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NORTHWEST PASSAGE

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VHS

C 9193 094



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MISSION: NORTHWEST PASSAGE uncovers the real story behind a WW II mission carried out by a small crew of brave Canadian men, but kept secret for over 50 years.

In 1940, Hitler invades Denmark, and casts his eyes on its far-off colony of Greenland in the North Atlantic. It could prove an ideal refueling point for German U-boats, prowling the sea lanes. Of even greater tactical importance is a mine on the southwest coast of Greenland which produces the mineral cryolite, used in the production of aluminium and essential to the Allied Forces' manufacture of airplanes.

Now vulnerable to attack by the German navy, the mine captures the attention of Ottawa, London, Berlin and Washington. The British and the Canadians quickly agree to send a special force to protect the mine. But the plan lacks one critical element: a communications and support vessel.

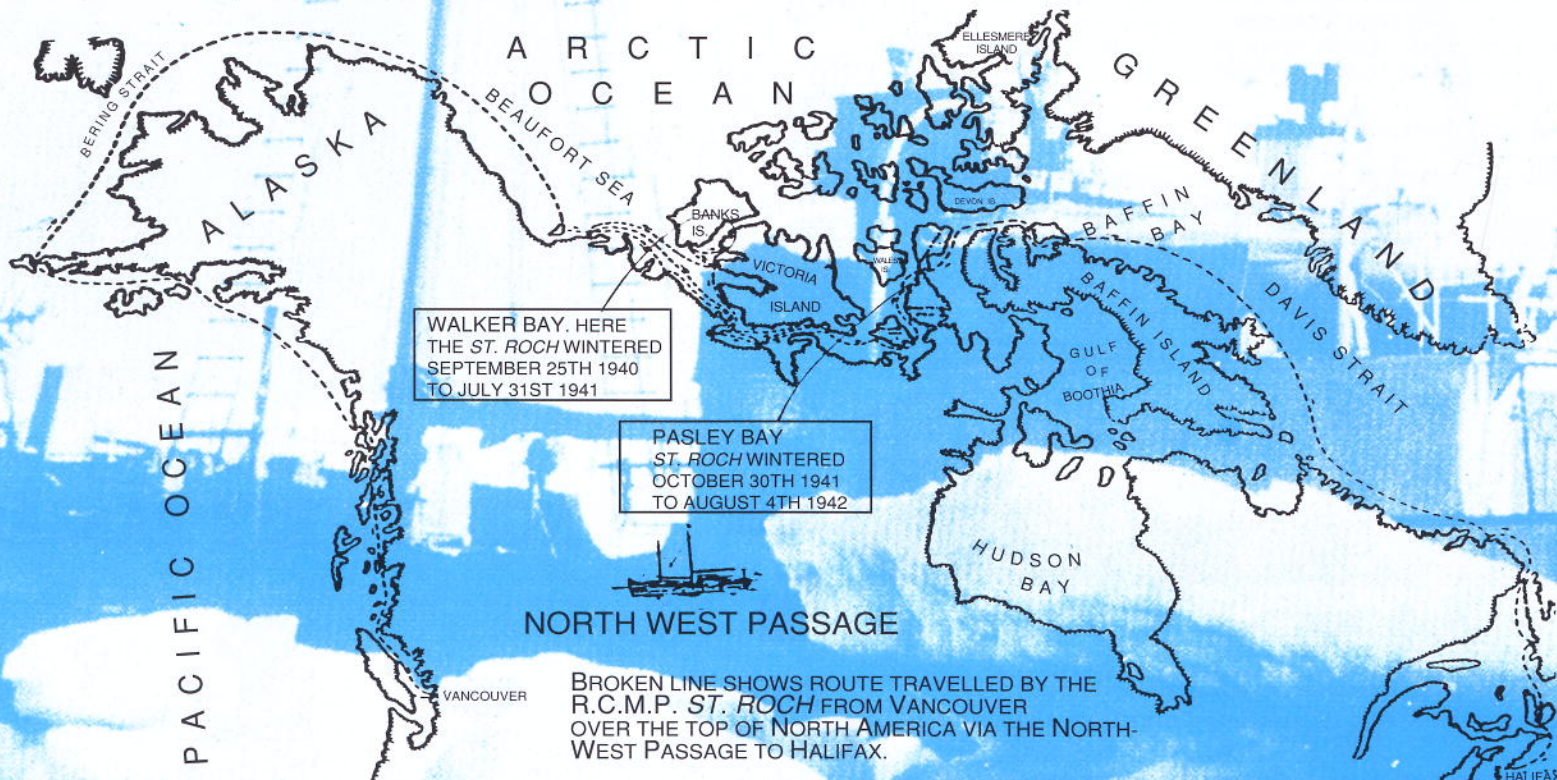
Only one ship capable of navigating the ice-strewn waters off Greenland is available, and it is an unlikely choice: the wooden schooner *St. Roch*, a commissioned ship of the RCMP. Its captain, Sergeant Henry Larsen, is among the world's most accomplished polar navigators.

A mere 104 feet long, the *St. Roch* is painfully slow and powered by a diesel engine with less horsepower than most small cars. The biggest problem, however, is the ship's location. The *St. Roch* is based in Vancouver, on Canada's Pacific coast, over 16 000 kilometres away.

Larsen manages to convince his superiors that he can make it through in 90 days. The *St. Roch* is dispatched under top-secret orders to sail for Greenland. Larsen and an eight-man crew, largely untrained in Arctic exploration, set out to do what no one has done before – to sail west-to-east through the infamous Northwest Passage.

As the *St. Roch* presses its way eastward in what prove to be the worst ice conditions in 50 years, Larsen is forced to stop and winter over in uninhabited Walker Bay. The *St. Roch* is now more than 8 000 kilometers away from home, only halfway to her destination. All hopes of a 90-day passage are dashed.

The men prepare for the long and harsh winter. Travelling by dogsled with Inuit guides, they search out isolated Inuit settlements, taking census and updating maps of the area. Larsen writes in his diary: "The Eskimos are probably some of the most remarkable people in the world. One cannot help but admire them, their helpfulness to one another, and their resourcefulness in hard times."



The men hear little about the war raging on in Europe. "Actually, we felt that we were on top of the world looking down on this thing, and it just wasn't real," remembers Pat Hunt, one of the *St. Roch's* crew members. "Everything was so peaceful up here. Yet three or four thousand miles away, they were bombing the hell out of each other. It was just unreal. Just unreal."

Ten months after being trapped, the journey is again underway. The ship enters the heart of the Northwest Passage. Again and again the ice slows them down, but sheer guts and determination keep Larsen and his crew going. The *St. Roch* is halted in a blinding snowstorm and forced by the huge ice floes into Pasley Bay, where they remain trapped for 11 more long and frustrating months.

With a badly-damaged engine and supplies running low, Larsen makes a last daring attempt to conquer the Passage. In the summer of 1942, he gambles all and takes a shortcut through the narrow Bellot Strait, the most northerly tip of North America. The *St. Roch* barely avoids being crushed by two converging ice floes, escapes into the North Atlantic and sails into the history books.

For Larsen, it is his crowning achievement. Never before has someone led an expedition through the Northwest Passage, from the Pacific to the Atlantic.

In 1944, the *St. Roch* returns to Vancouver in just 89 days. Larsen, sworn to secrecy about their mission, takes it to his grave. Ironically, the full story behind the incredible voyage and its true place in World War II has had to wait 50 years to be told.

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Produced by CineNova Productions Ltd., in association with the National Film Board of Canada, the Canwest Global System, the Arts & Entertainment Network and Channel 4, with the participation of the Ontario Film Development Corporation, Telefilm Canada, and with the financial assistance of the CRB Foundation.

52 minutes
Order number: C 9193 094



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Montreal, Quebec H3C 3H5

THEMES

- Spies, spy ships, classified information
- Leadership and courage
- Teamwork
- Arctic survival and the role of the Inuit
- Canadian/American relations

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before viewing:

1. What is a spy?
2. What do spies do?
3. What do you think a "spy ship" does?

After viewing:

1. What was the situation for the Allies in World War Two when the *St. Roch* was commissioned to make its voyage?
2. Why was Greenland considered to be important for Britain, Canada and the United States in 1940? Compare Canadian and American reasons for interest in Greenland.
3. What was the secret purpose of the *St. Roch* voyage? What was the official purpose?
4. How well prepared were the ship and its crew for the trip into the Arctic?
5. Describe the Arctic environment and its weather patterns during the voyage of the *St. Roch* from west to east. How did the weather affect the voyage?
6. While it took 27 months for the trip west, the return trip took 89 days. How do you account for the difference?
7. What did the crew of the *St. Roch* do to survive the two winters in the Arctic? Why was the second winter more challenging than the first winter?
8. What role did the Inuit play in the survival of the crew during the first winter? Why do you suppose that working with the Inuit was rare prior to this voyage?
9. What qualities of leadership did Henry Larsen display during the trip?
10. What qualities of leadership did Albert Chartrand display? How did his death affect the crew?
11. Why do we have visual records of this voyage? Why were these and other records of the voyage not revealed to the public until just a few years ago?
12. Canada, like many other countries, has an "Official Secrets Act" which keeps information secret from the public for up to 50 years. Is this a good law? Under what circumstances should information be kept confidential? If you believe that all information should be open to the public, justify your view.

Compiled by John Myers, History/Contemporary Studies Consultant,
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AUDIENCE

Ages 14 and up.

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NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Volumes have been written about the Second World War — yet one great mission of WW II has remained secret for over half a century. Carried out far from the battlefields but facing the harsh Canadian Arctic winter as its enemy, a Canadian schooner and its small dedicated crew accomplished an important military mission while the war raged on, an ocean away.

It is 1940. War breaks out in Europe. The Allies are ill-prepared and anxiety grows. Particular concern focuses on the North Atlantic where German U-boats and destroyers are taking a fearful toll. It is agreed that an Allied force must be dispatched to Greenland, a vital strategic island in the North Atlantic. A small RCMP schooner, the *St. Roch*, is given secret orders to sail from Vancouver to Greenland through the treacherous Northwest Passage. Its captain, Sergeant Henry Larsen, is among the world's most accomplished polar navigators, and believes he can make it through in 90 days. But soon he faces the worst ice conditions in 50 years, and is trapped in a life-and-death adventure that will last 27 months, costing the life of a loved and respected crew member.

MISSION: NORTHWEST PASSAGE interweaves never-before-released film footage taken on the original mission, the remarkable eyewitness testimony of the two surviving crew members, dramatic re-enactment of highlights from the voyage, and stunning High Arctic footage shot especially for the program.

Retrace the original voyage, relive its tension and drama, and uncover the full story of this mission, which has waited 50 years to be told.

Director: Christopher Rowley
Producers: Jane Armstrong
Michael Alder (NFB)

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Closed captioned.
A decoder is required.

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