

[Northwest Passage 100th Anniversary](#)

Polar Icebreaker Marks Historic Feat by Norwegian Explorer Amundsen in 1903

by Al Martin and John Trone

Aboard USCGC HEALY, August 20, 2003 – The Coast Guard’s polar icebreaker HEALY headed into the Arctic’s fabled Northwest Passage this evening exactly 100 years to the day that Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen sailed here on the first successful crossing of this treacherous waterway.

The HEALY is helping observe the anniversary of that historic transit across the top of the North American continent by sailing from Greenland to Alaska just as Amundsen did in his sloop GJOA a century ago.



The Coast Guard polar icebreaker HEALY now underway in the Northwest Passage dwarfs the Norwegian sloop GJOA used by explorer Roald Amundsen in the first successful transit of that fabled waterway in 1903. The HEALY is shown at anchor off Thule, Greenland, prior to the voyage that will help commemorate the 100th anniversary of Amundsen’s success in being first to sail from Greenland to Alaska over the top of the North American continent.

While best remembered as the first man to conquer the South Pole in 1911, Amundsen's goal in 1903 was to find a northern route from the Atlantic to the Pacific, the dream of explorers for centuries. It had been his dream since boyhood.

The HEALY, which also serves as an Arctic research vessel, entered Lancaster Sound en route to Alaska following weeks of scientific assignments off Greenland's northernmost coast. Projects there included ocean floor mapping, measuring ice movements and ocean currents. During her transit of the Northwest Passage, scientists and engineers aboard HEALY will undertake fish and wildlife surveys, refine sophisticated data gathering systems and observe operations of the icebreaker's unique propulsion system that has made it one of the most versatile and efficient icebreakers afloat. More science lies ahead when the ship reaches the western Arctic.

The 70-foot GJOA (pronounced Ur'ah), with its crew of seven and accompanied by a few icebergs, entered Lancaster Sound on the morning of August 20. The sea and wind were calm. GJOA, her sails limp, cautiously worked close to barren shorelines powered only by a 13 horsepower two-cylinder steam engine Amundsen added when he converted her from a herring boat. A thousand days and 2000 miles later, having fought through ice-choked channels in temperatures averaging well below zero and living off the land with the help of native Inuits, a battered GJOA emerged along the Alaskan coast in August of 1906.

In contrast, the HEALY's transit to Alaska is expected to take about 12 days. In the wake of shrinking Arctic ice fields which have occurred in recent decades, ice conditions may be less challenging than those facing the fragile GJOA 100 years before. HEALY's 30,000 horsepower engines and ice crushing steel hull will also make a difference.

Nevertheless, HEALY Captain Daniel K. Oliver and his crew are aware that the uncertainties plaguing Amundsen and other daring explorers are not all gone. In this frigid and unforgiving region, nothing is taken for granted. For example, even with a daily stream of space satellite images of the weather and seas ahead, HEALY cannot always be sure of sea ice conditions and may from time to time send its helicopters aloft to search hundreds of square miles for the most navigable channels through an ice pack. The best Amundsen could do was climb into GJOA's crow's nest and peer ahead for a few miles at most.

The lengthy search for a northwest trade route linking Europe with the Orient began in the 16th Century. As it turns out, there's more than one Northwest Passage. Ice conditions forced Amundsen into many detours and resulted in his being frozen in for three winters. HEALY will be able to follow a more direct track though it must still weave in and out of the islands of Canada's Arctic archipelago.

Since her commissioning a few years ago, the HEALY has been one of the busiest icebreakers in the Coast Guard's polar fleet. In addition to extensive scientific cruises in the Eurasian as well as the North American Arctic, the ship was dispatched on an urgent mission to Antarctica earlier this year to assist the USCGC Polar Sea with re-supply operations at the U.S. Research Station McMurdo when unprecedented ice conditions threatened to seal off the normal route.

In 1903, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, in the sloop GJOA, began his voyage through the Northwest Passage, the first to do so successfully. This month the U.S. Coast Guard's polar icebreaker/research vessel HEALY is transiting the Northwest Passage on the 100th anniversary of Amundsen's historic feat. Journalist Al Martin and photographer John Trone are aboard to report the HEALY's voyage which is taking the icebreaker from Thule, Greenland across the top of the North American continent to Barrow, Alaska.