



Former Mountie Pat Hunt with from left — Kelli Bryden, Pat Hunt, Kyla Breikreitz, Janelle Hebb,

Brandee Chaboyer and Shelly Stewart. The banner flew on the ship during the voyage.

Resident sailed northwest passage

By Bonnie Bridge

Pat Hunt, a retired Mountie who currently lives in St. James, was part of the nine-man RCMP ship's crew that made history by navigating Canada's famous Northwest Passage.

Their ship was the first to sail both ways through Canada's northernmost waters from Pacific to Atlantic, and the second ship to sail through the Northwest Passage.

Pat Hunt is one of two surviving

members of the crew of the first voyage, and last week he spent an afternoon telling the story to students at Assiniboine School.

Hundreds of Arctic explorers, beginning with Frobisher in 1576 and Henry Hudson in 1610, had failed to find the passage. Its discovery, they believed, would establish a shorter trade route to the fabled riches of the East.

Roald Amundsen was the first to make the trip from east to west -

completing it in 1906 after three years. But Hunt and his shipmates, skippered by Sergeant Henry Larsen, were the first to traverse the passage in the other direction, from west to east, Vancouver to Nova Scotia.

Their expedition has since been hailed as a major Canadian achievement. But at the time, the crew didn't recognize the historical importance of the trip.

"At the time you're doing something like that, you don't think about See SHIP page 4

Ship on secret mission to establish Canadian sovereignty

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it - you're just doing a job," Hunt said.

Their ship, the St. Roch, a small two-masted schooner 104 feet long, set out from Vancouver in 1940. It had a secret mission: to establish Canadian sovereignty over Arctic islands during a time of war.

Ordinarily, the St. Roch served the RCMP as an Arctic supply and patrol boat. She had sailed the Arctic Ocean since 1928 and had spent eight winters locked in ice.

The first trip through the northwest passage took over 27 months.

"It took two and a half

years to go from Vancouver through to Halifax because we were travelling among the very small islands close to the northern mainland. Because those islands were so close together, the ice was not able to break up sufficiently for us to navigate." The St. Roch spent several months of each year locked in ice.

"Two years after the first trip, it was decided that there would be a better channel if the ship went further north where the islands are miles apart." On a second expedition in 1944, the St. Roch made the trip in 86 days.

Today's huge icebreakers have the advantage of airplane lookouts and sophisticated communication systems to gauge conditions and select the best route.

Perilous

"We had nothing like that," Hunt said. Fifty years ago, such a trip was a perilous undertaking. Even as late as the 1940s much of the Arctic's shallow waterways and reefs hadn't been charted. The ship had to contend with fog, blizzards, heavy seas and extreme cold.

During the second half of the trip, one of the crewmen died suddenly of a heart attack. It was Pat Hunt who



The above map shows the route of the St. Roch's first trip through the Passage.

walked and dog sledged a distance of 800 miles to bring the nearest priest to the ship for a funeral.

Today, the St. Roch sits in drydock on the shore of Kitsilano Beach in Vancouver. Parks Canada has restored the ship to her former appearance and offers guided tours.

Pat Hunt is the proud owner of a white and green

banner the St. Roch flew from an upper deck, made out of bed sheets. "Captain Larsen gave it to me as a memento when I left the boat," he said, noting that the banner is front and centre in a photo of the ship used to advertise the St. Roch national historic site in British Columbia.

He left the ship in 1947 to return to police work on the

prairies. In one of the many books that recount the story of the St. Roch, Hunt gets the last word. "If I had not got off the boat when I did, I might have ended up like Ole Andreasen or Rudy Johnsen as far as the North was concerned. There was something about the Arctic that gets into you at some stage and if you ever succumb to it.... There's something about it."