

Harold Wood
Bellevue, WA
April 6, 19__

SG: I am visiting Harold Wood at his home in Bellevue on this 6th day of April. Nice rainy day, and Harold has a couple of stories he is going to share with us.

HW: I know you said you've got at least a three hour tape in there so I'll hold forth for some time. When you called, I tried to do something about thinking, which is rather difficult for me in this day and age, about what might be of interest to people. Things that were done by ships that I've been in since I've been in the service. I think more than any other episode would be the *Storis* transit of the Northwest Passage, but there were a couple of incidents leading up to that which I thought might provide a little background. In 1940, this was just after Hitler started things in Europe, there was much to do about the Danish colony of Greenland, and the United States was lending assistance up there and the cutter, *Northland*, was brought around from the West Coast, her sail rig had been taken off, and she looked like a bald-headed barge, really. Her lower main mast, remember she had two masts to begin with, and she was modified to break _____ rigs, but by the time I got to her in August 1940, she was in Brooklyn Naval Shipyard. She had no top hamper, no foremast. Her lower main mast _____ the deck house was there. That was fitted with a boom for the express purpose of hoisting in and out of an SOC3. If you remember the SOC3 aircraft, it was a scout observation Curtis, Model No. 3. A biplane, fabric-covered float plane, and it was an aircraft that was at that time normally hanging on the after end of cruisers. It was a scout observation plane. Someone had arranged to have *Northland* carry one of those hoist in and out with a boom, and all this was preparatory to going to Greenland for two missions that I knew about, about the time

I got on board. One was to show the flag, and the other was to scout around and look for potential air fields. We were conjoined to keep secret our movements. Our families knew only that we were off on a mission. I think most of them knew we were going to Greenland, half of us didn't know where Greenland was or much about it. And we had to surreptitiously get books out of the library to find out about Greenland. It was rather hurried preparations for the trip. We left in August.

SG: Let me interrupt. Who was in command?

HW: It was a fellow named Iceberg Eddy Smith who had been taken from the *Chelan*, transferred from the *Chelan* to make the trip. Remember the commander then, Edward Hanson Smith, was one of the more experienced Coast Guard officers in the North, and particularly in the Greenland area because he was, I think not father of the ice patrol, but he was well versed in Oceanography and had written a little red book.

SG: Wasn't he also a doctor?

HW: He was a doctor, had done postgraduate work, although he didn't much care to be referred to as "Doctor Smith" by his troops. He had been in Greenland on the *Marion*. He had gone up into Baffin Bay in the *Marion*, a little 125-footer. Anyway, Eddie Smith was the skipper, and we had sundry Execs from time to time. Don Morrison for a time; Don was Engineer Officer and then served as Exec, and Gene Coffin served as Exec, and Allard was Exec. Execs came and went. Let me get back to Greenland. We went up to Greenland and it was the first for most of us in those waters and that far north. We had some trouble getting into Julianehaab because there was an ice belt that we had to penetrate, and we lay off shore for a day or so, outside the ice belt, because the *Northland* was a sturdy vessel, but she was not an icebreaker. She was powered with a couple of

MacIntosh-Seymour diesels, great enormous things and were actually locomotive engine diesels, and she was literally one of the first electric drive chips the Coast Guard designed; Consance-B diesels. We burned out a bearing before we got to Julianehaab on one of the generators. So we lay offshore with repouring and then boring out a ten-inch bearing because it was necessary. We were on one engine; we couldn't then go through the ice. We felt we couldn't go through the ice, and it took two or three days to get that done. So we were still off shore. About that time, Coast Guard promotion exams came along. So while we were rolling around in the Davis Strait—had we been in ice we would have been relatively comfortable—but we were outside of it in Davis Strait, and it is pretty rough up there as you know. We wrote promotion exams, there were two of us on board who wrote promotion exams, and finally we got to Julianehaab. I would have you know that all of this background to my story about the Northwest Passage got started with promotion exams in Davis Strait. We worked in Greenland then for about four months. Julianehaab, Ivigtut, Holstensburg, up as far as Tooley. We didn't go into Tooley. There was no air base up there at that time, just a little Eskimo settlement. And we had on board a Danish-speaking Boatswain. We were ashore in almost each of the ports that we stopped in we went ashore, and the Danes were, of course, well versed in English. We had a very pleasant time. All this to the end that we could do two things: Show our flag, set up an anti-aircraft gun as a guard for the Ivigtut _____ (sounds like "Kriolyte") plane, and then later search for or scout for potential air bases. We came back to the States after about three or four months I guess and then picked up a board, a Navy captain, an Army colonel, I guess. No Marine that I can remember. And we had two Coast Guard aviators on board. And our express purpose was to—we went back to

Greenland then, to search for potential fields. We poked our noses into each fiord, all the way up to Sanderstrom Fiord which is, if you remember Sanderstrom Fiord, actually is a 90-mile fiord that goes up into Greenland in one of the widest portions of ice-free coastline. And up there, it was a good site for an airfield. And one incident that I have to tell about—Freddy Westbrook, well known to you, I think. Freddy Westbrook was one of our aviators. I was on board as an assistant engineer but also as a photographer because I had been a photographer for Commander Smith when we were on the *Chelan* together. So I was elected to go along with Freddy Westbrook in this SOC-3 to take pictures of what seemed to be a good place for an air strip, or an airfield, which finally became Buoy West 7. We were in the aircraft. The only camera that I had that was fitted for taking that kind of photographs was a Fairchild aerial camera. It had a double roll thing in the back which could be removed and then you could put on a plate arrangement with a leather bag to hold 12 exposures. It was a case of not working inside the bag but working by feeling through the bag to pull a plate, expose a plate, take that out of the way, put another one in. It was a very complex affair. The aircraft had no hatch for the camera, so I rode in the observer's seat which was behind the pilot. I took a piece of six thread and secured the camera. It was an open cockpit, you see, no nifty sky cover. I secured the camera with a piece of six thread to one of the _____ that was inside, because you could poke the fabric out and tie the thing around the _____, that was fine. The only way we could effectively take verticals of the land that we wanted to offer as a potential air base was for me to stand on two _____, lean out of the cockpit over the side, aim the camera down, call to Freddy who was piloting ahead of me and say, "Okay, ready to start, Freddy." And then he would fly a level course and he would

call marks to me on intervals of four seconds or something like that in order that we would move ahead and take verticals that we could put together to get a continuous map array of photographs. I took 12 photographs with Freddy calling mark, and I couldn't talk through the intercom because I had both hands holding this damn camera. "Freddy, finished." (in shouting voice). Freddy said, "Fine," and he nosed over—I'm still hanging up there holding on and the only thing that kept me from falling out of the damn aircraft was a piece of six thread holding the camera. And I held onto the camera. Well, my feet didn't fly. I finally got down, but Freddy and I didn't ever speak from that day on.

We had quite a session up in Greenland. We visited a great many people, and I heard you describe an incident where one of your men fell overboard in cold water. We were in Holstensburg actually, and the Danish people who were living there were invited out to the ship to visit the ship, have a meal, or a tea. We had one old lady who must have been at least 55, 60 years old. In those days that was old, you see. Now it is not so old. But in those days, 55 or 60 was old.

SG: Especially up north.

HW: Especially up north. This lady was brought out by one of our boats, and the accommodation ladder raised, and there was a little bit of swell, not much, a little bit. She missed her footing when she _____, fell into the water. We got her out. It was as if _____, didn't bother her a bit. I marvel that a person of that many years could be in water which must have been 29 degrees, salt water, of course, 30 degrees maybe. She was in the water for possibly 30 seconds, maybe a minute before we could get her out. We brought her on board, changed her into some other clothes, not her clothes but some trousers, coats. She went on with

her party, nothing to it. Enough of that. We were in Greenland; I was in Greenland three times. Each time was at least six months I guess. We had put up a gun ashore. We had done some survey work. Captain Smith was quite obviously being a scientist. He took magnetic observations. Gene Coffin, who was the navigator, he had him ashore using a magnetometer, all kinds of nifty things. I can remember calculating the volume of a tabular iceberg, at that time which was about 2-1/2 miles in each of five directions because it was pentagonal in shape, relatively. We went around it. The total girth was something like 12 miles. It was 90 feet from waterline to top. Goodness knows how deep it was underneath. I don't know where it came from. I don't think it could have been out of a glacier, but I've never seen sea ice that thick. I don't know where it came from. I have pictures of it. I can't show them to you because they're in the archives somewhere. I was the photographer and I remember calculating the millions of cubic meters. We couldn't do this in cubic yards, you see. This was scientific work, millions of cubic meters of ice, endeavoring to calculate the weight of it. All of this for Captain Smith's reports which were of some interest, although I have not seen them since the day we made them up. We started back from Greenland after Pearl Harbor. We were in Julianehaab when Pearl Harbor happened on the 7th of December. And about a month later, we started back to the States, and I had orders to go to the building of *Storis* in Toledo, Ohio. The last port that I was in, in Greenland at that time, was Godthaab. We left Godthaab, and I can remember hauling out a chart of the polar regions, and even aerial reconnaissance in those days wasn't as extensive as now, so that the chart of the polar regions which showed that area which was above or north of the northwest territories of Canada, was replete with dotted lines indicating that "we think this is where

the land is, but we are not sure.” And I can remember as we were rolling down Davis Strait having left Godthaab on our way back to the States, I can remember thinking wouldn’t it be nice if we could try with *Northland* to go through the Northwest Passage. And I can even remember ventilating that, discussing it with the Captain, because in those days it was not unusual to visit the bridge and the Captain might be on the bridge. Conversation was pretty general. We were all pretty much enthused about getting back to the States. And up came the subject of “Let’s go through the Northwest Passage. Let’s go back to the West Coast instead.” Well, it was just a fantasy of imagination at the time. We came back to the States. I was detached ultimately. I went to Toledo during building of *Storis*. I was with *Storis*, or with the building of her, for a period from January, late January, I guess, of 1942 until she left and came out from Toledo maybe in August of 1942, September, I don’t remember. It’s gone. But, at any rate, I went out with her as Engineer Officer, and then right back to Greenland. So I did some more duty in Greenland, that was very fine. No thoughts of the Northwest Passage at that time. There were sundry other assignments, but in 1955 I was in Headquarters finishing up a tour of duty there, and I managed to hornswoggle, because I happened to be Chief of Officer Personnel at the time, not Chief of Personnel but Chief of Officer Personnel, which gave me a little bit of an edge, you see, in recommending people for jobs.

SG: May I interrupt a moment?

HW: Please interrupt, Sam.

SG: I want to thank you, because at that time I asked you for an assignment to Juneau and you said, “After me, young fellow. I got a committee.”

HW: I have no recollection of that, Sam, no recollection. At any rate, I had orders to the *Storis*, and it was rather enjoyable for me to have been an engineer in her, I'd been the Engineer Officer for a time, and then to go back to Commander after 13, 14, 15 years, something like that. And the first important assignment that I consider for *Storis* was to take place that very summer after I had relieved George Pladin, a classmate, who had relieved Paul Trimbull, a classmate, so *Storis* was in good hands, you see, in the class of '36. Freddie Stats also, ahead of that. So I guess there were four of us who commanded *Storis* in that period. I went to Juneau and it was noon when I left Headquarters. The *Storis* was going to have to go north to work along the Canadian arctic coast to do survey work with the Navy survey ship, to do survey work for preparation of charts in order that there could be a sea lift for the express purpose of supplying materials for the then building DEW line, the distant early warning radar network that we were putting up. It was not yet in operation. The Navy MSTS, military sea transport service, had been charged with the task of getting supplies in to finish the construction of the DEW line, and the *Storis* was assigned as one of the task units attached to working for the western MSTS flight group that was going up to run the whole operation. We were going in to do survey work to make up overlays for charts and make up charts, send them back to the ships that were following us, give them icebreaker support to get the material in to build the DEW line. Well, that was a challenging assignment. The charts in the Alaskan coastline were very fine. They had been done by Coast and Geodetic Survey, and they were very fine over as far as Canadian waters. But from there on, the charts had very little hydrography. The outline of the coast was fair. The outline of the land was fair. And the winter before that, this was 1955, the winter of 54-55, our airforce had taken a

great number of aerial reconnaissance photographs. The hydrographic office had made up charts from those photographs, but since the shots were taken, the photographs were taken in the wintertime, there was not much definition as to where the ice stopped and the shore started because it was all white. So, we had fairly good outline charts with practically no hydrography on board. Our job was to go ahead of the MSTS ships that were going to follow us, make up charts, get overlays back to them. It was scary. We had something new for us in the Coast Guard. We had a fish finder on board which was a directional sonic device for scouting around underneath where you drop a dome down, search around, it was like a little search sonar, except that it could move in elevation or it could move in _____, and it gave us a picture, something like a computer print-out on the screen. It worked out very well. It was a great help to us, not so much for finding where the shoals were, but to find a hole between two shoals in order that we could squeeze through. We had with us a Navy AGS, which was a little minesweeper converted into a survey ship. *Requisite*. She was about as big as our 125, 165 footer. I guess she was about 165 feet long. Thin skin. She had quarter-inch plating and to work up in the ice, she was our charge; we had to nursemaid her. She had been strengthened a little bit with some additional framing inside, and she had an additional quarter-inch ice plate put on the outside. But she was tender as a tea cup. However, she had the survey gear and carried the hydrographers. All that we did was provide boats for boat work and break ice for her and keep her out of trouble. We did very well considering all things. We got in as far as Cambridge Bay and moved beyond that into Queenmont Gulf. Queenmont Gulf is a gulf which is south of Victoria Island and north of the coast of Canada. In width, it might be 90 miles. You can see from one side to the other, but you

can't see the shoreline, of course. You can see land, and you can see land, in good weather. It is a very rocky, ridged area. There are shoals from one side to the other. I don't know how best to describe it as to say it is a hell of a place to have to go through. And because it is relatively shoal, the wind whipping across a fetch of 90 miles can send up pretty good wind currents, and again, because it is shoal, the tidal currents, although in the north you remember that the tide range is not as great as the Bay of Fundy or even down here in the Pacific Northwest. But it seems to me that the maximum tide that I can remember experiencing up there was about 3-1/2 or 4 feet, which is not a great range. But if it is on a pool table, it means there is quite a current to get all that water off the top of the pool table when it wants to go low tide. I don't express myself very well, but there were a lot of currents in there. We went across the Queenmont Gulf. We went into Simpson Strait, and we got all the way to the other end of Simpson Strait and thought, now that is pretty good. Why don't we go through the rest of the way, we are almost here? Simpson Strait is not far from Resolute Bay, actually, and you can get into Resolute Bay from the east, so why couldn't we just keep on going? I can remember the first year even asking for permission to go through instead of backing up. We succeeded in getting enough hydrographic information back to the MSTS ships, so they followed us, they delivered their goods, and they started out and we came along behind them, and then when we got out of the Queenmont Gulf area, we would break ice for them occasionally. The MSTS ships were, I don't remember any livery ships. There were some C2s, and there were a great number of LSTs because they could beach at the radar sites, the DEW line sites. They could beach and get their stuff off very readily instead of _____ ashore. This is a long story. I'm sorry.

SG: Was *Storis* the only ship with icebreaking capabilities?

HW: Well, the only important one. There were a couple of big icebreakers, like the *Northwind*, and actually they stayed outside. We were the only ones who went inside. We were the only ship from the icebreaking capable ships that went inside the first year and the second year. Now we did this for two years, you see. I was very much interested, literally, in trying to go through the Northwest Passage, because I could remember my desire back in 1940, 41; I wanted to go through from the other side, thought it would be nice. And then, 1955 and 1956, I thought, gee it would be nice. I asked Headquarters for permission to do it. No. And then the winter of 1956, I learned the reason for it. There was a Chief of MSTS at the time who had committed himself to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that it was impracticable to do. He was responsible for getting the stuff into the DEW line stations and he wanted his ships to come in from the west and go out. In that year, between 1956 and 1957, he was relieved. There was a new chief of MSTS, and he was all for it. So this was the reason that in 1957 had orders from early in the spring to plan to go through, see if we could find our way through the Northwest Passage. It had been done by *St. Rock*, you remember? Canadian Northwest Police vessel, RCMP. And she was 80 tons. And it had been done by GOA, Roll Hammondson had done it by GOA, and if you've been in San Francisco in the Golden Gate Park, she is up in sand there. She is a memorial there. *St. Rock* is up in Victoria or Vancouver, B.C. Those were relatively small ships and they had to winter over. It took Hammondson two years to go through, and it took the *St. Rock*, seems to me took her three before she got all the way to Nome.

SG: She had two winters.

HW: She had two winters. But they had very little power and they were just rugged little vessels, and rugged men, and they wintered over one in Johaven and the other somewhere in the neighborhood, second wintering was done somewhere near Herschel Island, I guess, but it doesn't matter particularly. We wanted to do it. So in 1957 we had plans to do it. We carried a couple of helicopters. *Storis* had been fitted out with a helicopter deck in 1955, and the first year it seems to me we carried Coast Guard crew, and the second year we had Navy crews. The third year we had Navy crews. So when we went back in 1957 we managed to convince people we were going through. We had troubles getting in. It was a good year to go around; we got around Point Barrow about the 8th of July, something like that. It was relatively early. And we thought everything was going to be fine. It looked like a good open year. It was open along the coast as far as Herschel Island. But inside it was very difficult. There was one time, one session, when we were beset. We were in well ahead of the MSTS ships that were coming behind us, of course, because we had made that early bend around the corner, Point Barrow. We got inside, and there was one session when the three of us were beset, each trying to help the other. We came bow to bow overlap, got in a squeeze. We started out, first we got caught. We were about 700 yards offshore. There was a good north wind, a lot of ice. And we ended up about 100 yards offshore. We started off with 90 feet under us, and we ended up in 21 feet of water. And we were drawing 14 feet, literally squeezed up out of the ice. The draft marks on a ship, so 7 feet, her bottom was built like the _____, it was like a cork. We could squeeze up instead of being crushed. But by the same token, it almost upset us, you see. We had worries about that. Our task Commander, Rear Admiral of MSTS over at Point Barrow on his *Eldorado*, the flag ship, flew in to see how we were going to get

out of our problem. And that's the old story which I learned the first year. Persistent patience is all you need. If you don't ruin your ship, you just sit and wait until the wind changes, that eases the pressure on the ice and off you go. So we managed to get clear. We got through, I guess it was well into September. We chased the ships out; they finished their transit as far as they could go, the ships being the MSTS ships. They offloaded their supplies and started out again. We escorted them back through Queenmont Gulf until they got over the demarcation point in *Northwind*, and Navy breakers picked up from there, took them the rest of the way. And then we had those blessed orders to turn around and go back and go through. It was exciting. There were incidents that were thrilling to me, scary as can be, when we had little or no water under us, and I say the fishfinder was handy not for finding where the shoals were but finding where enough water was to get the ship through. Oh, incidentally, that year, instead of having *Requisite* along, we had two WAGLs, two more Coast Guard buoy tenders, *Bramble* and *Spar*, the three of us, the three ships went through together as a task unit. We got up as far as Bellit Strait, and there we met the Canadian *Labrador*, a big icebreaker. She was senior to *Storis*, so we changed operational attachment from the West Coast to the East Force and became instead of 5.1.5, which was our designation, we became 6.5.1. So there we were. We went through Bellit Strait which was a piece of cake because of steep water all the way through, had some swift tidal currents because it is a narrow, mild-wide cut separating two large bodies of water. So when there is a tidal change, there's a 4 or 5 knot current, but otherwise nothing else, nothing to worry about. We got through Bellit Strait and that was it. We made our way north, and then turned east to Lancaster Sound down through Baffin Bay back to Boston, and that was it. I

think, although it's been a disjointed recitation, the fact that *Storis* was able to work with *Bramble* and *Spar* as a task unit working for the Navy, the big thing that I learned about it was, even having been aboard a Coast Guard ship working as a part of the Navy force during the war, that to me was slightly different because it seemed to me we were enjoined to do that. We had to do that. It was necessary. But to work with *Storis* and *Bramble* and *Spar* as a unit working for MSTS, having their support and supporting them, it was a real bit of cooperation of the two forces. We were the junior force, but a most important contributor to the success of their mission. It was a real nice feeling.

SG: Later, the converted tanker, *Manhattan*, I'm not sure they made a complete transit, but obviously they could not have followed the path that you did.

HW: No.

SG: Your accomplishment among others is to say where ships could not go.

HW: Ships of that size could not go. That was, I consider, an impractical operation. She was too big a ship. *Manhattan*. They spent a great deal of money making her capable of breaking ice, for surviving in ice, but I would not want to invest my money in an oil transfer operation using a big ship of that sort. I think our pipeline has been the answer to that. *Manhattan* came from the East Coast and went through Lancaster Island, McClure Strait. She reached the Pacific side, but she then didn't go any further. She went back. So the *Storis*, with *Bramble* and *Spar*, actually circumnavigated the continent. We went through the Northwest Passage as a three-ship unit, and it was a good feeling. We felt that we had done something. What, I don't know. It's not something you can sell. There's no doubt about that. But each of us, I think, had a lot of

pride in the fact that the Coast Guard was able to do it. It was very nice. I don't have any other exciting incidents.

SG: You mentioned the *Roach St. Rock*. I have elsewhere in this series an 8 mm movie of the ship alongside the *Duane*, having her rudder lifted out, laid on deck on the *Duane* making some repairs, and then restoring. The RCMP, Larson, _____.

HW: Let me offer something to go with your story. The first year, the second year, and the third year, we had on board a Canadian Air Force character. His horsepower was Squadron Leader, which I think is about 2-1/2 stripes in their air force. He had been an RCMP person. He had ridden with Larson and for that reason, you see, he knew the way. He was offered to us by the Canadian Government. And I suppose it was one of those quick pro quo things. They put him aboard, although he did not do any piloting for us. But he had been in the far north for a good number of years. He wintered there several winters, and then because of his connection with the RCMP and his knowledge having been a sledge man, and a northern man, he was acquainted with the area so he came along with us, in support of us if you will. Literally he was an observer, but technically he was on board, I suppose, to offer whatever help he could. I can remember a couple of incidents where he met Canadian Eskimos whom he had known when he was up there as a patrolman. I don't remember that any of them ever came after him with a shotgun or anything like that, but I suspect there was reason and they should have. You can cut that out. That's about it. Push the button, Sam. I can't think of anything else. I think each of us, if we had a chance, I mean if we were hypnotized, we could dredge up some exciting things, but not for camera, and certainly each of us has had so many of those that it would take forever to tell about them.

SG: Well, I'm trying to capture a few of them for the benefit of all us and for the records in Washington and New London.

HW: I think it is a fine idea, and I'm sorry I am not a raconteur who could keep you spellbound instead of bored to tears.

SG: You've done marvelous here today. It is remarkable of all the people that I have talked to, *Storis* keeps popping up in stories—the *Storis* and the stories. And Alaska shows up in even more.

HW: Why would that be, Sam? Probably just because it is so different from the experiences that most of us had before we got in the service. Most of us came from Stateside. Alaska was a frontier land, still a territory when we got there.

SG: And it still is a challenge to navigate in these northern waters. Both Greenland and Alaska waters. There is something different.

HW: Now you stirred another little wrinkle. In the period in 1957, from July 1st until October when we got into Boston, there were many times when I would sit at my desk or at my cabin table having a meal, I would have put down a book, *Manson's* _____ for instance, or *The Cruise of the Jeannette*. These are Arctic experiences which I read about, you see, and I think of those poor characters freezing to death, literally. Cold food, no food, wintering over. And here we are in the *Storis* going through Baffin Bay and Union Strait, Queenmont Gulf, clean sheets, hot water showers, movies, good old explorers you see. Gee, what a change, what a difference.

SG: And compare 1957 with the capabilities we have now in 1988. That was primitive what you did.

HW: It was. I was thinking of that the other day. I was thinking of cadet cruises when we went to South America, for instance, I was thinking of the head facilities. I was thinking of the troughs. And no doors. The line of paper floating down under the people who were seated over the trough. And if we were to tell cadets that now, they would look at us and say, "Those guys have flipped their wigs." I mentioned that to Lorraine the other day. The differences that we have seen. And we had modern ships. We had radar direction finders even.

SG: And sometimes you could use them.

HW: And sometimes you could use them. Well, sometimes you could trust the results. You could always use them because you could tune in Atlantic City and listen to the broadcast stations. Mercy. Sam, we're getting older.