THE NAVAL MUSEUM OF MANITOBA

WHEELHOUSE LOG

Our Mandate: *To Preserve, Honour and Educate.*
Our Motto: *A Look to the Past with a View to the Future.*

FALL 2026

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See also: "A Legacy in Stone" Brochure - "The Prairie Sailor Memorial"

Arctic Adventures:
Transiting the Northwest Passage and the Race for the North Pole



PART I

Origins of the Saga: "Shadows of the Past" – The Search for the Northwest Passage

The search for the Northwest Passage has a long and storied history. Even casual students of Canadian history will recognize some of the names of early explorers in their search for a northern route and shortcut to the riches of the Far East. Out of the mists of time emerges the historical record revealing that the first European ever to attempt to reach the North Pole was a Greek **geographer and explorer** by the name of **Pytheas of Massalia*** (*a Greek colony located at today's Marseille, France) who reached the 70th parallel somewhere between Iceland and Norway in 325 B.C., and thus the first to penetrate the Arctic Circle to describe the Arctic (the "Thule"), the midnight sun and polar drift ice. He scientifically linked the Arctic tides to the phases of the moon and correctly identified that the 'pole star' was not truly at the North Pole. Using a 'gnomon' connected to observations of the sun, he calculates remarkably accurate latitudes for Northern Europe.

Legend has it that the next to venture north were some Irish Monks (*Papar*) who reached 61° north in 825 A.D. to settle in "***Iceland***". They were followed by a Norwegian named **Othere** who reached 67° north in 870, which led to the expansion of Viking settlements in Iceland, and the evacuation of the Irish Monks in the face of the advancing "pagan hoards". Then we fall into more familiar territory for most Canadians who remember some of their history from early school days: explorers such as **Eric the Red** of Norway, who was banished from '***Iceland'*** for murder, who sailed west in 983 to reach 73° north, and discovered and settled '***Greenland***'. From there, his son, **Leif Erikson** ('Leif the Lucky'), sailed west from Greenland on explorations of his own; and his voyage, as documented in the Icelandic ***Vinland Sagas***, describes the lands west of Greenland which Leif called **'*Helluland*'**, '***Markland***' and '***Vinland***'. According to these records, Leif reached North America around 1000 AD, roughly 500 years – or half a millennium – before Christopher Columbus's voyage of 1492. Leif established a temporary settlement at "***L'Anse aux Meadows***" in modern-day Newfoundland; and legend has it that he may have travelled a short way up the St. Lawrence, or even along the coast of Gaspe.

The circumnavigation of the globe by Portuguese explorer **Fernando Magellan's** expedition, 1519-1522, revealed a new southwester route to China, but more importantly, it caused a reconstruction of world maps to conform to this newly acquired knowledge of a 'spherical' earth. Magellan's discoveries initiated intense competition and a series of adventurous voyages to find a corresponding northern "arctic route" to the

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Arctic Adventures
(Continued)

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Far East known as the Northeast and Northwest passages, contested most especially between England and Spain.

As is well known by most elementary schoolchildren, "Columbus sailed the ocean blue, in 1400 and 92"; and although he is credited with the discovery of North America, he actually landed in the West Indies. As far as our story and Canada is concerned, the English **Cabot** brothers, John and Sebastian, reached 62°30' north, and discovered the fabulous fishing grounds off the ***Grand Banks*** of **Newfoundland** in 1497-98. They were followed in quick succession by **Fernandez** of Portugal (61°north) in 1500; the **Willoughby-Chancellor** expedition of England (72° north) in 1553; and then by another Englishman, **Stephen Burrough,** (71° north) in 1556. Now we are getting into the more familiar names of explorers after whom landmarks are named; names such as **Sir Martin Frobisher** of England who discovered '***Frobisher Bay'*** (63° north) in 1576-78. He was followed by the **Pet-Jackman** expedition of 1580 (72° north), then by **Brunel** of Holland (71°40' north) in 1584, and then again by Englishman **John Davis**, 1585-87 (73° north), after whom the '***Davis Straits'*** are named. We could continue like this, year-after-year, decade-after-decade, but now we are going to concentrate on those explorers of some renown that we know best.

Therefore, we skip forward to Englishmen **Henry Hudson** and his son who discovered "***Hudson's Bay"*** in 1607 (81°30' north), both of whom were set adrift in a lifeboat by mutinous shipmates who were disillusioned by their quest. This ill-fated venture was followed by a series of explorers from England, Denmark, Russia, Holland, and Germany, when the **Bylot-Baffin** expedition from England reached '***Baffin Island'*** (78° north) in 1616. Danish-born **Vitus Bering** began his explorations in 1728 ("**The First Kamchatka Expedition"**) for **Peter the Great** of Russia "to determine where Asia ends and America begins" (60° north); and in 1741, he discovered the '***Bering Strait'*** between Asia and North America and then went on to discover what came to be known as '***Alaska***'. **Capt. (N) James Cook** also explored the Pacific coast of our continent (70°41' north) in 1778; and later, **Capt. (N) George Vancouver** picked up where his mentor left off, travelling in tandem up the west coast with the Spanish explorer **Galiano** in 1792**,** only to discover that **"*Vancouver Island*"** was indeed an island as Cook had predicted but had never proven.

Looking eastward for a moment, the first English attempt to find the **Northeast Passage** had been made in 1553 by three ships under the command of **Sir Hugh Willoughby**, but the commander and crews of two vessels were lost. The third vessel, under Richard Chancelor, entered the **White Sea**, and wintered near the site of **Archangel**, thus opening communication between Russia and the rest of the world and initiating the famous ***Muscovy Company*** in 1555.

Skipping forward some years, and looking again westward, the dawn of the nineteenth century saw the spirit of exploration seize the imagination of English mariners, especially for the arctic regions. Following notable discoveries by **Sir John Franklin** by land (1818 and 1819-21) and **W.E. Parry** by sea (1819-20, 1824-25, and 1827), there occurred the last tragic expedition of **Sir John Franklin** by sea. He sailed for **Lancaster Sound** in 1845 with the "***Erebus***" and "***Terror***"; but the ships became locked in pack ice, and the whole expedition perished to a man. The search to determine the fate of Franklin was conducted on an unequalled scale from 1846 to 1853, without success. Thirty ships and land parties were engaged in thoroughly searching the archipelago of North America; sledge journeys of more than ten thousand miles were made, and two ships had to be abandoned, ice-beset. The '***Franklin Mystery'*** was only solved by **Leopold McClintock** who discovered the frozen bodies of expedition crew members in 1859-1860, but Franklin's body has never been found. Following this disaster, a new route was opened toward the pole via ***Smith Sound***. Exploration by **Kane**, then ventures **I.I.Hayes** (1860) and **Charles F. Hall** (1864-69 and 1871-73) reached the Arctic Ocean; and later, advancement toward the North Pole was made by **Greely** (1881-84) and the indefatigable **Robert E.Peary** (1893-95).

Editor's Note: The information contained in this article has been collected and condensed from sources which are considered to be in the "public domain", and therefore no particular author or source has been cited.

Stay tuned to the Spring 2027 issue of the Wheelhouse Log for PART II of this article or visit the Naval Museum of Manitoba's website for the complete article.

The Intriguing History of HMCS Churchill

By J.O. Dawson, Editor



HMCS *Churchill* (later **CFB Churchill**), though frequently associated with the broader **Fort Churchill** military complex, was a vital Cold War signals intelligence (SIGINT) and ionospheric research station located in Churchill, Manitoba. Operating from 1943 to 1968, it served as a crucial northern outpost for tracking Atlantic U-boats and monitoring first Nazi, and then Soviet communication.

Its Origin and World War II (1943-1945)

The station was originally activated on August 1, 1943, as Naval Radio Station (NRS) Churchill. Its primary strategic wartime role was supporting the High-Frequency Direction-Finding (**HF/DF** or "**Huff-Duff**") network to provide a "**U-boat Net**". It tracked German U-boats in the Atlantic and conducted early studies on how the northern ionosphere affected radio signals. Following the end of World War II, during the post-war drawdown, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) briefly closed operations and demobilized the station.

A quick diversion into post-war history is necessary before we proceed. **The Gouzenko Affair** (and "Intrepid's Last Case") began on September 5, 1945, when Soviet cipher clerk Igor Gouzenko defected from the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa with 109 secret documents which exposed a major Soviet spy network operating throughout North America. As a result of this exposure, the Canadian government arrested multiple suspects under emergency powers, leading to the Kellock-Taschereau Royal Commission of Inquiry and numerous trials for espionage from1946 to1949. In the United States, this revelation triggered "The Red Scare" and "The McCarthy Era" and "blacklists" which followed. Thus "Intrepid's" involvement with the 'Gouzenko Defection' marks the dawn of the Cold War.

Churchill's Reactivation and the Cold War (1950-1966)

Once the Soviet threat had been exposed, and recognizing Churchill's strategic location in northern latitudes, the RCN reactivated the original site on December 1, 1950, renaming it **HMCNRS Churchill**. In July 1956, it was fully commissioned **HMCS Churchill**. From this point on it grew in intelligence capabilities to become Canada's largest **SIGINT** intercept station and became part of the Supplementary Radio (SUPRAD) network. Armed with massive rhombic antenna fields and advanced receivers, the station intercepted Soviet radio signals and monitored northern military communications. The station also served as a logistics hub for building the **Distant Early Warning** (**DEW**) Line and supported massive joint Arctic training exercises such as ***Exercise Muskox***.

In November1953, a milestone for women was reached when the first members of the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (**WRCNS** or "**Wrens**") arrived, marking the first time female naval personnel were stationed in northern Canada.

Unification and Transition to CFS Churchill (1966-1968)

In July 1966, ahead of the official unification of the Canadian Armed Forces, the base lost its/her naval "HMCS" prefix and was redesignated as **Canadian Forces Station** (**CFS**) Churchill. (*Quick note*: It is commonly referred to in regional history as part of the broader CFB Churchill complex due to its proximity to the massive Fort Churchill army base).

Inevitably, technological shifts, automation, and military restructuring led to a rapid drawdown of operations; and so, CFS Churchill officially ceased all intelligence and radio operations in June 1966.

Post-Closure and Present Day

In 1971, the Manitoba provincial government purchased the 6.5-acre naval base for **$20,000**. Over the decades since, multiple proposals have been floated to repurpose the elevated, pile-constructed structures into a university, a job training centre, or a nursing home, but none ever materialized. Today, the distinct, boarded-up main structures of the naval station still stand vacant near the railway tracks outside of town, a rusting monument to Canada's Cold War Arctic defense network. But perhaps – just maybe – she will rise again out of the rust and ashes of bygone days, and rise again, like the Phoenix, to once again take her place as a key component of Manitoba's Indigenous, commercial and naval legacy.

Stay tuned to the Spring 2027 issue of the Wheelhouse Log for the next installment.

Museum Log

Some of what has happened at the Naval Museum of Manitoba in the past six months

The volunteers of the Naval Museum of Manitoba continue to work hard to update and improve the Museum's displays to make our visitors' experience that much better.



Another bell was added to the Museum's growing collection of ship's bells. The bell from HMCS La Hulloise is now on display in the Museum.



Work is well underway on an ASDIC hut to display second world war anti-submarine detection equipment, as that equipment would have been configured aboard ships such as HMCS Haida.



The panel displaying medals from those that served aboard HMCS Chippawa was updated to include several more member's medals.

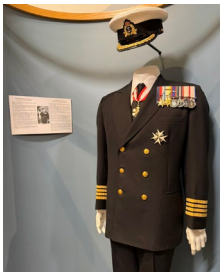


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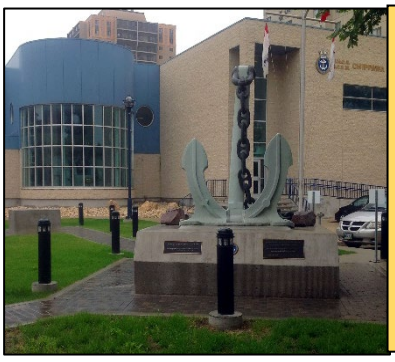


After

Also, the four panel display of medals issued to Canadians since Confederation has been updated to include medals issued since the display was initially created in 2000, and to add labels to better identifying the medals and the era in which they were issued.



Finally, the Hon. George Johnson display was updated to have a poster, detailing his life, and a copy of the Officer of the Order of Canada medal was added to the neck of the mannequin.



The Naval Museum of Manitoba located at
HMCS Chippawa 1 Navy Way Winnipeg

When is the Museum open?

Wednesday 9:00 am to 3:00 pm
School or Group Tours available on request.
Contact: Claude Rivard
Phone (204) 943-7745 Ext: 257-3294
Contact can also be made through the web site
https://naval-museum.mb.ca/

Was a member of your family in the Royal Canadian Navy during WWII ?

All Donations made to the Naval Museum, whether they are naval artifacts or financial donations, will receive a tax receipt for charitable purposes.

For More information call:
Claude Rivard, Curator
Phone: 204-943-7745 Ext: 257-3294