

# Homage to a Naval Arctic Explorer

## The *Labrador* Monument on Beechey Island

By Season Osborne

The rule when you visit historic sites is to take nothing but photographs. Geologist Peter Croal followed the rule. He took nothing when he visited Beechey Island in September 2017, but he left something—a canister of messages for his father.

**B**eechey Island, in the High Central Arctic, is a historic site. Sir John Franklin’s Northwest Passage expedition overwintered there in 1845–46, and, after 1850, it became the base camp for Franklin search parties. In 1854, an octagonal wooden pillar was erected on the gravelly terrace above the beach as a cenotaph to honour the men who died in the search.

About 20 paces to the right of the Franklin Cenotaph, the crew of Her Majesty’s Canadian Ship (HMCS) *Labrador* built their own monument, or cairn. Unlike Franklin’s ships, *Labrador* successfully transited the Northwest Passage in 1954 — the monument commemorates the event. The five-foot pyramid, constructed of wooden slats, is a smaller version of the navigational beacons built by *Labrador*’s crew and set up along the Arctic’s coastlines.

The navigational beacon at the abandoned RCMP post at Dundas Harbour was set up by the crew of the *Labrador* to help guide ships into the bay. © S. Osborne





Lt.-Cmdr. James (Big Jim) Croal received a personal commendation from the U.S. Secretary of the Navy for his excellent service and support to the Canadian and American navies operating in the Arctic.

© Peter Croal

Known as Big Jim, the 6'2", 27-year-old enlisted with the Royal Canadian Navy in 1943, and served on a destroyer in the North Atlantic. In 1946, he participated in Operation Muskox, an 81-day military exercise that travelled from Churchill to Edmonton via the sub Arctic. It was a dangerous operation, carried out in -35°F conditions with no basic maps, no satellite communications, but using a lot of Inuit knowledge to make the trek. Big Jim learned valuable lessons about Arctic survival on the mission.

"He was one of those quiet, big, capable guys, who didn't blow his own horn," Croal says of his father.

After Operation Muskox, Big Jim was stationed in Churchill to learn about permafrost and work with U.S. military. He also got to know the local Inuit community, which helped expand his knowledge about living in the Arctic. His skills caught the attention of his superiors.

"It was his ability to 'read' ice that got him on board *Labrador*. He was the Arctic expert in terms of survival. He would go ashore with the men as the Arctic survivalist," says naval historian Lieut. (N) Jason Delaney. "The captain, Owen Robertson, wanted Croal on the mission so badly he made him gunnery officer — an odd job on a ship that had no main armaments."

*Labrador* was the first heavy icebreaker built for the Royal Canadian Navy to explore Canada's Arctic waters for sovereignty purposes. Although it was designed as a warship, its main role was as an Arctic research vessel.

On July 23, 1954, HMCS *Labrador* left Halifax on its maiden voyage to rendezvous with two American icebreakers off Melville Island in the High Western Arctic. After surveying in the Beaufort Sea with the American ships, *Labrador* continued south, passed through the Panama Canal, and returned to Halifax on November 21, 1954, making history as the first warship to transit the Northwest Passage and circumnavigate North America in a single year.

*Labrador* carried a team of scientists who collected valuable hydrographic, oceanographic, and scientific data about the High Arctic. Croal says it was ground-breaking to have a Canadian warship working so closely with civilians and the science community.

The ship was also the first icebreaker and naval vessel to carry helicopters.

"Helicopters were indispensable for ship's operations," says Don MacNeil, whose father, Lieut. (P) John A. MacNeil, was a helicopter pilot and officer-in-charge of

Photo of HMCS *Labrador* taken from one of its helicopters.

© Courtesy of Lieut. (N) Jason Delaney



A jumbled collection of sealed metal tubes, or canisters, each with notes rolled up inside, has been left by tourists and mariners in the bottom of the cairn. Croal knew he would be visiting Beechey Island as a geologist aboard an Adventure Canada Arctic cruise.

"It was my fifth time going to Beechey. I just decided to put something there. It's not unusual to leave canisters," says Croal.

Leaving a message in the *Labrador* cairn was a fitting gesture. Croal's father had built it. James Croal was ice expert aboard *Labrador* in 1954 and 1955.

The HUP-3 twin rotor helicopter carried the assembled navigational beacons from the ship to the shore.

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Big Jim Croal (centre) learned much from the Inuit and travelled easily with them. © Peter Croal

*Labrador's* air detachment in 1956. "The Arctic waters today are not fully mapped by modern hydrographic standards. But the large parts of it that are mapped were done by *Labrador*... For the remainder of it, ships still use British Admiralty charts from the 1900s."

In addition to mapping, *Labrador* erected navigational beacons on points of land to aid ships. In 1954, it carried 25 beacons. These were large (20 foot high), pre-fabricated, wooden structures that were brought ashore by the ship's landing craft and then assembled. Eventually, the 800 pound beacons were built on the ship's flight deck, and then delivered ashore by the large HUP-3 twin rotor helicopter. Big Jim was part of the team that assembled the beacons, and determined where they would be erected.

"The ship's history is astounding. It was a 24-7 operation, and never ran aground or hit a rock," says MacNeil.

Big Jim's ice navigation skills had a lot to do with that. Delaney mentioned one story that has reached legendary status. While transiting Foxe Basin in 1955, Big Jim, who was on watch, ordered the ship stopped. When Capt. Robertson came on the bridge to find out why, Jim said, "I don't like the look of that ice." An ice reconnaissance party went out to investigate, and a massive rock structure was found 12 feet below the surface. *Labrador* had been headed directly for it, but Big Jim's astute assessment of the ice prevented a catastrophe.

"Croal spotted the ice, the way it was formed on the surface, and said 'I don't like it.' To this day that is in the charts, in government publications, as Croal Shoal," says Delaney.

Between 1955 and 1957, *Labrador's* principal role was to establish a route for the cargo vessels carrying materials to construct the 40 Distant Early Warning, or DEW line, stations across the Arctic. *Labrador* was transferred to the Department of Transport in 1959. It was taken out of service in 1987, then sold for scrap and dismantled in 1989.

However, *Labrador* contributed more to Canadian Arctic science, hydrography, and oceanography in its four years as a naval vessel than any other ship in the 20th century. Big Jim played a significant role in the first missions' success. Sadly, Lt.-Cmdr. James Croal passed away in 1985 at age 68.

Not surprising then that Croal wanted to mark his father's role in maritime history at the most famous historic site in the Arctic.

"I asked immediate family, 'If Dad were alive and you wanted to write a letter to him, write that letter.' And they did," says Croal. "I read these letters — all so lovely and loving. 'We miss you, and you were such a great guy.'"

However, leaving a note in a cairn is a more bureaucratic affair than it was 100 years ago. Just as you can't take anything from a national historic site, like Beechey, you also can't leave anything without permission from Parks Canada. So, Croal applied and received a permit to leave his canister of letters in the *Labrador* Monument.

"I never got the chance to travel with my dad in the Arctic, but the dedication of the canister with our family's thoughts was a way to connect with him in spirit," says Croal.

The moment when he deposited the canister in the *Labrador* monument was not as private as Croal had imagined. By the time *Ocean Endeavour* landed at Beechey, his story had reached the passengers. On September 2, 2017, Croal made a moving speech about his father and the significance of *Labrador* before an audience of strangers. Everyone present felt privileged to witness the occasion, knowing Croal's canister was now part of the history of Beechey Island. **ASB**

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Peter stands in front of the *Labrador* Monument on Beechey Island holding his canister of letters. The *Labrador's* coat of arms is attached to the peak of the monument, with crests of two other Canadian defence vessels, *Cormorant* and *Shawinigan*, nailed on lower slats. © Michelle Valberg