about and steam to the SSW. Both Cape Nome and Sledge Island were passed up in favour of a landing spot at Cape Vancouver to the south.

The ship anchored about five miles from the village of Tununak. Among the inhabitants there was a trader who agreed to take the party as far north as St. Michael. Seven dogs and two sleds were taken off the *Bear* along with other supplies.

Dogs were scarce along the Alaskan coast because of the Gold Rush, but as Tununak was off the beaten track, this was not a problem. Alexis Kalenin was able to supply dogs and arrange for native help, going along himself as a guide. On 17 December, four sleds left the village. Three of the sleds supplied by Alexis used nine dogs each, whereas the fourth was of the heavier type from the *Bear* so required fourteen dogs. The total weight of all supplies was 1,294 pounds.

Some of the items might seem unnecessary. Why, for instance, carry 75 pounds of mail and 50 pounds of trade tobacco? The answer to the first item is simple. The men from the *Bear* knew well how much the missionaries, herders, and traders appreciated contact with the "outside". To go north without mail would have been an unpardonable sin. Secondly, the services of Eskimos would be required, and payment would have to be made with something useful (not money) — some difficult-to-get luxury item such as tobacco. In addition, Dr. Call carried a camera, and recorded all aspects of the expedition graphically. The original photographic plates are now at the University of Alaska, thanks to one of his relatives, Frederick Booth, who some fifty years later also played a role in the history of northern Alaska in the construction of the DEW line.

The first village north was Ukogamute, consisting of seven shall huts or "igloos" and a large "kazheen" where dances and council meetings were held, and where travellers, bachelors, and widowers lived. Upon reaching the village, all of the women and children abruptly disappeared into huts. It was learned later that in times past traders had been known to steal women!

On 19 December the village of Ki-yi-lieug a mute was reached. Wood was very scarce, but some from an old hut was traded. More serious was the scarcity of dogs. When the men had left Tununak, two of the four teams were made up of young dogs; these were unable to continue, so Dr. Call and Lieut. Jarvis with two native guides continued on, leaving the rest to follow with Lieut. Bertholf.

On Christmas Eve the party reached the Yukon River at the village of Andreafski. Here Lieut. Jarvis opened the mail sacks, pulling out what was destined for these people, most of whom worked for the Alaska Commercial Company.

Despite its being the Christmas season, the journey was continued. After replenishing their provision from the stocks at the trading post, they were off the next day, arriving at the U.S. Army base at St. Michael on 30 December. This was the last outpost of civilization where one could be sure of securing enough food and transportation to last until Point Hope was reached.

The dogs had to be changed, and again there was a marked shortage of them. The Alaska Commercial Company lent a team to be used as far north as Unalaklik to be exchanged for another team belonging to the agent of the North American Trading and Transportation Company for use during the rest of the way. Jarvis found that he would have to wait until he reached Cape Prince of Wales before he could pick up any reindeer.

Before leaving, however, there were certain logistic problems that had to be met. It would probably take at least two months to reach Point Barrow and perhaps even longer. Speed was of importance, necessitating a limit of no more than 200 to 300 pounds per sled. If the routine continued to be the same as in the past, it would mean manhauling and pushing the sleds in order to average 25 to 30 miles per day. Jarvis, therefore, left word for Lieut. Bertholf to proceed to Unalaklik, pick up supplies and continue on to cache them at Cape Blossom, going overland, straight north.

Jarvis and his party left on New Year's Day. The wind had blown the ice out of the sound, so they had to strike to the tundra where they met warm weather and even found some of the tundra blown snow-free, making the journey still more difficult. On 3 January, Jarvis met a man from Point Barrow on his way to Vancouver Island and breathed a bit easier on being told that although serious, conditions there were not impossible. The party left Unalaklik on 5 January in three light sleds westward along the shore of what is now known as the Seward Peninsula.

It should be emphasized again at this point that this was a calculated but very dangerous mission. All of the personnel were experienced sailors of arctic waters during the ice-free summer, but now they were working on the land, in the dead of winter where temperatures drop to lows in the -60°F . range; the sun would start to peek over the horizon around January, and as travel proceeded north the days would get longer, but the temperature would still range between -10° to

— 30°F. or lower, long into April. Travelling west was difficult because of heavy snow. Both dogs and sleds sank into deep drifts, and it was necessary to tramp down a trail and slow the pace to ten miles per day.

The party arrived at Golovin Bay on 11 January. Here they acquired additional supplies and were joined by a Dr. Kettleton and a Lapp named Mikkel. The party set out for Cape Nome where blizzards slowed but did not stop them. On 18 January they reached the house of an Eskimo named Charlie Artisarlook who had a reindeer herd. Jarvis' job was to procure these animals; although he had the backing of the U.S. Government and he could have used "muscle", these deer were Charlie's absolute property. He had been loaned a herd by the Government, which he had replaced only a few weeks before. These were the offspring of that original herd, and represented the major portion of his material wealth. Jarvis explained the reason he was asking for the herd as a loan, and after consultation with his wife, Mary, Artisarlook gave them to Jarvis, insisting that he assume full responsibility for them and for their replacement. Jarvis agreed. In those early days, the men of the Revenue Service were a "hard-nosed" and tough lot but were trusted and respected by both native and cheechako alike.

By now, there were 138 deer on hand: Charlie owned 133, and 5 belonging to some of his employees were bought outright for \$15 each. Jarvis hired Charlie to accompany him to Barrow at the then huge salary of \$30 per month, to be drawn against purchases from goods that would be available on the *Bear* when she came north later on in the year. One of Jarvis' last acts before beginning the 800-mile drive north was to give Mary purchase-orders for food at the trading post at Golovin Bay and the reindeer station at Port Clarence. Without these, she would have surely starved.

Jarvis had still another herd to procure, so he left Dr. Call in charge with instructions to proceed north, while he went with Mikkel and Dr. Kettleton to Port Clarence on 20 January, reaching the Teller Reindeer Station there on the next day. On 23 January, he started out with two Eskimos in a blizzard; the temperature was — 30°F., and most of the day was still dark. After a fitful journey they arrived at Cape Prince of Wales on 24 January with the temperature still at this low reading.

Here again Jarvis had to make an impossible request for deer. Through the selfless efforts of a Mr. Lopp, the local representative of the American Missionary Association, he was able to "borrow" 292 and buy 9 outright to total 301. Despite the fact that he had a wife and children, Lopp with six Eskimo herders joined the final drive north. On 2 February, Dr. Call and Artisarlook arrived, so by 3 February the final assault began with a total of 438 deer and 18 sleds of supplies and food, all pulled by reindeer.

It was important now to make good time so that arrival in Barrow would occur before the fawning season in April. The terrain was hard on the deer pulling the baggage train, and valuable time was lost — in some cases only eight miles were covered in a day.

Since natives of this area had never seen a domestic reindeer herd and might mistake them for wild deer, Jarvis felt he should warn of their coming, so he let Lopp and his men take complete charge of the herd and, with supplies transferred

to dog sleds purchased from Eskimos, he went on ahead to Kotzebue Sound.

The trip north was a long and arduous one, and though the days were getting longer, the temperature still plunged to -30° to -42° F. Food now was in short supply, and dogs became more difficult to replace. However, on 12 February, the party reached Cape Blossom to find that Lieut. Bertholf had arrived the night before with the supplies from Unalaklik. He had also brought along seven good sled deer. Leaving Lieut. Bertholf to meet Lopp and the herd, Jarvis and Call now set a course for Point Hope with a brief stop at the Liebes and Company Trading and Whaling Station on 20 February. Here they learned from a man who had just arrived after a month's journey from Point Barrow, that at the Point there was enough flour, tea, and coffee to last until May for Brower had made his stocks available and hunting had been good. Three men had died, there were some signs of scurvy, and the men were getting surly from confinement and inactivity, but Brower had managed to keep them in tow. This was a great relief to Jarvis who was contemplating sending Dr. Call on to Point Barrow. His appearance would represent a tremendous psychological lift to the stranded men to know that starvation would not be their ultimate fate. However, his plans were changed when he heard that Lopp had decided to cross the hazardous ice from Cape Espenberg to Cape Kruzenstern, a trying trip that took quite a bit out of both animal and man, but by doing so had saved 150 miles and two weeks of travel. Jarvis and Nelson, the Whaling Station manager, went back south to meet him, arriving on 26 February. He instructed Lopp to swing the herd north to the mouth of the Pitmegea River; Jarvis then left for Point Hope, arriving on 3 March. He left a message for Lieut. Bertholf to remain there in anticipation of the transfer of some of the whalers from Point Barrow.

He now had to plan for the last part of the journey which was perhaps the most crucial. Once his party left Point Hope he would pass no Eskimo villages going north until Point Belcher, 300 miles away. There could be no begging or buying food or any possibility of exchanging dogs.

The fatigue, exposure, and anxiety were beginning to tell on Jarvis and Dr. Call. Till then, they had been able to run ahead of the dogs, breaking trail and urging them on to greater speed. Now this was impossible. They therefore hired a middle-aged Eskimo couple to accompany them, primarily to take care of the clothing and foot gear. None of the party had ever travelled to Barrow by land, but this would be no problem since they were going to follow the coastline where travel was best. (The low tundra is made up of high- and low-centre polygons, making travel difficult even in winter when it is at its best. Travel over ice is preferable where possible.)

They left on 6 March with two sleds of supplies. Nelson gave them an assist by travelling part way with a sled loaded with dogfood. Despite the fact that there was now a great deal of daylight, and the time for the best weather in the Arctic was approaching, the trip was still a most difficult one. The prevailing winds then as now blew from the northeast to the southwest, right in the faces of this small group going north. The temperatures at this time usually remained below -10° F., and the wind blew almost all of the time so that the chill factor was enormous. At the end of the day, the only solace was crawling into a tent and

eating some hot food, providing, of course, that enough driftwood could be found to start and maintain a fire. Clothes had to be removed, mended, and dried thoroughly as a prophylactic measure against the hazard of frost bite.

By 17 March, after having fought their way over rough ice, through blizzards, and shortages of fuel, they had arrived at a point just south of Icy Cape, where they met Lopp and the herd. After checking the animals and finding them in good condition, Jarvis wasted no time but pressed on.

The "Thetis Beacon" near the Cape was passed on 21 March; Point Barrow was not too far away, and the end was in sight. On 25 March they arrived at the village of Sedaro on Point Belcher.

Pushing north again on the 26th they arrived at the Sea Horse Islands, and saw the first ship of the ice-trapped fleet. In addition to the Master, 30 of the crew were left, the other 15 having been transferred to Barrow. They were naturally surprised to see Jarvis, but he discouraged any acts of jubilation. He was in no mood to visit, and convinced that the captain and crew could carry on, he left the next day, 27 March, arriving at his final destination on 29 March.

The reaction was one of extreme astonishment. Revenue Service people were not supposed to be north during the winter, especially on land and out of uniform. Some thought the *Bear* had either sunk or was also stranded in the ice and went so far as to look south to make sure.

Despite the fact that both men were tired and let-down after the journey, they stayed in command until relief came that summer. Dr. Call made a health survey, ordered quarters cleaned, and enforced activity in the form of "recreation".

The months that followed were particularly hard on Jarvis. Call it "cabin fever", "bushiness", or whatever — the whalers had it! Along with prolonged anxiety and the inevitable let-down following rescue, petty squabbles and other childish behaviour were the rule. Some men complained because they had only signed on their ship for one year; now that their hitch was up, they wanted to make other arrangements, and some Captains wanted to get rid of trouble-making crew-members. Somehow, Jarvis managed to keep order; he made sure that no pseudo-desertions took place and was as firm with officers as with the men. He ordered that food and messages be sent to stranded ships and that the best conditions possible be maintained both on board and ashore.

During April and May, Brower and the natives carried out whaling, and the additional meat helped to relieve food shortages among the natives. During July, some of the vessels began to work free, and by late August all whalers were on their way home either on their own ship or on the *Bear*.

So the job was done. A party of three, with help from natives, missionaries, traders and government workers, under the command of a tough, modest sailor, had led a herd of reindeer over the frozen tundra, and in the dead of winter, something that no one had done before or has done since for the main and simple reason that sanity dictates against it. He had procured a total of 448 reindeer, 66 of which were lost or killed en route. At Barrow, after delivery, 1 died and 180 were killed for food. There were 254 fawns born, 64 died, for a net increase of 391. With those remaining at Point Hope the sum total was 439, almost enough to pay back the herders from whom they were borrowed. The remaining herd

was driven back from Barrow by Lopp and his crew. Needless to say, all other debts were paid when the *Bear* came north. Charlie Brower went "outside" that summer to settle his accounts with the government and received an additional \$3,000 as a well-deserved reward for his help and sacrifice.

Jarvis and his valiant companions left the Arctic that year under sail and steam to return many times, Jarvis and Bertholf as Captains of the *Bear*. All members were awarded a special Congressional Gold Medal.

The new Coast Guard cutter *Jarvis*, launched on 24 April 1971, is a monument to a brave and capable seafaring man who could more than hold his own on the "beach". Perhaps her ghosts one day will sing again the favourite chanty aboard the *Bear*:

"And when they sound our funeral knell,
They'll say we had our share of hell.
Our welcome sure in Heaven will be
Because we've sailed the Bering Sea."