

Matelot In Mukluks

Navy's Northern Expert Studies
Winter Clothing, Equipment

IN mid-November 1945, at Toronto's HMCS "York," seven young naval officers earnestly discussed a Headquarters signal regarding a three-month special assignment in the sub-Arctic. They knew that from their group would come the man for the job and, with one exception, didn't know whether or not they liked the idea. This one officer had a very definite stand. He wanted the appointment — and quietly hoped that he would draw it. Hope and personnel selection met, and Sub-Lieut. James P. Croal, RCNVR, was the choice. The job: Naval observer on Exercise "Muskox," the Army's ambitious cold-weather training project in the Canadian North.

Today, tall, strapping Jim Croal, a Lieut.-Cdr. (SB) in the permanent force and one of the Navy's experts on northern conditions, remembers this episode as the beginning of a career that has been unique in the RCN. Since that day in 1945, 33-year-old Lieut.-Cdr. Croal has taken part in three major expeditions in the north. He has crossed the Arctic Circle four times and has gone further north than 80 degrees of latitude. He has probably visited more of the Arctic area than any other serving officer or man of the RCN.

Because of his experience in and enthusiasm for the North, he was the logical choice last year for the appointment as RCN representative in the Directorate of Inter-Service Development. Among his duties at DID is the testing of clothing and equipment in Arctic and sub-Arctic conditions.

Lieut.-Cdr. Croal was no novice to the ways of the north when he reported for duty with "Muskox." Ever since high school days in his native Kitchener, Ontario, the Canadian north has fascinated and attracted him. Furthermore, he has an unshakable belief in its potentialities.

He spent summer vacations working as a tourist guide at French River in Northern Ontario. Later, when he graduated, he joined the International Nickel Company at Sudbury, with whom he worked in various capacities for eight years.

His first three years there were spent in research, learning the principles of testing and experimentation. From there he went into production milling, including open-pit work. He learned the use, operation and capabilities of machinery in the rigors of a northern winter. He worked with bulldozers, rock drills, trucks, pneumatic machinery. He learned, too, the vital importance of proper clothing and equipment.

He got more of the same when he took to prospecting a few years later. During all this time he was gaining knowledge and experience which were later to prove invaluable during northern duties with the Defence Research Board and the RCN.

Joined on Lower Deck

Lieut.-Cdr. Croal began his naval career in 1943, when he joined the RCNVR as an ordinary seaman. He was commissioned the next year, and following sub-lieutenant's training at HMCS "Kings," was appointed to the destroyer "Annapolis," later going to the frigate "Orkney." When V-J



Lieut.-Cdr. (SB) J. P. Croal

Day came, he stayed on as a member of the interim force, serving at HMCS "York." It was only a few months later that the opportunity came that opened the way to his unique career.

Exercise "Muskox" began in the winter of 1945 at Churchill, Manitoba, wound as far north as Denmark Bay on Victoria Island and ended up at Edmonton. The exercise lasted 12 weeks and covered over 3,100 miles. Lieut.-Cdr. Croal was the only Canadian naval officer on the trip. His job was to test and observe clothing and equipment used during the operation. But it was not long before previous experience in the north country brought him other duties. He became navigator of his group, and later he undertook another important task.

As "Muskox" started its homeward trek, the spring break-up began to hit the Mackenzie River. Before the personnel and heavy equipment could cross, the river had to be bridged and rafted in several strategic places. In charge of this job — Exercise "Tadpole" — was Lieut.-Cdr. Croal.

With a party of army personnel, he reconnoitered the Mackenzie by plane, pin-pointing the spots for the bridgings. Then, with "Muskox" close behind, he and his advance party tackled the job, finishing it just in time to permit the vehicles to roll unhindered across the Mackenzie toward Edmonton, where they arrived exactly on schedule.

"Muskox" produced some interesting sidelights for Lieut.-Cdr. Croal, most memorable of which was an emergency appendectomy at which he was an assistant. During a stop-over at little Perry River, a young Eskimo in the village came down with acute appendicitis. The army doctor attached to a "Muskox" moving force decided an immediate operation was necessary. He could arrange a make-shift operating room in a trapper's hut but he had no assistants. Lieut.-Cdr. Croal and two army men offered their help — but an operating room assistant is not trained overnight. However, the resourceful doctor found a way.



Same Guy

For six solid hours he briefed the volunteers, carefully rehearsing each phase of the operation over and over again, all the while calling the instruments by layman titles. The scalpel was a knife, hemostats were clamps, and sutures were needles and thread. The operation was a success, with every one of the novices playing his part perfectly. The young Eskimo was well on the road to recovery when the doctor and his "staff" left the village.

A Spell with DRB

On the conclusion of "Muskox," Lieut.-Cdr. Croal was demobilized from the interim force and went to Churchill as a civilian on the staff of the Defence Research Board, carrying out exercises and tests in the surrounding country. These included study of ice conditions, perma-frost, behavior of vehicles and testing of clothing and rations. During his two years at the northern Manitoba outpost, he was accompanied by his wife and two children, all northerners keen enough to rival Lieut.-Cdr. Croal himself.

In the summer of 1948 he was on the move again, this time as a Canadian observer on a US Navy-Coast Guard expedition to Arctic waters (Task Force 80) where he continued his ice and perma-frost studies.

He had one lively memory to bring back this time. He and 15 others became stranded on Cornwallis Island when an unexpected ice break-up cut them off from their ships. Fortunately, an American aircraft touched down a few days later, and the men were flown to Goose Bay, from where they returned to their respective bases, Lieut.-Cdr. Croal going to Churchill.

While on the island, the group had a brush with a prowling polar bear who wandered into their hut one night. The animal's reconnoitering was cut short when an American sailor brought him down with a well-aimed rifle shot. The uninvited guest is now a handsome rug — and a sure-fire conversation starter — in the sharpshooter's home in the U.S.A.

Back at Churchill, Lieut.-Cdr. Croal resumed his testing and experimentation. Then in June 1949 he entered the permanent force of the Royal Canadian Navy and was appointed to his present post in Inter-Service Development, with headquarters at Victoria Island, Ottawa.

But he wasn't in Ottawa more than a few months when he was northward bound again, this time on Exercise "Fish" — a two-man expedition aimed at testing survival equipment in the lake-pocked area north of Churchill.

NOAC NEWS

CAPTAIN J. M. GRANT HEADS VICTORIA BRANCH

Captain J. M. Grant, CBE, RCN, (Ret'd), was elected president of the Victoria branch of the Naval Officers' Association of Canada at the annual meeting in the Officers' Mess, HMCS "Naden."

Other officers elected were: J. R. Genge, vice-president; Captain F. G. Hart, RCN, (Ret'd), secretary; Paul Fecteau, treasurer; and Rear-Admiral (E) B. W. Greathed, CB, (Ret'd), A. M. C. Kenning, H. S. MacDougall, J. Patterson and V. G. Pinhorn, executive members.

In addition to the work done by its welfare committee in assisting ex-naval personnel, the Association last year donated \$300 to the Navy League of Canada (Victoria branch) to be used for the "comfort, welfare and entertainment of naval personnel at Prince Robert House."

SYDNEY EX-OFFICERS FORM NOAC BRANCH

Former naval officers living in the Sydney, Cape Breton, area recently organized a branch of the Naval Officers Association of Canada. Several of them previously had been out-of-port members of the Halifax branch, but it was felt that they could be more useful and active with a branch of their own.

Lieut.-Cdr. Croal has never lost his enthusiasm for the north, in spite of the difficulties and discomforts. At 40 and 50 below a man can freeze his lungs by gulping too much air. Ordinary rubber tires freeze and crack. Food rations freeze solid. But he still likes it.

Lieut.-Cdr. Croal has often found occasion to be thankful for his naval training. The type of communal living he experienced on board ship was good preparation for the living conditions he encountered in huts, igloos and wannegans during his northern jaunts. Other training, like knots and splices, has proved valuable, too.

Last month the RCN's northern expert headed in his favorite direction once again. He was aboard HMCS "St. Stephen," testing cold weather clothing and other equipment in the Navy's weather observation ship on Station Baker, between Greenland and Labrador.

Oscar Merchant is president of the new branch, James Finlay vice president, Michael Field secretary, Jack Radford chairman of the house committee, Robert MacDonald chairman of the membership committee, and Jack Rector chairman of the publicity committee.

The branch begins its operations with 33 members. Plans for club rooms are now being investigated. Willard MacKenzie, past president of the Halifax branch, assisted with the organization.

HALIFAX NOAC HEARS ADDRESS ON RCMP

Assistant Commissioner Robson Armitage, RCMP, who is an honorary member of the Halifax Branch, Naval Officers Association of Canada, was a special speaker at a recent meeting, telling the members something of the scope of the work done by his force.

Assistant Commissioner Armitage, who has served with the Mounties in every province of Canada, described a number of unusual and exciting cases during the course of his address. Rear-Admiral E. R. Mainguy, Flag Officer Atlantic Coast, and Commander F. W. T. Lucas, his Chief of Staff, were guests for the evening.

A series of speakers will address the branch on Wednesday evenings during the next few months.