

## Henry Larsen (1899-1964)



Courtesy of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Neg. no. 1086-1.

Henry Astrup Larsen was the first man to traverse the Northwest Passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic, beginning his historic voyage in Vancouver in 1940 and ending it in Halifax in 1942. Within two years of this major success, Larsen navigated the Passage from east to west, thus scoring another "first" by crossing the continent in both directions.

In 1940, desirous of asserting its sovereignty over the Arctic Islands, the Canadian government entrusted the Royal Canadian Mounted Police with the task of patrolling this barren, largely unexplored region of half a million square miles. Corporal Henry Larsen, captain of the R.C.M.P. schooner *St. Roch* and a 16-year veteran of the Arctic, was chosen as a key figure in this dangerous, ambitious, and politically expedient undertaking.

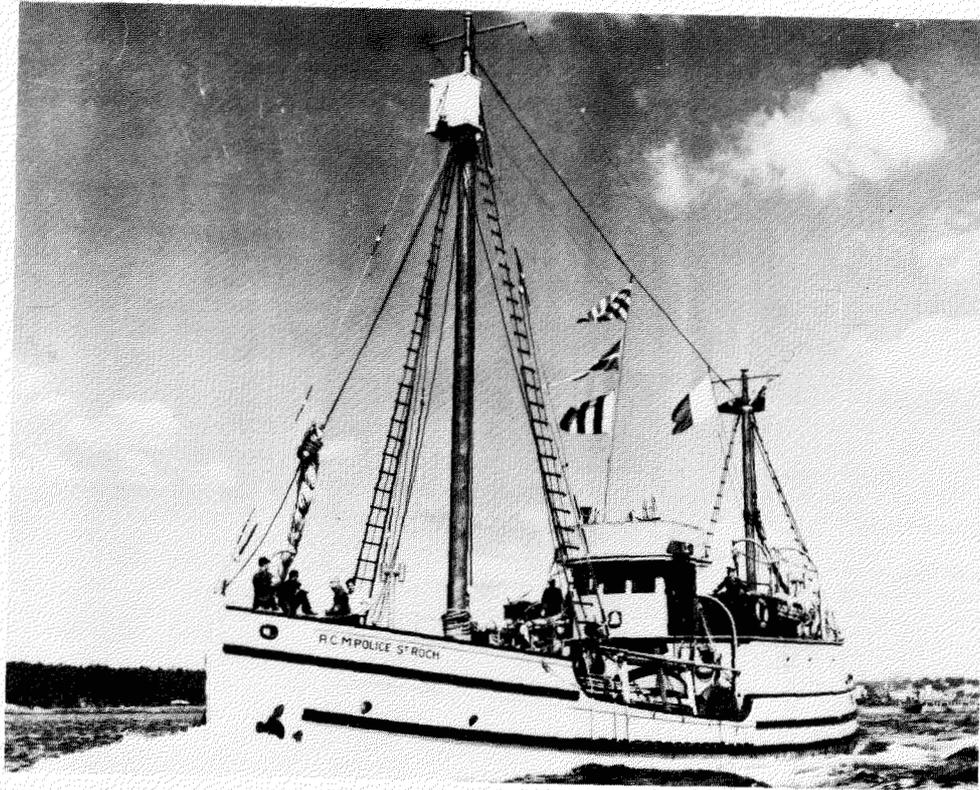
Born in 1899 in the same coastal district of Norway as Roald Amundsen, Larsen early displayed an interest in the history and geography of the Arctic. He yearned for new lands and wished to follow in the footsteps of the great explorers, especially his boyhood hero, Amundsen. Virtually growing up in boats, Larsen truly began his maritime career at the age of 15. Later, en route to Vancouver in 1924, he read of an arctic trader named Klengenberg who wanted a navigator. Henry Larsen applied and was hired on the spot.

Based off Victoria Island, Klengenberg's ship the *Old Maid* plied arctic waters, bringing Larsen into amicable contact with the "Mounties", who often travelled on the *Old Maid* on their way to arctic detachments. When the R.C.M.P. decided, in 1928, to build their own ship, Henry Larsen sensed that his dream might come true. The policeman given charge of the ship was Larsen's friend, and he wanted Henry aboard. By now a Canadian citizen, Larsen applied to the R.C.M.P. and was accepted. In his interview with Superintendent Duffus, Larsen confessed to knowing very little about horses, perhaps a serious shortcoming for a position in the "Mounted" Police. But to Henry's surprise, Duffus directed his sergeant-major to "make sure that this man does not get near a horse for a while. He is too valuable to us to become hospitalized now."

The solid, 104-foot *St. Roch*, equipped with a 150-horsepower diesel engine, was one of the last wooden ships to challenge the arctic ice. Her round bottom, designed to escape ice pressure, sent her bucking and heaving in a gale like a bronco, as one constable described it while he was still able to speak. Larsen called her the "Ugly Duckling" and declared her the most uncomfortable ship he had ever travelled in, but he quickly came to love her versatility. The ship's cramped quarters, spartan food, and unseemly behaviour in a rough sea, Larsen asserted with a smile, were no match for the *esprit de corps* of the R.C.M.P.



Courtesy of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Neg. no. 963.



Courtesy of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Neg. no. 1061-1.

Larsen's first 12 years aboard the *St. Roch* were a long string of successes. He plied the icy waters with cargo and personnel in the summer; in the winter, he undertook lengthy dogsled journeys, all a part of the R.C.M.P.'s versatile police work. He became known for his ability to navigate ice-choked and uncharted waters, but the modest Larsen credited his devoted crew for the *St. Roch's* success. In police work, he showed a remarkable sensitivity to native culture, born of a cruel environment and often colliding with the laws of the white man. He admired the natives' cheerful outlook and undaunted struggle to survive, and accepted their well-intentioned — though frequently unsanitary — hospitality with the gentleness of a saint. Hanorie Umiarpolik (Henry with the Big Ship) was the true friend of Canada's native people. He was, however, displeased with the effect of the white man's attempts to "civilize" them.

But it is for his navigation of the Northwest Passage in the 1940s that Henry Larsen will be remembered. On his first crossing, ice conditions were at their worst. Enormous ice floes in M'Clintock Channel and Franklin Strait blocked the *St. Roch's* advance for two consecutive years and upon two occasions nearly crushed the ship. Finally, Larsen managed to reach Bellot Strait and the open waters to the east. On the return trip in 1944 through Lancaster and Melville sounds and Prince of Wales Strait, ice conditions were much improved and the entire trip from Halifax to Vancouver was completed in three months.

Larsen's dedication to arctic work was unswerving. Over an eight-year period he took but one short trip south "to get mar-

ried and learn to walk again with ordinary shoes." He was promoted to staff sergeant after the first crossing, commissioned with the rank of inspector after the second, and later made a superintendent. He especially cherished the Patron's Gold Medal and an Honourary Fellowship bestowed upon him by the Royal Geographical Society of London for his outstanding achievements in the field of exploration. He received the Massey Medal from the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and his name is immortalized in Larsen Sound, the body of water between James Ross Strait and Franklin Strait, the place where he and his crew miraculously escaped death.

Larsen remained in the R.C.M.P. until his retirement in 1961, when he moved with his family to Vancouver. After a brief illness, he died there in 1964. Through his outstanding efforts, the voyages of the *St. Roch* put the final capstone on the centuries-old search for the elusive Northwest Passage.

#### FURTHER READINGS

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