

We set sail from Panama and headed for Boston. We arrived in port on May 18, 1941. Up to this time, we had not become involved in the war with military personnel, but some of our ship convoys were on the high seas transporting supplies to our allies. Other convoy duties were to escort tankers and other merchant ships carrying military equipment and materials in safety. News came out of Newfoundland that German submarines were spotted in their waters and the subs were effective in torpedoing some of our freighters. The shipyards were busy refurbishing ships that were eventually used to transport a number of military men, as it was soon apparent that we would be involved in this campaign before too many more months. Many of the vessels that had no guns in place were being rigged with gun emplacements and were being extensively modified for warfare.

It became a necessity to curtail further Antarctic Expeditions for the duration of the war. All personnel were immediately assigned to work on other active Navy tasks. Mine was an assignment with the U.S. Coast Guard to carry out investigations in Greenland.



Some of the men evacuated from the East Base. Joe Healy (with the whiskers) Cmdr. Nemo (far right with glasses).

## Chapter Nine Greenland Assignment Investigate German Infiltration

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In 1941, after Denmark had been occupied by Germany, the Danish minister to Washington, D.C. signed an agreement that put Greenland under the temporary protection of the United States. Although it still belonged to Denmark, the U.S. was given the right to build bases for airplanes, radio and weather stations and "to do any and all things necessary" to hold them. This prevented Greenland from falling into German hands and protected the North American continent from close observation by the "enemy".

One might say, "Surely, such a desolate land could be of no use to anyone in the eyes of the average American;" but it is this icecap and the location of Greenland between northern Europe and North America which made it valuable both as an air base for flights across the Atlantic and as a weather observation post.

The U.S. Government had good reason to believe that some of the trappers and countrymen on the mainland of Greenland were in communication with the German submarines. The trappers were Danish citizens and most were ham radio operators. It was believed that they were informing Germans of U.S. ship convoy movements and also intercepting our coded messages. We communicated with the Coast Guard in Greenland to let them know we were coming in.

On July 4th, 1941, we left Boston. We set sail with Captain Nemo as our new commanding officer of the *Bear*, as Captain Cruzen was given another assignment. Some of the *Bear's* original crew were assigned to other duty, while a few of us remained and other personnel were picked to replace those who left for new assignments. Since the *Bear* was now designated a "ship of the fleet," our complement of men was greatly increased.

I must mention this one fact about the *Bear*. While sailing to this new assignment, we ran into some heavy weather and the *Bear* began to roll to a much higher degree than ever experienced before. Rough seas played havoc with her timbers and we were within inches of capsizing. There were more experienced seamen than I aboard that ship, and they were just as frightened.

We finally reached Greenland, and I can truthfully say that I have never been as cold as I was in that land. By comparison, the snow on Antarctica was dry as powder; this snow was moist and packed. It was wet and cold to work in. We had sailed up and down the fiords and the winds that blew were almost unbearable. There were a number of small mining towns that mined a product called cryolite, which is used in manufacturing aluminum. We were privileged to visit some of the mines.

The Greenlanders are a friendly people. They are of both Danish and Eskimo descent. This was a new experience for me in this new Naval career of mine, and I had not counted on sailing to the land of Eskimos.

The capitol of Greenland is Godthaab. Upernivik on the Central West Coast is considered the outpost of civilization. Ivigtut is on the West Coast. The local inhabitants put on exhibitions for us to demonstrate their prowess at maneuvering kayaks with paddles. They would paddle into the water, roll over under the water and then come back right-side up in the water; then continue to paddle along — right-side up as before. To embark onto one of these kayaks, the boatman would step into a hole in the skin that is stretched from stem to stern and this would accommodate his body snugly inside. It fit so snugly around the waist that the boat did not take on water when rolled in the water. It was a unique observation. To them, this was quite a feat.

They were delighted to please us and would grin spontaneously after one of these demonstrations. Grinning or smiling did not present a pleasing sight, as they had such bad teeth due to the poor diet they had to contend with. We learned later that the purpose for these demonstrations were due largely to entice food from the ship's crew and cooks. The children were always scavenging about for food unfit for human consumption. There were always flocks of them following us about, asking for something to eat. We discovered, to our horror, that whatever the galley threw over the side of the ship was rescued by divers for consumption.

One day, there was great excitement in the village! A school of walrus had been sighted! Walrus was their main staple of food. Immediately, all of the boats and kayaks set into the water toward the "school." Eventually, the boatmen returned to the beach, towing walrus behind them. They were pulled upon the beach, and the natives set to cutting and sharing this morsel with each other. It was another first experience for many on the *Bear*; young and old, alike.

Let's not forget our reason for being in Greenland — to investigate the possibility of Danish trappers collaborating with the Germans by informing them of U.S. ship convoy movements. What better way to begin our investigation than to have radiomen show an interest in the trappers; and the beautiful white and blue fox furs they had trapped. This was a diversion to throw off any suspicion on their part of our investigation. We wanted access to the operations log and to examine their communications equipment. These trappers lived in one room and worked in another — a convenient way for a "ham radio operator" to communicate with the Germans independently and unnoticed. Each trapper had a small fortune in furs and had a three-year contract with fur companies in Denmark, which gave them the freedom to move in and out of their country without suspicion. Each time they returned to Greenland, they would continue to trap and operate their ham radio sets. They were a congenial lot and friendly. It was difficult to judge whether or not they would be persuaded by the Germans to set up a radio station on their land. For that reason, the United States Government wanted to get a close look at their operation and become familiar with their mode of communications.

The *Bear* personnel were assigned by the Coast Guard to patrol around the Greenland coast and the *Bear* very nearly collided with a berg. It was an incident during night patrol. A cloud passed over the moon, creating a darkness. Thus, the berg was completely unseen as we found our ship sailing about 50 yards off the starboard side of the berg. It was as tall as the mast of the ship.

On another occasion, the Coast Guard was patrolling in one of the fiords when they spotted a "coal burner" coming in. It was flying a Danish flag. The Coast Guard suspected Germans aboard and intercepted her. They boarded the ship and found out that Germans were mixed in with the crew and they were planning to set up a radio station in order to monitor U.S. ship movements. We learned also, that German U-boats were "thick as fleas on a dog's back" in this area. They certainly would have benefited in having a station in the vicinity of Greenland. The Coast Guard commander communicated with the Washington authorities and, after much deliberation, it was decided to commandeer the "coal burner" and we had instructions to tow her back to Boston. Unofficially, it was probably the "first spoils of war," even though war had not been declared.

Since the vessel did not have enough coal to propel it through the water under its own power, we had to attach lines to the ship to tow it back to the United States. The North Atlantic was pretty rough at this particular time of the year. There were icebergs in these waters to make it hazardous for maneuvering — particularly while towing another vessel. At one point, we were steaming along when, out of nowhere, there was an iceberg looming up in front of us. With quick maneuvering of the ship, the wheelhouse personnel managed to avoid it. It was so close we could almost reach out and touch it from the deck. Skill is the key word here. To know your job, be alert and meet a challenge head-on. When the Atlantic was turbulent, the Danish vessel would have to navigate under its own power, but after the weather abated, we would have to attach the tow lines to resume the towing operation until we finally reached Boston. (I neglected to mention that we put our own crew onboard the Danish ship to maneuver her through these treacherous waters.\*)

After many days at sea, the *Bear* arrived in Boston. We were wondering what fate awaited the ship we had been towing. Not long after arrival, the Immigrations and State Department personnel were all over that Danish ship with a magnifying glass and fine tooth comb to examine it from top to bottom. It was eventually turned over to them for disposition.

Now that the crew of the *Bear* was back in the United States, our concern was the next assignment — and if it would be on the *Bear*. If not, what would happen to her? It was not long before I had answers to both questions: (1)

\* (Just recently, July 1986, I was fortunate to receive a letter from a former member of the *Bear* who was part of the crew who brought the Danish ship back into the Boston harbor in October 1941.)



The *Bear* lay at anchor in Boston harbor for some time while the Navy was trying to decide what to do with her; (2) I soon found out that orders had come through for me to report to radio school in Anacosta, Washington, D.C.; and to the Naval Research Lab, radio division. This school was for advanced radio training. As it was the latter part of October 1941, we had not yet become involved in war. It was good to have the opportunity for this further training, as it provided me with advanced studies and methods in radio. During this period, I was advanced to First-Class Radioman.

While attending classes at the Navel Research Lab, I met Perce again, months after our Antarctic Expedition ended. He began briefing me on RADAR, and I must admit, it was the first time I had heard about it. It was so secretive that I found out no one in class knew the meaning of the acronym — RADAR (Radio Detecting and Ranging). Not only did I study radio, but was also instructed in this new subject. It was an amazing new development. This was the beginning of advanced communications beyond anyone's dream; anyone interested in the field of communications. It is ironic that while on the *USS Bear*, we thought we were dealing in advanced communications since we were operating in the 16,000 kilocycle area; but, here at the Naval Research Lab, we discovered work was being done in the megacycles. A complete new dimension in communications — and, one that played a very large part in the outcome of World War II.

One day while attending class, I was surprised to see Captain Nemo (remember, he was executive officer of the *Bear* on our second trip to pick up personnel; and later, appointed commanding officer for the trip to Greenland). He walked into the classroom and asked permission to speak with me. Now, this created a stir in the classroom as it was not usual for a commander to walk in and pick a sailor out of class and ask to speak with him in private. As we shook hands, we stepped out of the room. He asked me if I would like to go to the Philippines after this course ended, and I would be under his command in communications. This offer flattered my ego, to be sought out personally for an assignment, and it certainly encouraged me as to my abilities and capabilities. His offer came too late, as I had already decided to go back to Naval Aviation. Naval Aviation was my first "love" and my background prior to joining the Antarctic Expedition. It was just as well that I did not go with him on that tour duty, as I found out later during the war that he and his crew from that particular radio station in the Philippines (NPO) had been taken prisoners of war by the Japanese. I am sure my guardian angel was watching over me this time around.

Also, during that same year — December 7th, 1941 on a Sunday — THE JAPANESE BOMBED PEARL HARBOR! It was the beginning of World War II!

At the end of my training, I left Washington, D.C. and journeyed to the State of Washington where I picked up a squadron. From that point on, I was involved in the war. That assignment is another chapter in my Naval career.

As this is 1988, some 47 years later after the beginning of the war, I have just now chosen to write on a small segment of my Naval career. I must say this; if I were asked the part of my Navy life which stands out most in my mind, I would have to answer, "This period." Picture, if you will, a young man who had come from a small town in Southeast Texas, who had never been very far from home. Here he was very quickly swept up into young adulthood, adventure, inexhaustible experiences, and had gained a wealth of knowledge. He had seen parts of this world he had only read about in geography and history books — and, he helped to make history by his own contributions to this effort. It is his wish that future boys and girls will have learned a little more about that frozen region, Antarctica, by having read his experiences.



Note: Some years after the expedition had ended, the United States Government saw fit to issue silver medals to those of us who had participated in the 1939-1941 Antarctic Expedition. On the back of the medal is inscribed:

"By the Act of Congress of the United States of America to Joseph Austin Daigle in recognition of invaluable service to this nation by courageous pioneering in polar exploration which resulted in important geographical and scientific discoveries"

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