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A voyage into the history books

Des Moines man recalls 1957 sailing of fabled Northwest Passage

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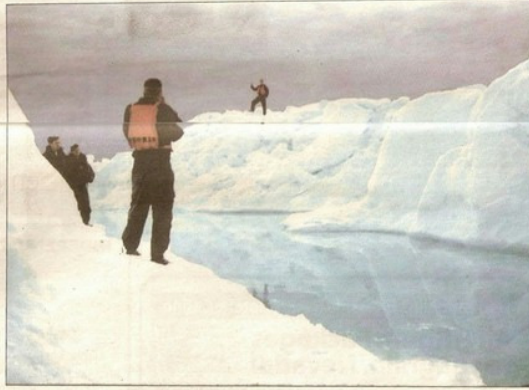
When Bernie Merrifield enlisted for duty in the Coast Guard, he was thinking more about a college education than a place in history.

Five wound up granting him both.

Merrifield was a high school graduate from Portland when he joined the Coast Guard in 1954. He just squeaked past the closing deadline for the G.I. Bill, the measure that granted servicemen a college education for serving their country.

"I joined the Coast Guard just a few months before the G.I. Bill ran out," the retired veteran, who now lives in Des Moines, recalled of his youthful ambitions.

And while Merrifield liked the sea and the pursuit of a better life with a college degree, he didn't realize what the Coast



The crew of the Coast Guard cutter Storik, which made history in 1957 by being one of the first three American ships to sail the fabled Northwest Passage, clambers on arctic sea ice early into the voyage. Des Moines resident Bernie Merrifield, who was a radioman on the Storik, took photos of his crewmates, who enjoyed one of the very few times they were able to get off the ship during the historic several-month voyage. Merrifield and his crew received medals for the 50th anniversary of the historic sailing.

Photo by Bernie Merrifield

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Guard had in store for him.

In 1957 he became one of the first American seamen to successfully traverse one of North America's most prized seafaring paths:

The Northwest Passage.

"I remember thinking, 'what the hell were we thinking,'" Merrifield recalled, of those nail-biting moments when the ships in his company became locked for days in the vice-grip of arctic ice.

Evasive passage

Few nautical accomplishments stand out as clearly as the Northwest Passage. From the time North America was discovered, explorers were trying to sail through the continent or around it, hell-bent on establishing trade routes with the rich Asian continent.

All were to fail — resulting in their spouses empty-handed, or worse, dying on some bleak shore from the elements or their own mutinous crews.

One of the worst was the 1845 British expedition led by Sir John Franklin. All 129 officers and crew died after their ships became trapped in the ice, and the crew abandoned the vessels in a futile escape on foot.

The arctic finally yielded a passage in 1906, when Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen successfully piloted his way through the ice-filled seas from Greenland to Alaska.

During the Cold War years in the late 1940s and early 1950s, finding a truly navigable passage through the arctic ice became critical to U.S. military strategy. The DeWain Early Warning Line, a string of military installations in the arctic to detect incoming Russian aircraft, was established in the 1950s. The new superpower in the Arctic required massive amounts of supplies, and ships were the most logical way to get the cargo through. Establishing the Northwest Passage as a navigable route for shipping would be a mission of top priority.

"They knew the passage was there," Merrifield said.

"I loved to ski, but no."

When Merrifield joined the Coast Guard and was trained as a radioman, he had no pretensions of a career in the arctic.

"I loved to ski and everything, but no," he said, when asked if he'd ever had a desire to go north.

But he was shipped out immediately for a polar assignment.

"Then, we were on icebound," he said.



Coast Guard veteran Bernie Merrifield, of home with wife Cheryl, shows his arctic medal he received last month honoring the 50th anniversary of his ship's sailing of the Northwest Passage.

His first ship was the icebreaker *Northwind*, which just out from Seattle in the winter of 1955 on a mission to take soundings of the arctic region, to map the Arctic Ocean floor.

Later, with several arctic cruises under his belt, Merrifield shipped out of Seattle in July 1957 aboard the Coast Guard cutter *Storik*, an icebreaker. Anticipations were running high, as the crew knew they were up for a lengthy stint at sea.

"Joining up with two other Coast Guard ships, the heavy tender *Spar* and the cutter *Brinkley*, the convoy steamed out to not only traverse the Northwest Passage from the west, but to become the first American vessels to circumnavigate the North American continent."

"History wasn't on the minds of the crew as much as it is today," Merrifield recalled of anticipating their mission. "We were a bunch of guys and all we really thought about were gunk. We didn't think we'd be making Coast Guard history."

The most gunk-washing scenario came in the light sea near that moment, as their ships were through the straits and flows of ice.

At one point in late July in



Bernie Merrifield, intrepid Coast Guard radioman, shown aboard the Storik during its voyage through the Northwest Passage.

met some occupants of the north — Arctic foxes, Polar bears, for instance, some members to be found.

On Sept. 8, met by the Canadian icebreaker *HCMV Labrador*, which came through from the eastern side, the three American vessels sailed through the 17-mile length of water known as the Bellot Strait — and into the history books. That final arm of water constituted the last critical segment of the Northwest Passage, and took just two hours to complete.

From there, the three American ships went on to complete the first circumnavigation of the North American continent.

"It was kind of neat," Merrifield recalled of their final leg of the Northwest Passage. "These were helicopters taking pictures of the ships, and a bunch of airplanes."

It was one of the few times during the voyage that Merrifield actually thought about history. The rest of the time it was just another day's work.

Acknowledgment

But Merrifield carried the memories and many photographs of his cruise with him. He went on to marry the young nurse in training he'd met in Seattle during a USO function. Cheryl. They have been married 50 years.

"I don't like him at first," Cheryl said of the young seaman. "He looked like he was too young about himself."

But one thing led to another. "I was between boyfriend, I guess," she grinned and Merrifield eventually popped the question to Cheryl two years after meeting her.

He left the Coast Guard in 1958 and with G.I. Bill help, earned a degree in education at Eastern Washington University in Cheney.

And he continued to talk about his remarkable voyage to the classes he taught for 28 years at Power High School in

Bellevue.

"The history teachers would have me come in and show the slides," Merrifield said. "I showed the kids in my class, too, because it was something for them to do during the final year of high school. Christmas break, rather than just raising hell."

Major reunion

This year Merrifield was surprised to learn his contributions about the Storik, and those of his crewmates, had not been forgotten. At their 50th reunion in Reno, Nev., in September, they received a visit from R.J. Papp, vice admiral of the U.S. Coast Guard and the USCG's chief of staff. Papp presented each of them with Arctic Service medals for their historical voyage.

"That was a surprise to all of us," Merrifield said of the nod of recognition. "At first we just thought it would be a few guys."

It was an emotional moment, which Merrifield waved away with his usual bluster.

"Guys don't do that," he said gruffly and smiled, when asked if there were tears.

Papp reached inside that week, shared his feelings about the voyage, and the opportunity to meet the crewmen who were part of it.

"The Coast Guardmen of the cutter *Brinkley*, *Storik*, and *Spar* who sailed the Northwest Passage 50 years ago, were true trailblazers and worthy heroes," he wrote. "It was proud to recently meet many of the surviving crewmembers and their families, and honored to present them with the Arctic Service Medal for their accomplishments."

Of the speech, the admiral gave, praising them for their efforts, Merrifield said he was surprised to get that kind of attention for doing his job.

"We never thought that much of it, previously," he admitted.

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