

Snowplow sinks sovereignty patrol

Canada's ability to protect the North is compromised Global warming melting barrier of Northwest Passage

MIRO CERNETIG
QUEBEC BUREAU CHIEF

MONTREAL— Charlie Michalski was dispatched to the High Arctic on a vital national mission. Take his trusty tool kit to an abandoned weather station 1,500 kilometres from the North Pole, where he was to start up an ice-encrusted snowplow and do his part for Canada's sovereignty.



Capt. Ron Marois sends a message via satellite phone to the Canadian Ranger Patrol Group headquarters in Yellowknife from Mould Bay on Prince Patrick Island, from where soldiers, Inuit and Indians usually patrol the Northwest Passage to ensure Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic.

Deep snowdrifts were blocking the runway at Mould Bay on Prince Patrick Island, making it impossible to land a Hercules cargo plane laden with Ski-Doos for soldiers who were to spend a week skimming across the sea ice around the fabled and often deadly Northwest Passage.

The mechanic toiled for days in the Arctic twilight on the machine's frozen innards. Finally, it grumbled to life and started to roll toward the runway. Then, kaboom!

"(Master Cpl. Michalski) got the 'dozer started but on the way down to the runway it blew a piston rod," said Maj. Stewart Gibson, commander of Yellowknife's 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group, which oversees Arctic sovereignty patrols. "It died... I didn't have the funds to bring up military aircraft to repair the damage."

The military was forced to retreat 500 kilometres south, to the inhabited and more easily accessible hamlet of Sachs Harbour on Banks Island, where a commercial runway was working. From that fallback position, a team of about a dozen Canadian Rangers — the soldiers, Inuit and Indians who patrol Canada's north to ensure sovereignty — Ski-Dooed the barren landscape in the first week of April, covering almost 1,000 kilometres.

The defeat received scant attention to the south, where the federal government was celebrating a win in another sovereignty challenge — the Quebec Liberal Party had trounced the separatist Parti Québécois in last week's provincial election. But experts warn that broken snowplow in Mould Bay raises another, equally serious question about Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic, where international pressure may be mounting to open the Northwest Passage to commercial shipping.



"It may seem a bit comical, not being able to fix a snowplow," said Rob Huebert, an Arctic and sovereignty specialist at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies. "But this is a serious issue. The fact that something so minor as being unable to maintain one of our runways stopped a sovereignty patrol is evidence of how much we've ignored the North."

For centuries, the High Arctic's year-round ice, legendary for tearing through ships' hulls, largely protected Canada's north from outsiders craving a fuel- and time-saving route across the top of the world. Even the super tanker Manhattan, in its 1970 transit of the Northwest Passage, suffered holes and the ignominy of needing a push from a Canadian icebreaker.

But in an era of global warming, the ice may no longer be the barrier Ottawa has relied upon to protect Canada's sovereignty.

Since 1970, the Arctic ice pack has shrunk by about 3 per cent every decade, according to Canadian Ice Service reports. It is also getting much thinner — down to two metres in thickness from three metres. Last December, the U.S. Snow and Ice Data Centre in Boulder, Colo., reported the amount of ice cover is the lowest since satellite surveillance began 24 years ago.

"I'm no scientist, but everything I'm hearing indicates we are in a period where the ice is not holding the Northwest Passage in as tight a grip as it did in the past," said James Delgado, director of Vancouver Maritime Museum and author of *Across the Top of the World: The Quest for the Northwest Passage*.

"There's now a longer season when it is navigable to shipping."

That was evident three years ago, when Mountie Ken Burton piloted the RCMP's aluminum catamaran through the passage in 21 days. It never ran into a scrap of ice.

The remarkable voyage didn't get much attention in Canada, said Delgado. But in Europe and Asia, where shipping companies could save fortunes using a northern route instead of the Panama Canal or a route around South America, "people really paid attention," he notes.

Many governments in Europe and Asia share Washington's view that the Northwest Passage is an international strait, connecting two oceans and thus open to international traffic.

"I believe that we'll see a challenge to our sovereignty within 10 years," said Huebert.

Challenges may already be happening. Officials talk about northern UFOs — unaccustomed floating objects — that attest to Ottawa's historically poor surveillance of the Arctic.

Sailboats have been in the passage. A Russian tug used it to take a massive dry-

dock from Vladivostok to Bermuda. Cruise ships see the trip as a potential boon for a troubled industry.

Three years ago, residents of Tuktoyaktuk were astounded to find Chinese sailors in town, snapping souvenir photographs at the edge of the Beaufort Sea.

"The voyage of the Chinese vessel demonstrated the limited Canadian surveillance capabilities," Huebert said. "Canadian officials did not learn of the vessel's entry into Canadian waters until it actually arrived."

Increased shipping in the Arctic also raises the danger of a future environmental catastrophe — particularly if ships of poor quality with no experience in the perilous region try to make the passage.

For most of this century, when the ice held firm, the Canadian government has relied on the Inuit as "human flagpoles" who can mark the country's sovereignty over the Arctic. A half-century ago, many were forcibly moved to the High Arctic to prove Canada used the region and people inhabited the ice pack.

The Canadian military still enlists Inuit and other natives for sovereignty patrols and search and rescue missions.

But if the ice continues to melt, and the Northwest Passage opens up, Canada will need to add a more high-tech surveillance component, from satellites to unmanned drones, if it wants the world to respect it as an overseer of the Arctic, says Huebert.

It won't come cheap. Huebert thinks it could cost Ottawa \$100 million a year to prepare for the years ahead, when the Northwest Passage might be rechristened Panama Canal North.

"It's a lot of money," he said. "But if we do nothing, and spend after the Japanese or Europeans challenge us, then you might be talking \$2 billion to deal with the problem."



[Mail this story to a friend](#)



[Printer friendly version](#)