

# Northwest Passage's history marked by dangers, death

July 19 2017, by Frank Jordans

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This 1923 file photo shows the schooner Maud, frozen during winter at Aton Island off Siberia, with which Capt. Roald Amundsen made an attempt to reach the North Pole in 1924. In 1903, Amundsen and six other men set out in a tiny ship, the Gjoa. Sailing from east to west, they drew on the expertise of indigenous Inuit people to brave the dangerous conditions and reached Alaska in 1906. (AP Photo)

European explorers had long speculated about the existence of an Arctic route that connected the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and would avoid the long journey around South America's Cape Horn.

For centuries, able seafarers failed to find the Northwest Passage, among them John Cabot, Henry Hudson, Francis Drake and James Cook.

Harsh weather, thick ice and treacherous shallows forced many expeditions to turn back. Those that didn't ended in disaster, such as the expedition led by British naval officer John Franklin in 1845.

Franklin's men perished from scurvy, starvation and apparent lead poisoning from food tins, with some resorting to cannibalism toward the end. The wrecks of their formidable [ships](#), HMS Erebus and HMS Terror, were found in 2014 and 2016.

Rescue parties sent to find Franklin's expedition made key discoveries about the passage's maritime geography, eventually paving the way for the first successful transit.

In 1903, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen and six other men set out in a tiny ship, the Gjoa. Sailing from east to west, they drew on the expertise of indigenous Inuit people to brave the dangerous conditions and reached Alaska in 1906.

The next recorded transit of the Northwest Passage, this time from west to east, was completed by the Canadian RCMP vessel St. Roch in 1942.



Cmdr. Bill Woityra, manager for domestic and polar icebreaking for the U.S. Coast Guard, right, gives a presentation on the history of U.S. ice breaking aboard the Finnish icebreaker MSV Nordica as it sails in the North Pacific Ocean toward the Bering Sea, Sunday, July 9, 2017. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

Over the years, there have been 410 recorded transits, mostly by Canadian icebreakers and small adventure yachts. The first cargo ship to achieve a [transit](#) was the SS Manhattan, a reinforced tanker accompanied by several icebreakers in 1969.

In 1984, the Lindblad Explorer became the first cruise ship to complete the passage, carrying 104 passengers on a trip from New York to the Japanese port of Yokohama. Thirty-two years later, the Crystal Serenity set a new record, carrying 1,100 cruise passengers through the passage at once.



In this Dec. 6, 1955 file photo, Capt. Roald Amundsen and one of his companions make observations during Arctic exploration. In 1903, Amundsen and six other men set out in a tiny ship, the Gjoa. Sailing from east to west, they drew on the expertise of indigenous Inuit people to brave the dangerous conditions and reached Alaska in 1906. (AP Photo)



In this 1926 file photo, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, left, stands with Lieutenant Undahl, who is his pilot in the attempt to fly over the North Pole, at the doorway to his hut on the Arctic ice. In 1903, Amundsen and six other men set out in a tiny ship, the *Gjoa*. Sailing from east to west, they drew on the expertise of indigenous Inuit people to brave the dangerous conditions and reached Alaska in 1906. (AP Photo)



Researcher Daria Gritsenko looks out toward the American island of Little Diomedede, Alaska, near left, and behind it on the right, the Russian island of Big Diomedede, as the Finnish icebreaker MSV Nordica sails along the international date line through the Bering Strait, Friday, July 14, 2017. The international date line divides the two islands, with Little Diomedede sometimes referred to as Yesterday Isle and Big Diomedede as Tomorrow Island. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



In this May 1926 file photo, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen departs for the North Pole from Norway. In 1903, Amundsen and six other men set out in a tiny ship, the Gjoa. Sailing from east to west, they drew on the expertise of indigenous Inuit people to brave the dangerous conditions and reached Alaska in 1906. (AP Photo)



This Sept. 23, 1986 file photo shows the grave of Able Seaman John Hartnell, a crew member of the Arctic expedition led by Captain Sir John Franklin in 1845, in the permafrost of Beechey Island, Nunavut, Canada. (AP Photo)





In this Oct. 25, 1988 file photo, one of two trapped California Gray Whales swims in a long man-made opening in the Arctic Ocean ice as two native whalers move ice away from the whale as rescue efforts continue near Barrow, Alaska. The whales had been trapped for more than two weeks. (AP Photo/Jack Smith)



In this Thursday, July 10, 2008 file photo, a polar bear walks along the ice flow in Baffin Bay above the Arctic circle as seen from the Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker Louis S. St-Laurent. As of 2017, there have been over 400 recorded transits along the Northwest Passage, mostly by Canadian icebreakers and small adventure yachts. (Jonathan Hayward/The Canadian Press via AP)



Canadian ice navigator, David "Duke" Snider shows the route the Finnish icebreaker MSV Nordica will navigate on a map of current sea ice conditions as the ship sails north in the Bering Sea Tuesday, July 11, 2017. A group of international researchers is sailing into the Arctic Sea aboard the Finnish icebreaker to traverse the Northwest Passage and record the environmental and social changes that are taking place in one of the most forbidding corners of the world. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



In this Tuesday, July 8, 2008 file photo, boatswain Bob Taylor, of Halifax, watches as a box corer is lowered from the Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker Louis S. St-Laurent in the Davis Strait. The device gathers mud and sediment from the bottom of the ocean floor. The Louis is on its annual voyage to Canada's Arctic which will include patrols through the Northwest Passage. In addition to serving the people of Canada's North the ship is carrying a team of scientists studying climate change and the health of Canada's three oceans. (Jonathan Hayward/The Canadian Press via AP)



In this Aug. 21, 2016 file photo, a man stands on the shore of the Bering Sea to watch the luxury cruise ship Crystal Serenity anchored just outside Nome, Alaska. The ship made a port call as it became the largest cruise ship to ever go through the Northwest Passage, en route to New York City. (AP Photo/Mark Thiessen)



Trainee Jussi Mikkotervo looks out from the bow of the Finnish icebreaker MSV Nordica as it sails through ice floating on the Beaufort Sea off the coast of Alaska while traversing the Arctic's Northwest Passage, Sunday, July 16, 2017. Although the passage presents an attractive shortcut for maritime traffic between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, only a dozen or two vessels attempt to navigate the poorly charted Canadian Arctic Archipelago during the brief summer window each year. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



First officer Jukka Vuosalmi sits at the controls of the Finnish icebreaker MSV Nordica as it sets sail in the North Pacific Ocean toward the Bering Strait, Friday, July 7, 2017. A group of international researchers is sailing into the Arctic Sea aboard the Finnish icebreaker to traverse the Northwest Passage and record the environmental and social changes that are taking place in one of the most forbidding corners of the world. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



In this Dec. 14, 1928 file photo, O.T. Brandrud, Pastor of the Trinity Lutheran Church of Oakland, speaks during memorial services for explorer Roald Amundsen at the land anchorage of his former ship, the Gjoa, in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. Amundsen sailed the Gjoa through the Northwest Passage in 1903, a voyage that took three years to accomplish. Norwegian singers are in the background. (AP Photo)

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