



The Arctic Adventures of the *Thetis*

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The *Thetis*, one of most famous Arctic ships was built as a whaler in Scotland in 1881, and served with distinction in the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, and the U.S. Coast Guard on many an Arctic voyage, before ending her days as a Canadian sealer in 1950. Her sixty-nine years of travels took her from the polar wastes of Greenland to the lush tropics of Hawaii, and from the barren tundra of Siberia back to the frigid waters of Newfoundland.

The 1,250-ton, wooden-hulled, steam whaler, measuring 188½ feet (57.5 m) long and 29 feet (8.8 m) in the beam, and with a draught of 17 feet 10 inches (5.2 m), had been built by Alexander Stephen and Sons of Dundee, Scotland (U.S.R.C.S. 1913; Nelson 1971 p. 77; Riley 1976). No doubt the shipwrights christened the *Thetis* with the customary ceremony as, with her brightwork shining and teak woodwork glistening, she slid down the ways and floated out into the placid waters. Few, if any, who witnessed her launching could have imagined the long and chequered career that she was destined to have in Arctic waters.

The launching of the *Thetis* coincided with a flurry of international interest in the Arctic. On 3 March 1881, the United States contributed to it by mounting an expedition to Lady Franklin Bay on the northeastern coast of Ellesmere Island in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. Its ostensible purpose was to participate in the International Polar Year, but its leader, Lieutenant Adolphus W. Greely of the U.S. Army Signal Corps, harboured secret longings to be the one to push the farthest north (Mowat 1967 pp. 161–2; Caswell 1956 pp. 96–106). Both of these goals were realized, but mishaps plagued this American expedition. The worst of them, since it doomed the members to deprivation and eventual starvation, was the sinking of the relief ship, the steam whaler *Proteus* on 23 July 1883, and the sailing away of her escort, the U.S.S. *Yantic*, without caching any provisions.

No sooner did word of this disaster reach the United States, than the Greely Relief Expedition was organized. It acquired international significance when Great Britain donated the *Alert* to assist the searchers. Next, the United States purchased the steam whaler *Thetis* for its Navy, as only vessels specially constructed to operate in Arctic ice could stand a chance of reaching any survivors. The expedition's leader, Commander Winfield S. Schley, U.S.N., assumed command of his squadron on 8 February 1884. He had at his disposal the newly commissioned U.S.S. *Thetis*, which he selected as his flagship, the *Bear*, and the *Alert*, as well as the collier *Loch Garry* for logistical support.

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Schley immediately set sail northward, picking up the necessary dog sleds, teams and drivers in Greenland. Leaving the *Alert* and the *Loch Garry* to follow at a more leisurely pace, he ordered, on 29 May, his flagship *Thetis* and the *Bear* to push on with all possible speed, ramming whenever needed a passage through the ice-infested waters. In this manner, he made his way up the coast, pausing only long enough at likely spots to land reconnaissance parties to seek out any signs of the Greely expedition or to question the Eskimos.

Relentlessly, Schley pushed northward through polar gales and ice-choked waters, for he knew that time was all important if lives were to be saved. Nor did his determination falter during the month-long futile search. Finally, persistence paid off. In the midst of a howling gale, as Lieutenant Greely later recalled (Caswell 1956 pp. 111–2):

By the morning of the 22nd we were all exhausted, and it was only through the energy of Frederick or Brainard, I do not remember which, that we obtained, about noon, some water. That and a few square inches of soaked seal-skin was all the nutriment which passed our lips for forty-two hours prior to our rescue. . . .

Near midnight of the 22nd I heard the sound of the whistles of the *Thetis*, blown by Captain Schley's orders to recall his parties. I could not distrust my ears, and yet I could hardly believe that ships would venture along that coast in such a gale.

The *Thetis* had arrived just in time, for only seven pitiful survivors out of the Greely party of twenty-six still remained alive. None, according to a doctor in the rescue squadron who promptly examined them, could have lasted more than a few days longer.

On her return trip to civilization, after having forced her way through over 1,300 nautical miles (2,400 km) of ice, the *Thetis* touched at St. John's, Newfoundland, and New York to tumultuous welcomes, before coming to anchor at Portsmouth, Virginia, where the U.S. Atlantic Fleet greeted her by "having dressed ship with every available flag and pennant" (Caswell 1956 p. 113).

Ironically, the U.S. Navy rewarded the ships of the Greely Relief Expedition by selling them off. Only the personal intervention of the Secretary of the Navy saved the *Thetis* from such a fate. She remained a U.S. Navy vessel, but remained in an out-of-commission status in the New York Navy Yard until 1887, when she was reactivated and assigned to duty in Pacific waters (Nelson 1971 pp. 22, 77; Riley 1976).

Although now fitted out as a gunboat, the *Thetis* primarily performed survey work. For eleven years, she cruised or surveyed from Central America to as far north as Alaska. During 1891 and 1892, she surveyed proposed cable routes between California and Hawaii. Then, in 1898, the U.S. Navy again decommissioned her, placing her into what would be known today as the "mothball fleet" at Mare Island, California. Strangely enough, the reason for her subsequent recall to active service was an animal — the Asiatic reindeer.

The idea of introducing the reindeer from Asia to Alaska had its genesis on King Island in the Bering Sea. One day in 1890, Captain Michael ("Hell Roaring Mike") A. Healy, a legendary hero of the old U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, a

predecessor of today's U.S. Coast Guard, brought his revenue cutter *Bear* to anchor there on a routine inspection trip. In sharp contrast to the usual boisterous welcome, they were met by a strange quiet, for only a handful of Eskimos awaited them on the beach. They told the tragic tale of death and starvation in which hundreds of the villagers had perished as a result of excessive drinking of alcohol and indiscriminate hunting (Evans 1949; Noble 1976).

Both Captain Healy and his passenger, Dr. Sheldon Jackson, Superintendent of Education in Alaska and a missionary, were greatly affected by what they had witnessed, a scene that they were to relive several more times on this annual inspection trip. Both felt that, if the Eskimo continued his age-old custom of depending on the hunt, he was doomed to eventual extinction through the machinations of unscrupulous traders and the pressures of white civilization.

During the long days and nights, as the revenue cutter ploughed through the waters of the Bering Sea, the two men discussed the problem, seeking a solution to prevent such incidents from recurring. While doubt still remains as to which of them first hit upon the idea, both Healy and Jackson hammered out a plan aboard the *Bear*.

The solution, it turned out, rested just a few short miles away on the shores of Siberia, where the native Chukchi gained their food not by hunting, but by herding reindeer. Basically, Healy and Jackson planned to import reindeer from Siberia to Alaska and teach the natives how to care for the animals, thereby ensuring a year-round supply of food. While Jackson would use his influence in Washington to raise the money needed to put this venture into operation, Healy would transport the reindeer aboard the *Bear*. Since both he and his cutter were well known to the Chukchi, Healy foresaw no problems in purchasing the necessary seed stock (Evans 1949; Hunt 1975).

Fortunately, sympathetic ears listened to the pleas of Jackson and Healy. As a result, the revenue cutter *Bear* transported the first load of reindeer the same year, 1890. Thereafter, each year until 1906, when the Russian government prohibited any further trading with the natives, revenue cutters brought reindeer to Alaska. From the initial herd of seventeen in 1890, the number of reindeer in Alaska grew to over half a million at the outbreak of the Second World War.

Other, more traditional, missions assigned to the *Bear*, however, took priority over the transporting of reindeer. On 31 January 1899, therefore, W. T. Harris, U.S. Commissioner of Education, found occasion to complain that "the duties devolving on the cutter *Bear* during the coming season are so pressing that the vessel will be unable to give any time to securing of reindeer" (Jackson 1900 p. 126). After making his point that the transporting of reindeer to Alaska was of "the utmost importance", he urged the Secretary of the Interior to arrange for the necessary money to secure the transfer of the out-of-commission *Thetis* from the U.S. Navy to the Treasury Department and to operate her for six months (Jackson 1900 p. 127). Within just two months, a Sundry Civil Bill was approved by the U.S. Congress (Jackson 1900 p. 130) which had the express

... purpose of repairing and defraying the running of the United steamer *Thetis* for a period of six months, said vessel to be used as a revenue cutter,

and to perform service for the Department of the Interior in procuring reindeer and transporting them to the coast of Alaska, twenty thousand dollars, and the Secretary of the Navy is hereby authorized to transfer said vessel to the Treasury Department.

Mere days later, on 16 March 1899, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service accepted the *Thetis* "with steam launch, quarter boats, sails, blocks, running gear, compasses, and other belongings" (U.S.C.G. [1935] p. 39). Once fitted out, the new revenue cutter sailed on 26 May for Seattle to pick up barter goods for the Siberian natives. There, the commanding officer of the *Thetis*, First Lieutenant Albert Bruhner, U.S.R.C.S., presumably following Dr. Jackson's advice, secured "tobacco; powder; shot; steel traps; calico; duck; large case knives; a little flour; a few boxes of pilot bread; a box of tea, with the tea in small paper packages; some tin plates and cups; also, cheap iron spoons" (Jackson 1900 p. 131).

Departing on 13 June, the *Thetis* slipped through the waters of the North Pacific, while her crew performed the duties required of all salt water sailors, as well as the additional and unique task of "making hobbles for reindeer" (Log 1899). She dropped her "hook" off Saint Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea on the morning of 10 July. The same afternoon, the officer of the day logged that the following trade items were purchased: "16 bolts white drill, 14 blankets, 15 large brass kettles, and 22 small brass kettles". After the stowing of the new cargo, the *Thetis* weighed anchor and headed for Siberia.

The cutter was at nightfall on the following day "anchored in Lutki Harbor" — which, from the position indicated (65°40' N, 171°12' W) is probably the present Zaliv Lavrentiya. The next morning, Lieutenant Bruhner dispatched "an officer on shore to purchase reindeer". This person, Second Lieutenant Harry G. Hamlet, U.S.R.C.S., proved so adept at dealing with the natives that he eventually ended up handling all future negotiations with them. The ship's carpenter, meanwhile, had begun "building troughs and reindeer pens" for the live cargo (Log, 13–14 July).

After receiving "on board 14 reindeer for transportation to Alaska", in the early morning hours, the *Thetis* slipped her anchorage and arrived at Cape Prince of Wales, Alaska, in the afternoon (Log, 15 July). The next day, she continued on to Point Spencer for a meeting with Dr. Jackson. On 19 July 1899, according to the Log:

Lieut. Hamlet and Dr. Jackson went ashore on land spit to determine advisability of landing reindeer there, returning . . . with information that deer could be landed and cared for . . . heaved up anchor and steamed into Port Clarence coming to at 1150 . . . 1230 lowered three boats and commenced hobbling reindeer and loading them into boats . . . boats in charge of Lieut. Hamlet and accompanied by Dr. Jackson left ship and landed deer in good condition. Scrubbed boats ashore.

Within 24 hours, the cutter was again on her way back to Asia for more reindeer but, this time, with a native interpreter by the name of Chio aboard. Six more times, during her first cruise under the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service ensign, the *Thetis* made this passage between the two continents (Log, 11 July–26 August).

In Fig. 1 (official photograph of U.S. Coast Guard) the *Thetis* is seen in Alaskan waters, still not in the light colours of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service.

FIG. 1.



As the cutter neared the shore, where reindeer could be purchased, her watch began making hobbles of ropes and gathering lumber for pens. Upon anchoring, Hamlet, Jackson, and Chio would go ashore and begin bartering. Once the bargain was sealed, the watch immediately put "up reindeer pens and covered deck with ashes" and ran out the ship's small boats to the beach where the herd had been driven by the natives (Log, 29 July).

Then, in what must have been a wild melee, the reindeer were roped, hobbled, and man-handled into the small boats (Fig. 2). Pulling alongside the ship, the small boats unloaded their strange cargo by means of block and tackle onto the cutter (Fig. 3). One short sail between continents, and the whole process was reversed. No sooner were the reindeer safely ashore in Alaska, than the crew turned to and "took down reindeer pens and washed deck" and cleaned the boats (Log, 23 August).

Not always did this operation run smoothly, as the few following instances demonstrate. Once, Hamlet went ashore, only to learn "that no reindeer could be bought from the large herd nearby because illness in the family of the owner prevented by native superstition" (Log, 20 July). On other occasions, he rowed ashore only to find that the reindeer herds were too far inland. All too often, even when the herds were close by, the natives "refused to go after the deer unless furnished whiskey which was not done" (Log, 23 July). Ironically, one day, the natives delayed the reindeer drive until "after the heat of the day"; the thermometer aboard the *Thetis* read all of 68 degrees (20°C) at this time (Log, 28 July). To top everything else off, the officer of the day "sounded alarm of fire", only

FIG. 2.



to find "port gangway being closed for reindeer pens and deck filled with natives, interfering with manning and working of pumps" (Log, 24 July).

Despite all these difficulties, plus many others, the *Thetis* transported 81 reindeer, steamed 8,552 nautical miles (15,847 km) in a season that "was exceptionally inclement, high winds and thick fog prevailed", and successfully completed her mission (Bruhner 1899). Then, she shaped a course for San Francisco, arriving there after many stops on 30 September 1899 (U.S.C.G. [1935] p. 39).

Thus ended the first voyage of the *Thetis* under the temporary control of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service. In his official report on this unique cruise, Lieutenant Bruhner praised all his officers, but singled out Second Lieutenant Hamlet for special praise, stating that this "officer tramped miles of Tundra", handled all the bartering, and "it is but just to say that without his help the reindeer bought could not have been obtained" (Bruhner 1899). No doubt, this laudatory mention so early in the career of this young officer in the official dispatches played a significant role in his later selection as Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Somehow, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service now contrived to convert its temporary control of the *Thetis* into a permanent one. In short order, the sister ship to the *Bear* appeared as a regularly commissioned vessel of the Service. Her value to the increasingly important Arctic operations of the United States can be ascertained from a perusal of the orders directing the seasoned polar veteran to San Francisco in April 1900, where 50,000 dollars would be expended "for necessary repairs" (U.S.C.G. [1935] p. 39).

Not surprisingly, the year following her reconditioning, the *Thetis* was ordered to Alaska. Each year thereafter until 1916, except for another brief period of out-of-commission status from July 1905 to April 1906, she received similar

FIG. 3.



operational instructions, her homeport shifting between San Francisco, Port Townsend (Washington State) and Honolulu (U.S.C.G. [1935] pp. 39–42). Her primary duties in Alaskan waters were with the Bering Sea Patrol.

Those ships assigned this patrol carried on a traditional U.S. Revenue Cutter Service mission dating back to 1867, when the revenue cutter *Lincoln* rushed north to survey the new United States territory of Alaska, just purchased from Russia. They performed a variety of duties, among them being the protection of the fur seal against illegal poaching, the capturing (or deterring by their armed power) of smugglers, the recording of scientific observations, acting as floating platforms for the official functions of other governmental agencies, the furnishing of medical aid to the natives, and the rendering of assistance to shipwrecked mariners. In many instances, the visits of these revenue cutters provided the only contact of the inhabitants of coastal Alaska with the U.S. federal government.

Such duties in the fog-shrouded waters of the Bering Sea were at best dangerous and, as one U.S. Revenue Cutter Service officer recalled, “isolated duty. Very much away from the ordinary civilized life of the United States” (Noble 1975). Not a few revenue cutters ran afoul of the poorly-charted waters of the Bering Sea and its extremely changeable weather. The *Thetis*, for example, “lost her jibboom, fore-topgallant mast and yard, and part of the foretopmast, the rigging and gear of the spars, a part of her radio antennas” during a heavy gale in 1912 (U.S.R.C.S. 1912).

Beginning in 1905, the *Thetis* began venturing through the Bering Strait and into the polar regions. Previously, the *Bear* had by tradition made this northern cruise but, that year, “showing her age, . . . had been forced to retreat from the Arctic before performing her mission to Point Barrow. *Thetis*, a bit older, but

having led an easier life, was recalled from her station in Honolulu and sent to the yards . . . in preparation for the . . . Arctic cruise" (Hottel n.d.). Her ability to manoeuvre in the ice fields was never in question for, in "working through the ice", boasted a senior officer of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service with many years of Arctic experience, "the *Thetis* has no superior afloat" (Healy 1902).

The 1906 Arctic cruise of the *Thetis* was representative of the others that she made in the polar regions. Leaving the Bering Sea Patrol headquarters at Unalaska (54°N, 166°30'W) on the Aleutian Chain, the revenue cutter began picking her way northward towards Nome, Alaska. "The *Thetis* . . . adhered to her established routine", one crew member later recalled, "and met with nothing unusual. The Commanding Officer performed marriage ceremonies at various stops" (Hottel n.d.). After stopping at Nome long enough to be sworn in as both the Deputy U.S. Commissioner and the Deputy U.S. Marshal, Hamlet began working his revenue cutter further northward.

At what is now Cape Lisbourne, Alaska, the *Thetis* met (see Hottel n.d.)

. . . both the real Arctic and the Native on his home ground . . . , the former with its restless burden of ice and the latter with his oomiak — the family boat. Navigation changed its course from point to point, turning and twisting through irregular masses as only ice can do. . . . Almost three weeks of backing and filling were required to make it to the lee of Point Barrow. . . .

There, beset in the ice, were five whaling ships. Hamlet immediately dispatched his ship's doctor to check on the physical health of their crews, as well as the sanitary conditions aboard the stranded whalers. Next, he sent his executive officer to see if the Norwegian exploring ship *Gjoa*, reported to be only twelve miles away and stuck in the ice, needed any assistance. As it turned out, the little exploring ship decided to hoist sail the following day and, by taking "advantage of the fair wind", managed to escape from the ice pack by sail power alone. Meanwhile, a sharp-eyed cutterman had spotted a dead whale nearby. The *Thetis* promptly "steamed out to get the carcass as food for the natives and returned with it and grounded it off the village" (Hamlet 1906).

While at Point Barrow, Captain Hamlet performed more marriage ceremonies and dispensed justice. One case involved the master and first mate of the whaler *Beluga*, who were fined for committing adultery. In many other "suspicious cases" Hamlet found that he lacked "enough evidence to convict", so he "called in" all the whalers and gave them a stern "warning", hoping this would deter them from future illegal acts (Hamlet 1906).

At the end of two weeks, the *Thetis* slowly retraced her course back to Nome. Then, she set a course for San Francisco, arriving there on 14 November, interrupting her passage only long enough to search unsuccessfully for the British ship *Inverna* that had been reported missing (U.S.C.G. [1935] p. 40).

Towards the end of her career as part of the Bering Sea Patrol, the *Thetis* "did but little patrolling in the sea, her principal duty being in connection with the United States court transporting the latter to such places as it was necessary for the court to visit" (U.S.R.C.S. 1913 p. 96). To her fell the duty of a "floating court" for, because of extreme isolation, the Bering Sea Patrol had to provide

waterborne transportation for the judges and their staffs to the various settlements along the coast of Alaska.

Typical of these judicial cruises was the one that the *Thetis* made in 1911. While the revenue cutters *Rush*, *Manning*, *Bear*, and *Tahoma* searched the Bering Sea for seal poachers, the *Thetis* began her leisurely passage up the Alaskan coast. At Juneau, she picked up the "floating court", consisting of a judge, an Assistant U.S. Marshal, a clerk and a stenographer. After touching at Unalaska, she continued on to Naknek (58°44'N, 157°05'W), taking aboard a prisoner and a witness for transportation to Nushagak (58°50'N, 158°32'W) on Bristol Bay in the Bering Sea. Here, at the largest canning factory town in the area, a grand jury made up of Captain C. S. Cochran, commanding the *Thetis*, who acted as jury foreman, and two other cutter officers, conducted "considerable investigations . . . in the week that the court was in the town" (U.S.C.G.M. 1930). The cases tried dealt not only with poaching, but murder, arson, assault with a deadly weapon, and selling liquor to the natives.

Once the business was finished at Nushagak, the "floating court" returned to Unalaska, where it convicted four Japanese of poaching and sentenced them to prison terms, before continuing on its coastal progress. Finally, the judicial cruise ended for the *Thetis*, which by this time had been turned into a floating jail. After depositing both her prisoners and the "floating court", the *Thetis* returned to other, more service-connected, duties. But, it was through the *Thetis* and other Bering Sea Patrol cutters that a semblance of order — a veneer of civilization so to speak — was brought to the more isolated regions of the frontier settlements along the Alaskan coast.

By 1913, the *Thetis*, "being over 31 years, has outlived her usefulness", read an ominous entry in an official report of her service, "as it would cost considerable to put her hull and machinery in first-class condition" (U.S.R.C.S. 1913 p. 79). The old Arctic veteran, however, hung on for another three years before the following entry appeared in the official records: "Placed out of commission at San Francisco" (U.S.C.G. [1935] p. 42).

After being sold in 1916 by the U.S. Coast Guard, the successor to the Revenue Cutter Service, the *Thetis* worked out of Newfoundland as a sealer for the next thirty-four years. Some idea of her capabilities in this line of business, despite her advanced years, can be gained by the size of her seal catches for the years 1917-1923, an impressive total of 116,619 seals (Maunder 1950).

Finally, in 1950, at St. John's, Newfoundland, her inevitable end — unique though it was — came. After her figurehead had been detached and "any fittings useful were used by other ships of the sealing fleet, then the hull was turned over to the public for firewood with the result the police had to be called to quell the riot". What still remained of the *Thetis* "was towed outside of St. John's to Freshwater Bay (about 2 miles) and she was grounded and so remained until she broke up" (Maunder 1950).

Thus, ignobly, yet with her customary flair for the unusual, did this gallant old Arctic veteran pass from the maritime scene. Only her figurehead, faithfully preserved by a museum in Newfoundland, remains to remind anyone of her passing (Nelson 1971).

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