The North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol
A unique and lasting legacy of the U.S. Coast Guard's defense of Greenland during WWII

by Captain Bob Desh, USCG (Retired) – Foundation for Coast Guard History

With the signing of a protection agreement between Greenland and the United States in April 1941, the U.S. Armed Forces became responsible for the defense of the world's largest island. A Danish possession strategically located between North America and Europe, Greenland was the ideal place to gather meteorological data essential to forecasting weather in the North Atlantic and Europe. It was also home to rich deposits of cryolite, at the time, a substance essential to aluminum production. The Coast Guard's pioneering exploration of the Labrador Sea in support of its International Ice Patrol mission made it the ideal service to lead the effort. Well before official entry into the war, Coast Guard forces were operating in and around Greenland. In June 1941, the Northeast Greenland Patrol organized under the command of Cdr. Edward "Iceberg" Smith, USCG. One of his greatest concerns was the enemy establishing weather stations along Greenland's vast, rugged, unpopulated northeast coast. In addition to ice capable ships patrolling from the sea, a small group of brave Danish, Norwegian, and Greenlandic (Inuit) hunters were organized to patrol a stark 700-mile stretch of Greenland's coast by dogsled in search of German interlopers. Operating hundreds of miles above the Arctic Circle, the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol was one of the most unique military units of the war.

Defending North America

When Germany invaded Denmark in April 1940, Copenhagen's response was to form a government that collaborated with the German occupiers in the hope of keeping the country out of open fighting. While most domestic policy remained intact, Denmark no longer had control of its foreign policy, making many normal dealings impossible. This included support and supply of its colony, Greenland, now separated from Denmark by a wide expanse of ocean controlled by Britain. At the time, the massive, largely uninhabited island was governed by the Greenland Administration in Copenhagen, with two local governors (Danish: *landsfogeder*) in Greenland running the colony's day-to-day affairs. The King of Denmark had ordered all Danes to submit to the German occupation. However, the Greenland Constitution of 1925 directed that the country be administered in the best interest of the Greenlanders. The Constitution states: "The Administrators, as the representatives of the Danish Government in Greenland, are to be considered the responsible authority in the country and can in exceptional instances take such measures as the interests of the population may demand." With the Danish trade monopoly now severed, Greenland was essentially cut off from the world. New alliances and inventive solutions were absolutely essential.

U.S. consul James K. Penfield (right) and vice consul George L. West Jr. (left) arriving in Greenland aboard Cutter Comanche (Acme News Pictures Inc. 1940)

Greenland was too remote to garner much immediate attention from the European powers. However, the United States was vitally interested. In addition to Greenland's strategic location, it is geographically and geologically part of North America. As such, Greenland was covered by the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which declared the entire Western Hemisphere to be in the sphere of American interest. According to the doctrine, colonial powers holding sovereignty over territories in the Western Hemisphere could continue to do so, but no new colonies or transfer of sovereignty was acceptable. This position was further strengthened by the Havana Conference of July 1940 in which the U.S. and the majority of Central and South American countries agreed to collectively govern territories of nations that were taken over by the Axis powers. Germany gaining control of Greenland by way of occupying Denmark would be a clear violation of the Monroe Doctrine wholly unacceptable to the United States. From a practical standpoint, negotiating a working relationship between Greenland and the U.S. was the most logical and beneficial solution for all involved. With the view that Danish sovereignty had been compromised, the U.S. position was that all dealings concerning Greenland should be done directly with the governors. However, the U.S. at this point was still a neutral country not formally involved in the war. Using Coast Guard vessels and personnel in Greenland waters was viewed to be far less provocative than using other branches of the military. With the approval of the Greenlandic Councils, plans were made to establish a U.S. consulate in Greenland. On 20 May 1940, the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Comanche* delivered United States consul James K. Penfield and vice consul George L. West Jr. to the capital city of Godthab (now Nuuk) on Greenland's west coast.

Two Governors and an Ambassador

Ambassador Henrik Kauffman at U.S. State Department
(Acme News Pictures Inc. 1940)

Governor Eske Brun arriving in U.S. on Cutter Campbell
(Wide World Photos 1940)

When Denmark fell to Germany in 1940, Eske Brun was the governor of North Greenland and Aksel Svane of South Greenland. Henrik Kauffmann, the other key player, was the Danish ambassador in Washington. All three were focused on an alliance with the U.S. However, each had personal thoughts and agendas, with Svane being the most supportive of the neutrality policies of the Danish government. Both Brun and Svane traveled to Washington independently to negotiate a working relationship with the U.S. A brief power struggle ensued between the three. Kauffman and Brun would come out the winners. Kauffmann had been actively speaking with President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull on the fate of Greenland. He became the chief negotiator and signer of the eventual protection agreement (known as the "Hull-Kaufman Agreement" or "Greenland Treaty") with the U.S. Unlike Svane, who was still loyal to Copenhagen, both Kaufman and Brun were adamant that the U.S. should not accept the government in Copenhagen as the legitimate ruler of Greenland while Denmark was under Nazi occupation. Both the U.S., and Kauffman himself, believed that he was the proper authority on the issue and empowered to speak for Greenland. Like Kauffman, Brun had determined that it was necessary to side with the U.S. and support their efforts to help the Allies. Brun returned to the island and assumed governorship over all Greenland. Kauffman became the island's spokesman and authority in Washington. Svane was relegated to minimal influence, staying in Washington as a subordinate to Kauffman. Brun being the boots on the ground in Greenland would prove essential to the creation and success of the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol.

Birth of the Sledge Patrol

"One of the achievements of Commander Smith's trip in 1941 was the establishment of a dog-team patrol whose duty it was to observe and report any person not an authorized resident of Northeast Greenland. The Sledge Patrol was made up of faithful Danes and [native Inuit Greenlanders], whose knowledge of the terrain and its inhabitants was unsurpassed. In that large expanse of snow and ice, where men can scarcely be recognized at a little distance, only the natives covering the territory on sleds and well acquainted with the regular inhabitants could detect a stranger…"

~ The Coast Guard at War – Greenland Patrol

When reading various articles and publication on the history of the Coast Guard's involvement in Greenland during WWII, one inevitably finds a few sentences, or a paragraph or two, highlighting the creation and service of the Sledge Patrol. This quote, from a series of after-action reports authored by Coast Guard Headquarters shortly aft the war, is typical. The birth of the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol, and the exploits of men who served in the unit, is far more complex than the limited treatment often allotted to the topic. This is their story.

Eske Brun and Iceberg Smith

Every now and then in history, leaders with the ideal skills, experience, and temperament are in the right place at the right time. For the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol those men were Governor Eske Brun and U.S. Coast Guard Cdr. Edward "Iceberg" Smith. Whether it was

Smith's idea enthusiastically supported and encouraged by Brun, or Brun's idea enthusiastically encouraged and supported by Smith, is a matter of historical speculation, perspective and conjecture. No matter the originator of the concept, both Smith and Brun were essential to actually bringing the Sledge Patrol to fruition.

Cdr. Edward "Iceberg" Smith, USCG (CG Photo)

Greenland Governor Eske Brun (Associated Press)

Smith's motivation was simple and straightforward. He understood that because of the extraordinarily harsh weather and ice conditions along the northeast coast, coupled with long winters of nearly continual darkness, neither his vessels, nor the Army's aircraft and mechanized vehicles, would be capable of ensuring that the Germans would not be successful in establishing crucial weather and communication stations. Smith was well aware that several peacetime expeditions to the North Pole had proven the extreme difficulties of spotting objects from aircraft in the vast whiteness of the Arctic. His years of oceanographic research in and around Greenland had provided him with an acute familiarity with the extraordinary capabilities of an arctic hunter and the innate talents of his team of sled dogs. Smith also understood how much the Revenue Cutter Service (forerunner of the Coast Guard) had depended on the expertise of those who lived in the Artic for the service's long history of success with the Bering Sea Patrol. He knew the Sledge Patrol was the only answer.

Eske Brun, perhaps even better that Smith, understood completely what the hunters and their dogs could accomplish. He knew that, as absurd as it might sound, in the extraordinary conditions of the Arctic, a few men who had lived there could be more successful at this specific mission than the powerful U.S. military. Additionally, he also understood that this was the opportunity for Greenland to play a meaningful role in its own defense. Brun was undoubtedly grateful that Iceberg Smith understood the magnitude of the problem he faced in patrolling the northeast coast and that he, Governor of Greenland, could help offer a potential solution. It must

have been a matter of great personal pride for Brun to prove that, in this instance, Greenland could truly help the Allied war effort.

While both Smith and Brun played crucial roles in the standup of the Sledge Patrol, history will continue to rightfully recognized Smith as the man most responsible. As founder and champion of the concept within the U.S. military and senior officer with control of the needed resources and logistic support, Iceberg Smith was indeed the "founding father" of the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol.

Everybody to Scoresby Sound

Village of Scoresby Sound, Northeast Greenland (W.R. West photo 1945)

The first step in the process was an order from Smith to have all inhabitants of the northern half of Greenland's east coast to come south to the settlement at Scoresby Sound. With the coast completely uninhabited, anyone found there could be treated immediately as an enemy. Brun agreed. As it turned out, there were only 27 people (26 men and 1 woman) along the 700 miles of coast above Scoresby Sound. In addition to twelve hunters, one of whom had brought his wife, there were four weather stations, three Danish and one Norwegian, with staffs of three or four men.

The Norwegian hunters offered a bit of a unique challenge. Their treaty rights to hunt meant that the Norwegian Government in exile in London possessed the only authority to order them to vacate. Eventually, all necessary diplomatic permissions were acquired and using radio communication to the weather stations, the evacuation order reached everyone. Most moved to designated locations along the coast for transport south by the Coast Guard; others made the trek

on their own. All personnel, some unwillingly, drifted south to the Scoresby Sound as ordered by summer's end, 1941.

The evacuation of all personnel also ensured positive control of the gathering and broadcasting of weather information. All the meteorological equipment from the weather stations, some of which had been established by renowned Arctic explorers Dr. Lauge Kock and Count Eigil Knuth, was moved to the station at Eskimoness. Meteorological observations from northeast Greenland are crucial to accurate North Atlantic and European weather forecasting, something that was essential to both sides in the war. By an extraordinary oversight, even in the summer of 1940, well after the invasion of Denmark, the weather stations were still broadcasting unencrypted weather observations in plain international code for anyone to record and use. The personnel at these remote arctic stations continued to broadcast in the clear simply because nobody had told them to stop. The transmitting of unencrypted observations was eventually halted. Future Sledge Patrol commander, Ib Poulsen, was one of those responsible for ending the open transmission of weather information.

Danish research, weather and hunting station, Ella Island, Northeast Greenland, BE-4 (Danish Arctic Institute photo)

Both Smith and Brun knew that this serious gap in the German weather maps would be a powerful motivator for incursions into the remote arctic wilds of northeast Greenland. The cutter *Northland's* capture of the Norwegian fishing trawler *Buskoe* attempting to establish a German weather and communication station proved them to be correct.

A Joint Operation

The construct of the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol was fairly straightforward. The primary mission was arctic reconnaissance, utilizing dog sleds and experienced men with the expertise and fortitude necessary to succeed despite the unique challenges of terrain and climate. They would also gather and report the ever-critical meteorological observations. The personnel to accomplish the mission would be identified and recruited by the Greenland Government. The Coast Guard and Army would provide the logistic support needed by the Sledge Patrol. If an

enemy incursion was discovered, the Coast Guard and Army would also provide the military forces required to capture, eliminate or destroy the threat.

U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Northland (WPG-49), Greenland, WWII (Coast Guard photo)

The Hull-Kaufman Agreement authorized the U.S. to establish miliary bases on the island. Utilizing the U.S. military code name for Greenland, "Bluie," they were identified by number sequence and coastal location, east or west. Three research and hunting stations on Greenland's northeast coast were specifically designated for support of the sledge patrol mission.

Despite Iceberg Smith's enthusiasm for the concept, there were many in the War Department who were resistant. Smith's persuasive arguments eventually won over the skeptics. Essential U.S. support guaranteed, the plan for the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol moved forward rapidly.

Fifteen Good Men

A request went out to those gathered at Scoresby Sound for volunteers interested in joining the Sledge Patrol. Perhaps surprisingly, there was no shortage of eager candidates. Even those who didn't really appreciate or understand the potential threat were happy for the opportunity to go on doing what they had done before the war interfered: live the arctic life they enjoyed, and be relatively well paid for it. Of the volunteers, fifteen were chosen to be the "plank owners" of the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol. Over the course of the war, the total complement of the Patrol stayed relatively constant, with personnel flowing in and out of the unit. A total of 27 men would serve with the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol between 1941 and 1945.

The original crew consisted of 10 Danes, 1 Norwegian, and 4 native Greenlanders. The Danes with the greatest experience made up the command cadre of the unit. The Sledge Patrol was

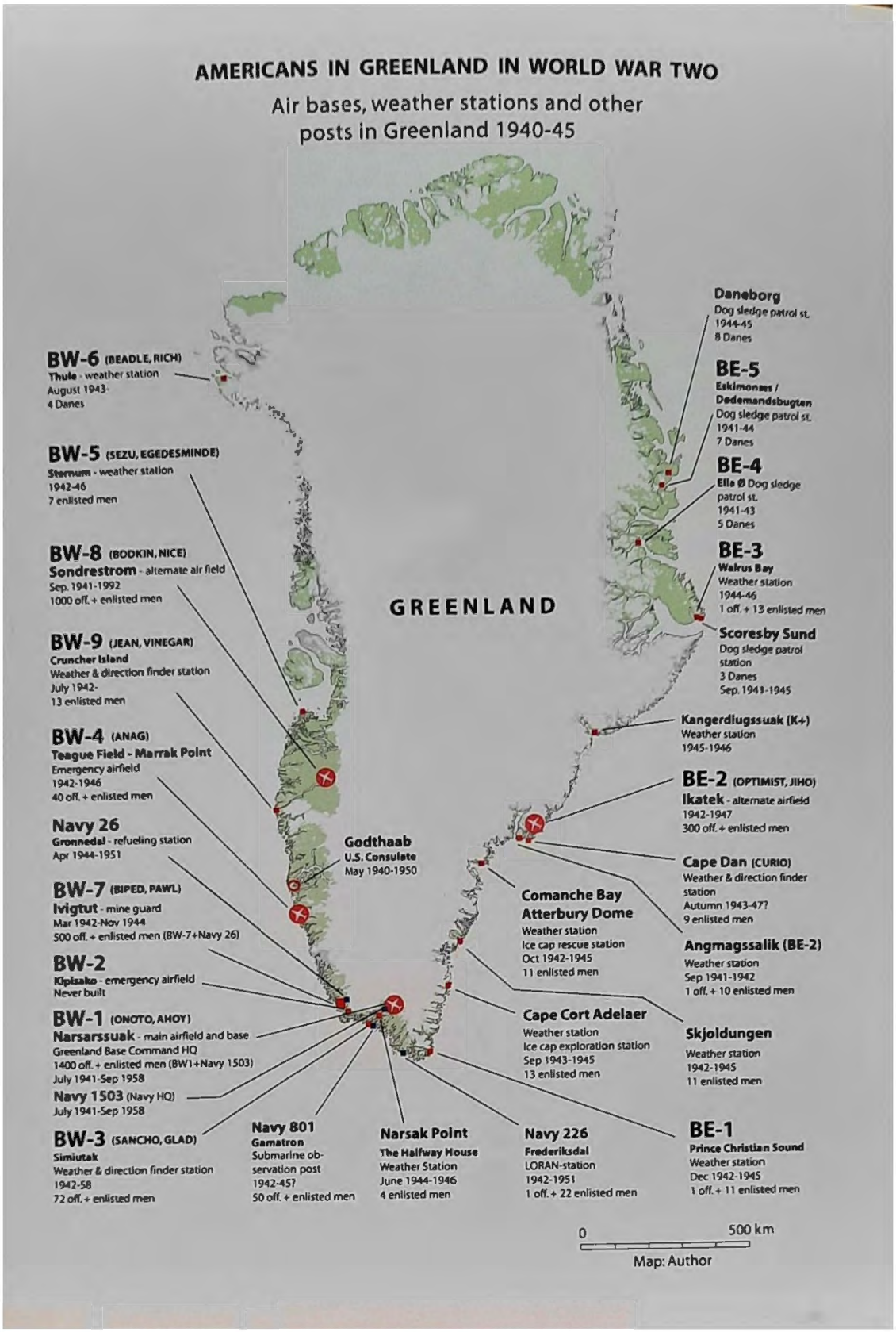
originally designated as a "police" unit, with a chief in charge of operations as Scoresby Sound (Bluie East 3), Ella Island (Bluie East 4), and Eskimoness (Bluie East 5). As the realities of war and the potential for direct contact with the enemy became readily apparent, Governor Brun bestowed official military ranks and status, making the Sledge Patrol the first and only "Greenland Army." The military status of the Sledge Patrol was further reinforced when they were also co-designated as a reserve unit of the U.S. Army. The members of the Sledge Patrol continued to serve in their own civilian clothing; however, a unique red, white, and blue armband identified their official status as military personnel.

The original members of the Sledge Patrol:

- Ib Poulsen (Dane)
- Niels Ove Jensen (Dane)
- Aage de Lemos (Dane)
- Jens Marius Jensen (Dane)
- Kurt Olsen (Dane)
- Peter Nielsen (Dane)
- Eli Knudsen (Dane)
- Mads Christensen (Dane)
- Niels Hansen (Dane)
- Carlos Ziebell (Dane)
- Hans K Siewers (Norwegian)
- Christian Arke (Greenlander)
- Lars Napotoq (Greenlander)
- Eval Simonsen (Greenlander)
- Aparte Hoegh (Greenlander)

Members added 1942 to 1945

- Oddvar Akre (Norwegian)
- Bjarne Akre (Norwegian)
- Henry Rudi (Norwegian)
- Mikael Kunak (Greenlander)
- William Arke (Greenlander)
- Oscar Berthel Nordum (Dane)
- Berndt Jensen (Dane)
- Carl Henrik Schultz (Dane)
- Hans Bronlund (Greenlander)
- Alfred Hansen (Dane)
- Alibak Cortsen (Greenlander)
- Malekalet Arke (Greenlander)



U.S. Bluie Bases in Greenland (Ole Guldager image from "Americans in Greenland in World War Two")

A Massive, Remote, Isolated Command

Sledge Patrol Commander, Ib Poulsen

Sledge Patrol Station at Eskimoness, BE-5 (Danish Arctic Institute photos)

Ib Poulsen was selected to be the overall commander of the Sledge Patrol, first as Chief of Police and later Greenland Army Captain. He and Neils Jensen split time in command of the forward operations at BE-5, both serving for the duration of the war. Poulsen was the son of a bookseller in a provincial Danish town, a temporary summer job in Greenland with renowned explorer and geologist Dr. Lauge Koch would infect Poulsen with arctic fever. Northeast Greenland would become his passion. He spent several years as a hunter and radio operator at one of the four weather stations, this one operated by another of the great men of Danish arctic exploration, Count Eigil Knuth.

When the Germans invaded Denmark, Poulsen was home on leave. Fortunately, the men at Knuth's station were due for relief, providing him with a potential avenue for return to Greenland. Knuth applied to the Germans for permission to send Poulsen and two others to bolster the staff at the weather station. The Germans were eager for the ongoing weather broadcasts, so despite Greenland's efforts to side with the Allies, they granted permission for ship transport from Norway. Before Poulsen sailed, Knuth gave him covert instructions to shut down the unencrypted weather observations, but Poulsen did not need to be told. From his days as a station radio operator, he knew well the value of those broadcasts. He also understood that the gap in weather information would be a powerful motivation for German intrusion into northeast Greenland

It is hard to imagine that anyone ever had a more expansive and isolated command than that of Captain Ib Poulsen, North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol. His civilian boss, Governor Brun, was on the other side of the massive Greenland ice-cap. His patrol area stretched from just south of Scoresby Sound to whatever point north along the coast might be potentially navigable for a German vessel, roughly 78 degrees north latitude. If anyone had the patience to measure the length of the jagged coastline, it would be area of responsibility of approximately ten-thousand linear miles of some of the most inhospitable territory on earth. The Coast Guard cutter *Northland,* and the other ships and personnel of the Greenland Patrol, were his closest and most

important military allies and support network. To ensure good communications, *Northland* carried two Danish-speaking interpreters, one of whom was a Coast Guardsman of Danish heritage. However, come winter, they too would depart to avoid being trapped by the inevitable, rapid-forming coastal icefield. Poulsen and his crew would then be on their own from that point on.

Operations Begin

With personnel, essential supplies, and an initial plan in place, the Sledge Patrol began operations shortly after its formation in September of 1941. The personnel were divided into three groups. One team would operate from Scoresby Sound (BE-3). The bulk of the crew would be divided into two larger teams stationed north of the colony at two former research stations established by Danish geologist Lauge Kock in the 1930s located at Ella Island (BE-4) and Eskimoness (BE-5).

Bluie East Five, Eskimoness, Northeast Greenland (Danish Arctic Institute photo)

For hunters accustomed to living alone in primitive uncomfortable shacks, luxurious is not too strong a description for the stations at Ella Island and Eskimoness. By arctic standards, they were palatial. The station at Eskimoness was a single-story red-painted house with large living-room in the center surrounded by six bedrooms. A radio room and battery/generator compartment opened off one side. Store rooms were built against the outer walls of the bedrooms; so that the house was in three concentric layers which sheltered and insulated each other and could be heated by a large stove in the middle. Ella Island Station was similar. Poulsen chose the station at Eskimoness as his command center because of its proximity to the northern half of the patrol area. It was also a critical location for the encrypted weather observations that the patrol was required to broadcast every six hours.

The stations were originally constructed for scientific research and the gathering of weather information. In addition to their science and meteorological purposes, they were essential visible symbols of Danish sovereignty. In the early 1930s, Norway, who also has historic ties to the island, made claims on eastern Greenland. The International Court of Justice in the Hague ruled in favor of Denmark in 1933. Nevertheless, maintaining visible presence became increasingly important. Knowing that Germany had now installed a puppet government in occupied Norway, this became even more vital. In addition to its primary reconnaissance and weather missions, the Sledge Patrol presence was also protecting Danish sovereignty.

The patrol showed its worth almost immediately after beginning operations, reporting that a suspicious-looking party of men had landed near the entrance to Franz Joseph Fjord. Cutter *Northland* investigated, locating the Norwegian fishing trawler *Buskoe* in MacKenzie Bay. The *Northland's* boarding party determined that the *Buskoe* had deposited the German shore party and equipment. The vessel was seized and the members of shore party were apprehended. Thanks to the Sledge Patrol, the *Northland* had made the first American naval capture of World War II.

The Sledge Patrol continued their reconnaissance throughout the long, dark winter of 1941/42. Their clothing was chosen carefully for survival in the Arctic and their weapon, a reliable hunting rifle, selected to ensure a lethal shot on all manner of game, including the ever-dangerous polar bear. On patrol, hunting was a necessity to ensure adequate food for both human and dogs. Before the war put an end to ordinary hunting, each hunter had a fairly elaborate hut, known as a hunting station, where he lived. These were at intervals of approximately every 60 miles up the coast to around 76 degrees north latitude. Much smaller, very crude huts where a man could spend the night were scattered roughly every 12 miles between the hunting stations. In keeping with arctic tradition, the doors of stations and huts were never locked; they were open for whomever had the need.

Every single station and hut are marked on the maps of Greenland. At first glance, it gave the coast a deceptively populous appearance. Whenever possible, the men of the Sledge Patrol continued to overnight in the huts, stocking many with depots of coal, driftwood, dog food and paraffin. However, their sleds also carried the tent and other gear necessary to endure a blizzard in the open. Some preferred their own tent on the pure clean ice to a less inviting hut. Allowing for poor weather, a patrol could average 15 to 20 miles a day and as much 40 miles on a good day. At times, patrols to the northern end of their area of responsibility required the men to journey for two months or more away from their station at Eskimoness (BE-5).

Elite Sensor Package with Tails

Sledge dogs are arctic animals ideally suited for their environment. They did much more for the Sledge Patrol than just drag the driver's gear across the ice and snow. The dogs were his companion and protector. Without dogs, it would be dangerous to sleep in a tent on the ice. The fierce and inquisitive polar bear will hunt a human for food. A sleeping man might not hear a bear before it is too late. A sleeping dog, on the other hand, is far more alert.

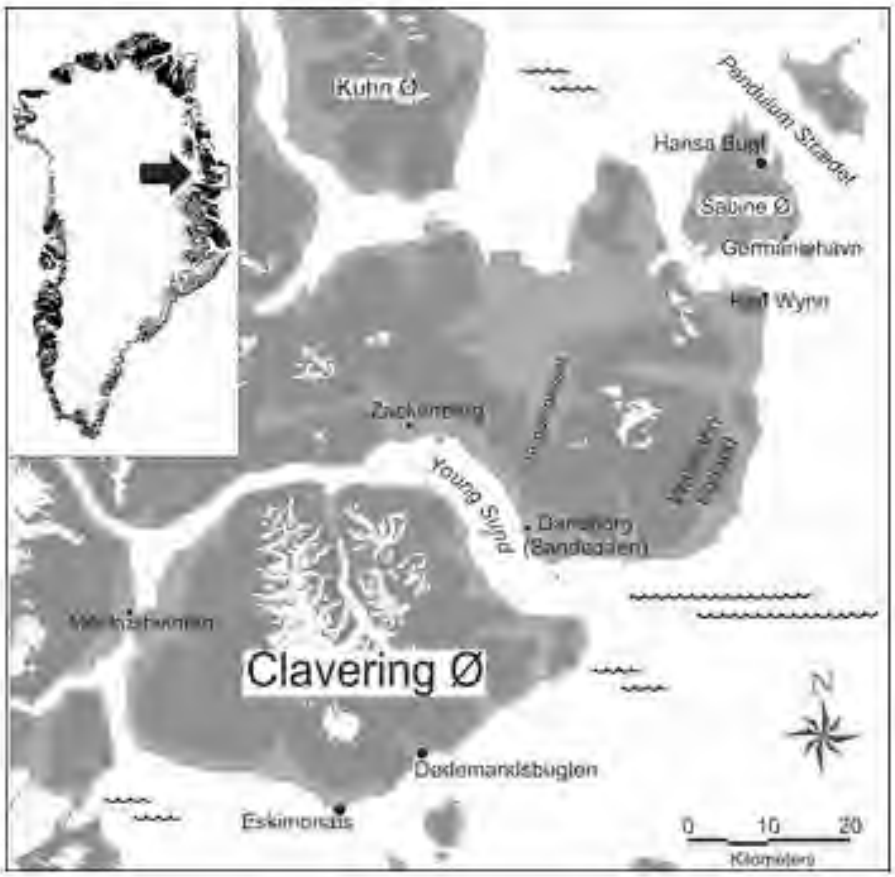
North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol on the ice (Danish Arctic Institute photo)

Sledge dogs are also very intelligent and even more inquisitive than polar bears. A sledge dog's keen sense of smell is almost incomprehensible to humans. Down-wind, they can scent a man, a bear, or a hut that is lived in, two or three miles away. More importantly for reconnaissance, they will always go towards the scent unless the sledge driver stops them, no easy task. The Sledge Patrol personnel by themselves, especially in winter, could never have searched all the small valleys where huts or tents might be hidden; but with dogs, all they needed to do was to drive along off-shore on the sea ice, relying on the dogs to use their acute sense of smell and natural curiosity to locate the enemy. The machines and technology of the 1940s could not have come close to the innate talents of a good sledge dog team.

Contact with the Enemy

In the summer of 1942, the German trawler *Sachsen* sailed from Kiel on a secret mission to Greenland under direct orders from naval headquarters in Berlin. The ship had 19 men onboard and was under the command of a seasoned merchant mariner, now serving as a reserve lieutenant in the German Navy. In addition to the vessel's crew, the *Sachsen* carried a doctor, two radio operators, and a team of meteorologists. Lieutenant Hermann Ritter, the commanding officer, was a skilled ice pilot. His orders were to make best use of his experience in the Arctic to avoid British and U.S. patrol vessels and land the meteorologists undetected in northeast Greenland to establish a covert weather station. As he approached the coast of Greenland on 26 August near the southern point of Shannon Island at 75 degrees north latitude, he encountered unbroken sea ice for as far as the eye could see. Ritter had hoped to get farther north to lessen the chance of detection, but it was late in the summer season and not wishing to get crushed by the slow moving, unpredictable sea ice, he headed south. He sailed into a tiny fjord called Hansa Bay on Sabine Island. There, Ritter ran his vessel aground is a relatively safe spot in anticipation of being frozen-in for the winter. His crew began the work of establishing the weather station ashore, code named *Holzauge*. However, Ritter's feelings of success were definitely dampened by the knowledge that his vessel and crew were far too close to Eskimoness, a well-known hunting station, for comfort. In the first of many ironic events that would follow, Ritter watched nervously as a small single-engine amphibian aircraft flew over the location without detecting his vessel. The irony was that it was a Coast Guard aircraft deployed from cutter *Northland*,

checking ice conditions along the coast, while the cutter and its crew simultaneously provided supplies and support to the Sledge Patrol station at Eskimoness (BE-5).



Sabine Island, Hansa Bay and surrounding area (Danish Arctic Institute image)

Footprints, Human Footprints!!

At the beginning of March 1943, Poulsen requested that sledge patrolman Marius Jensen have a look at Sabine Island. This time of the year was the busiest for the Sledge Patrol. The worst of the winter storms and cold was over, and the periods of daylight were increasing by 20 minutes every day. Temperatures were not too cold for the men nor too warm for the dogs, and sledging conditions were near perfect. Jensen was not enthusiastic about the trip to Sabine Island because of the poor hunting and his skepticism that the Germans would ever choose a place with both bad weather and bad hunting. Poulsen was unmoved, reminding Jensen of the primary mission of the Sledge Patrol.

Jensen started his journey on 8 March, accompanied by two native Greenlanders, Mikael Kunak and William Arke, who had joined the patrol in 1942. In total, nine native Greenlanders served in the Patrol over the course of the war. In keeping with long-standing Danish efforts to protect the native Greenlanders from the worst aspects of the outside world and to preserve their best characteristics, they were allowed only to enroll as "assistants" in the Sledge Patrol. They were essentially support personnel, there to drive sledges, hunt, and lay in depots of food. They were

not allowed to patrol alone and if fighting occurred, every attempt would be made to keep the Greenlanders out of it.

Marius Jensen

Mikael Kunak

(Danish Arctic Institute photos)

The native Greenlanders were intelligent, sensible people, expert hunters and devout Christians, but their view of the world was rather limited. The idea of great nations at war was nearly impossible for them to grasp. In the life experiences of the Inuit Greenlanders of the Sledge Patrol, the concept of meeting a hostile man was as unlikely as meeting a friendly bear. Unfortunately, the sad realities of war were about to become very real for Mikael and William.

As the three approached Sabine Island, the dogs alerted—ears up, tails out—and began to move more quickly. Jensen knew there was a hut on Sabine Island, but suspected that it was far more likely that a bear was scavenging nearby rather than a human inhabitant. As he cleared the rise, he was amazed to see a wisp of smoke rising from the chimney into the cold arctic air. His initial thought was it must be sledge patrolman Peter Nielson, who was patrolling somewhere to the north. The thought lasted only a moment. Mikael came rushing up, shouting: "Footprints, human footprints—boots, with heels!" Nobody Marius knew wore boots with heels. With his field glasses, he saw two men running away up the hills behind the hut. Recovering from their surprise, the three drove their sledges down to the hut on Germania Harbor, discovering the stove still burning and two half-empty mugs of coffee on the table. They also found sleeping bags, daggers, Nazi uniforms, supplies, coal, and half of a butchered polar bear. The three sledge patrolmen immediately set-off for BE-5 to inform Poulsen and the others. What would follow is the makings of a screenplay for a wartime adventure movie.

The Stage is Set

The two German hunters had made their way quickly back to the outpost at Hansa Bay. Being familiar with this part of Greenland, Lieutenant Ritter knew that the patrol had undoubtedly come from Eskimoness (BE-5), since that was the only significant station within 300 miles. He took it for granted that the station had a radio. If any of the members of the patrol reached Eskimoness, the Americans would soon know the location of his hidden base. Two search

parties were quickly organized. Armed with sub-machine guns, rifles, and revolvers, their orders were to find the sledge drivers and bring them back—alive, if possible, dead if necessary.

The First Mistake

Based on his years of adhering to successful, time-honored practices, Marius Jensen made a grievous error. He did what he had always done—stop at one of the many hunting shacks to rest his dogs when they showed sign of fatigue. One can image the pleasant surprise of the pursuing German search party when they saw the faint light from the shack's window in the distance.

As the Germans approached, the Sledge Patrol team's dogs began to howl. Familiar with the language of sled dogs, Marius, Mikael and William knew they were in trouble. They immediately fled the hunting shack, heading into the arctic night with nothing more than their rifles and the clothes on their backs. In the somewhat panicky escape, they left behind their dogs and three fully equipped sledges. Perhaps the greatest loss was Jensen's journal. The Sledge Patrol had been ordered to keep a log of their daily activities. The enemy now had a wealth of information on the Patrol's whereabouts and organization.

Once away from the hunting shack, Jensen made the decision to split the team to improve the chances of getting word back to Eskimoness. He told Mikael and William to make their way back together and he would take a different route alone. Miraculously, all three made it back successfully, arriving on 13 March. Over the course of two days, they had walked nearly 100 miles along the rugged coast of northeast Greenland.

Arctic Hunters become Warriors

"Your main task till further notice obtain fullest most reliable information and if possible, without prejudice to main task also to eliminate enemy forces by capture or shooting."

Poulsen reported the information about the German outpost on Sabine Island by radio, requesting guidance. He also made plans for how best to gather those members of his crew still out on patrol and began to organize his thoughts on defending Eskimoness (BE-5), if or when the Germans came. He also proposed to undertake additional reconnaissance once he had his troops gathered and accounted for. Governor Brun's encrypted message response to Poulsen on 14 March 1943, clearly articulated the Sledge Patrol's tasking:

> *TO POULSEN ESKIMONES*
>
> *MARCH 14TH*
>
> *FROM ESKE BRUN*
>
> *Your main task till further notice obtain fullest most reliable information and if possible, without prejudice to main task also to eliminate enemy forces by capture or shooting. You are authorized use of any means to this end and your weapons should be used rather than run least risk of being captured yourselves, or at least sign among prisoners of resistance or attempts to escape. Immediately you have in your own judgement assembled enough men at the station, you may make journey proposed with necessary companions. Keep*

radio watch for possible detection enemy radio in neighborhood. Be prepared for air attack. How many men will be at station when Olsen returns. Inform me for sake of identification from air how many men leave with how many sledges immediately on departure. Signal conditions of fjord ice with regard to possible plane landing. Signal winter ice and pack ice conditions. Energy and judgement of great importance our future position in east Greenland. Remember enemy probably resolute so take no chances but shoot first. BRUN

Greenland's First and Only Army

Having operated as a hastily conceived, albeit successful, civilian volunteer police force since the fall of 1941, the North East Greenland Sledge Patrol could now be facing combat operations against enemy forces. While he did not regret his guidance to shoot first, Brun understood that under the rules of war, what he had done, in legal terms, was to incite civilians to murder. Ever focused on what was best for Greenland and always creative, Governor Brun's solution was more than a bit unorthodox, but enormously satisfying to him personally. As far as he knew, under international law, there was no prohibition to a colonial governor creating an army, so he decided to found one: the Greenland Army. He wrote out a set of commissions and appointments and sent the signal to Poulsen. The Sledge Patrol at BE-5 was now a military unit with two officers, one sergeant and six corporals, together with six non-combatant native Greenlander assistants. Similar commissions and appointments were dispatched to the Sledge Patrol personnel at Ella Island (BE-4) and Scoresby Sound (BE-3). It was impossible to get them uniforms, so Brun told them to make identifying arm bands, with the number of stars indicating officer rank, vertical bars for enlisted grades—problem solved.

North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol armband (Danish Arctic Institute photo)

While it had a charming almost farcical element, if the worst came to worst in a conflict with the Germans, the members of the Sledge Patrol could now claim to be military prisoners of war. Seeing the humorous side of what he had done, Brun began calling himself General. In later years, he joked that like all good generals he had remained at least five hundred miles behind the front line.

Back at Eskimoness, the men of the Sledge Patrol quickly recovered from their surprise, sewed their armbands, and made ready to defend Bluie East Five. Poulsen replied to Brun's message with an assessment of the ice conditions and an urgent request for automatic weapons.

Where are the Germans, and the American Airplanes?

A week passed and nothing happened. Everyone, especially Poulsen, was puzzled that neither the Germans nor Americans had arrived. The answer to the delay in the German's pressing their advantage was somewhat simple. They had the captured dogs and sledges, as well as essential intelligence on the Sledge Patrol, but lacked the essential skills needed to drive a dog sledge team across the ice. After watching the chaos of his crew's pathetic initial attempts, Lieutenant Ritter wisely devoted much needed time to training his crew as dog sledge mushers.

The absence of anticipated American military support was much more complicated. Poulsen's expectations and the realities of what might actually happen where definitely misaligned. He envisioned U.S. aircraft immediately attacking the discovered German station. Poulsen also hoped for an airdrop of weapons to better match the firepower of the Germans. In reality, the closest air base with long-range bombers was in Iceland. The attack would require extra fuel tanks and crews skilled in both arctic navigation and bombing expertise. The capability to carry out the mission simply wasn't available. U.S. operations in Greenland had expanded rapidly, resources were stretched thin, and mission priority was always the driving force.

Poulsen had never met Eske Brun in person. He had met and talked with Iceberg Smith and other Coast Guard crewmen on cutter *Northland* when the Sledge Patrol was established in September 1941, and again during resupply in summer of 1942. What sort of support expectations he garnered from these encounters is pure speculation. The fact that these exchanges happened through an interpreter undoubtedly improved the opportunity for misinterpretation and confusion. At any rate, in the spring of 1943, Poulsen's expectation and the American response were very different.

A two-vessel task force consisting of the cutters *North Star* and *Northland* had been organized and dispatched, but it would take weeks to get to Sabine Island, assuming they could even find a route through the formidable, extremely hazardous sea ice. The arrival of heavy icebreaker capability was still over a year away. The efforts of the task group were further complicated when *North Star* was damaged early in the voyage and had to divert to Iceland for repairs.

The requested automatic weapons would eventually be airdropped to the Sledge Patrol, the German station would be attacked by the Army Air Force, and cutter *Northland* would land Coast Guard and Army forces at Sabine Island. Ironically, all of this would occur far too late to be of help to the Sledge Patrol.

Going it on Their Own

Not being one to sit on his hands, Poulsen sent two of the native Greenlanders to the station at Ella Island (BE-4) to tell any men not out on patrol to come north to reinforce Eskimoness (BE 5). Defense positions were established and depots of supplies hidden along possible escape routes to the south. Kurt Olsen, who had been on patrol, returned, leaving only Peter Nielsen, on

patrol somewhere to the far north, unaccounted for. Paulsen was deeply concerned that Nielsen would run right into the Germans as he worked his way south. Despite the loss of two rifles to defend BE-5, he dispatched sledge patrolmen Marius Jensen and Eli Knudsen to look for Nielsen. That left Poulsen, Olsen and seasoned arctic hand, Henry Rudi, a Norwegian hunter who had joined the patrol in 1942, to defend BE-5.

Kurt Olsen

Peter Nielsen
(Danish Arctic Institute photos)

Henry Rudi

Somebody on the Ice!

On the evening of 23 March, Poulsen had completed his rounds of the station. Kurt Olsen had compiled and encrypted his weather observations and was preparing to broadcast. Henry Rudi was on watch. His shout to "Poulsen, I think there's somebody on the ice" would be the beginning of the next chapter of Germans vs Sledge Patrol.

Poulsen grabbed his rifle and headed outside; the other two were ordered to their action stations. In the darkness, he saw movement and heard and stirring of the dogs. After brief verbal exchanges, first in Danish, then German, he heard the challenge: "Do you intend to offer armed resistance?" His answer in the affirmative was met instantly with tracer fire from an automatic weapon. In a hail of gunfire, he, Olsen, and Rudi scattered and escaped. In less than ten minutes, BE-5 had been lost.

Survive and Regroup

Poulsen immediately realized his dire situation. He had literally escaped with the clothes on his back—shirt, trousers, and seal skin boots. The nearest help was at Ella Island (BE-4), two hundred miles to the south. He located one of the depots of escape supplies, but clothing was not among the items hidden. He cut up a tent, fashioning the crudest of clothing that might help him survive the arctic cold on foot. Over the course of the next eleven days, he walked more than 230 miles, arriving at Ella Island station on the evening of 4 April. Concerned that the Germans had cracked the cypher, Poulsen sent his update message on 5 April in the Inuit language of the native Greenlanders, knowing for certain that the Germans would have no way to understand.

Olsen and Rudi also made the miraculous journey successfully, although theirs was bit less harrowing because they departed with better clothing. The seminal moment for them occurred while resting at a hunting shack at Musk Ox Fjord. When alerted by the sound of dogs, they fully expected to be surrounded by well-armed Germans. Instead, they heard the familiar voice of Peter Nielsen, whom nobody had seen for months. In the turmoil and unlikely happenings of the past few weeks, the news that Nielsen brought was the most shocking—Eli Knudsen had been killed by the Germans.

Destruction of Bluie East Five and the Loss of a Sledge Patrolman

Marius Jensen and Eli Knudsen had been successful in tracking down the last of the unaccounted-for sledge patrolman, Peter Nielsen, near Hochstetter Foreland. Poulsen had instructed them to take a longer, but safer, route back to Eskimoness (BE-5) once they located Nielsen. In yet another grievous error in judgement, the three decided that getting back to Eskimoness on the more direct route to double the forces available to defend the station was the better choice. Unfortunately, they were unaware that BE-5 would shortly fall to the enemy. Before burning the station to the ground, the Germans did a thorough search and now had a wealth of information on the Sledge Patrol and the whereabouts of its personnel. Lieutenant Ritter used the information to set a trap for Jensen, Knudsen and Nielsen at Sandodden along the route back to BE-5.

Because Marius Jensen was driving a mismatched team of eight borrowed dogs, he constantly lagged behind the other two, with Knudsen often far ahead. It became a bit of procession, with the three far more spread out than normal. On the third night, they had agreed to camp on the northern side of Kuppel Pass, so the next day they could pass Sandodden without going too near, reaching Eskimoness the next evening. However, because Sandodden had been Eli Knudsen's base camp before the war and he was hungry and tired, he decided not to wait on the others. This error in judgement would prove deadly. As he approached, the Germans were lying-in-wait. When Knudsen saw them rise, he attempted to make a run for cover behind a rock outcropping. Ritter gave the order to "shoot the dogs!"—intending to stop the sledge and capture Knudsen alive. In a tragic twist of fate, the machine gun jammed after the first burst felled many of the dogs. In the process of clearing the weapon, the gunner's second burst was off target, accidently killing Knudsen.

Eli Knudsen

Knudsen's gravesite (Danish Arctic Institute photos)

The next morning Jensen and Nielsen drove down the pass following Knudsen's tracks to the cabin. From past experience, they should have been more wary, but the smoke rising from the chimney and Knudsen's sled and dogs resting outside gave a false sense of wellbeing. The Germans once again rose from their hiding spots in the snow and easily apprehended both Jensen and Nielsen without a fight.

This was definitely the low point in the Sledge Patrol's colorful history – the all-important station at BE-5 was in ruins; the enemy had journals, logs and other papers containing critical information including communication codes; one member has been shot and killed; two others were prisoners of war; and the rest of the unit was is in tactical retreat. Time to rally.

Back to Sabine Island

Knudsen's body was placed in a thick earthen hut, that Knudsen himself had constructed at the hunting station to store food and other supplies. His final resting place was hastily marked with a crude wooden cross constructed by one of the Germans. Lieutenant Ritter and the other Germans, along with their two prisoners, prepared to head back to their base at Hansa Bay on Sabine Island. With the capture of Jensen and Nielsen's sledges added to those acquired earlier with the capture of BE-5, they now had 8 dog teams. The Germans were still marginally skilled as sledge drivers. It was obvious to Ritter that they needed the expertise of Jensen and Nielsen if they were going to get all the dogs and sledges back to the base successfully. Ritter made it clear that an escape attempt by either would bring severe punishment to the other. He also promised more humane treatment in exchange for cooperation. With these threats and incentive hanging over their heads, the two Danes did what they did best, drive their sledges and dogs across the ice and snow, leading their far less skilled captors back to Hansa Bay. However, they were simultaneously plotting how their superior skills and familiarity with the terrain and environment could be parlayed into an opportunity for escape.

The Reluctant Warrior

Lieutenant Hermann Ritter was a German only by the happenstance of politics. Born in Austria, he was a veteran of WWI. At war's end, he found his homeland now part of Czechoslovakia. When the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia in 1938, his nationality changed again; he was now told he was German. He enjoyed a diverse and successful career as a merchant marine officer, including as captain in arctic whalers. He joined the German naval reserve, but was never a member of the Nazi party, a fact that would cost him his first command. As commanding officer of a naval auxiliary vessel operating in the North Sea and Baltic, he came under suspicion by the Gestapo. No charges were ever brought and he was defended vigorously by his Navy superiors. Nevertheless, he was removed from command. Ritter was thrilled when he was given command of *Sachsen* for the Holzauge mission to Greenland and looked forward to a return to the Arctic.

Ritter and his crew were not nearly as cohesive as the members of the Sledge Patrol. The fact that he was a good naval officer but not a Nazi, would once again bring suspicion and conflict with the more ardent believers in his command. His understanding of the ways and culture of the

Lieutenant Hermann Ritter (Danish Arctic Institute photo)

arctic and lack of conviction for the Nazi cause would help shape his actions over the next few weeks.

Now that his base had been discovered, Lieutenant Ritter's main goal was survival until ice conditions would allow the *Sachsen* and his crew to escape back to sea. He also set into motion plans for potential emergency evacuation by German aircraft.

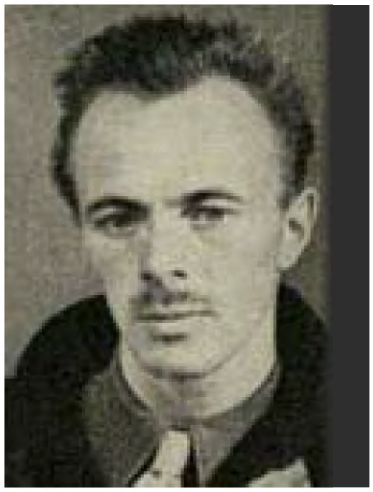
The greatest threat was obviously an attack by American forces. There was also the uncertainty of further action by the Sledge Patrol. Discussions with both his crew and his two captives would lead to a multifaceted plan. The unit's head meteorologist, Dr. Weiss, and ship's physician, Dr Sensse, along with a few of the best of the German sledge drivers would set out for Ella Island to attack BE-4. The primary goal was to sever communications and lessen the chances of good weather information and other details reaching American forces. As odd as it sounds, in response to an emotional appeal from Marius Jensen, fellow sledge patrolman Peter Nielsen would be allowed to take a sled team back to Sandodden to fortify Knudsen's grave in arctic style to protect his corpse from foxes and other invaders.

In exchange, Jensen would lead Ritter on a reconnaissance mission to the north and east. After completing the burial, Nielsen was to wait at the hunting station at Sandodden until fetched by

the Germans. Ritter knew quite well that Peter, even though unarmed, would undoubtedly keep going south once his work was completed, but saw the threat of one more Sledge Patrolman as far less dangerous than other challenges he faced, and it would be one less man to feed.

Reunited

This is how Peter Nielsen came to be driving toward BE-4 all alone when he caught up with sledge patrolmen Henry Rudi and Kurt Olsen at Musk Ox Fjord with the news of the death of Eli Knudsen at the hands of the Germans. Meanwhile, Poulsen waited anxiously at BE-4 for the arrival of Rudi and Olsen from the north and Sledge Patrol Lieutenant Carlos Ziebell from Scoresby Sound (BE-3) to the south. When Nielsen, Rudi and Olsen reached BE-4, Poulsen was



Carlos Ziebell (Danish Arctic Institute photo)

flooded with information including the destruction of the station at BE-5, Knudsen's death, and Nielsen and Jensen's capture. Most important, they provided definite confirmation of the German base's location at Hansa Bay, as well as a solid estimate of the number of personnel and armament. Again, fearing the Germans had cracked the cypher he possessed, Poulsen wrote out all the information and sent it overland to BE-3 for transmission to Brun and the Americans. After several days, Poulsen received orders to abandon the BE-4 Station at Elba Island and consolidate his forces at BE-3 in Scoresby Sound.

Captor becomes Prisoner

Farther to the north, by happenstance, a severe storm had driven both the German assault team and Ritter and Jensen to take shelter at a hunting station at Mosquito Bay. When the storm subsided, the Germans requested guidance from Jensen on the best route to BE-4. Seizing the opportunity, he recommended a route that he knew would be challenging because of the newly fallen snow. When they had departed, an inattentive Ritter left his rifle unattended and Jensen was able to overpower him. Jensen took all the weapons and abandoned Ritter at the well supplied hunting station for a race to Ella Island on a faster route to warn the Sledge Patrol of the Germans' approach. To his surprise, he found the station abandoned and a note to him from

Poulsen explaining that they had waited as long as they could and were complying with orders to shift south to BE-3. Poulsen included the location of food depots they would leave along the way as they made their way back to BE-3 at Scoresby Sound. The obvious course of action would be for Jensen to follow the instructions and head directly to the relative comfort and security of Scoresby Sound. Instead, he headed back to Mosquito Bay to check on Ritter. This says volumes about the culture of those who live by the special moral code of the Arctic.

Jensen, now a seasoned and shrewd campaigner, was hyper cautious in his route selection, alertness, and observation. He found Ritter essentially as he left him at the hunting station. He then escorted, alone, the enemy commander on a 290-mile, fifteen-day, trek south through what was now enemy territory. The Sledge Patrol now had its first prisoner of war.

The End of Holzauge

Marius Jensen's successful coup had boosted the spirits of the Sledge Patrol. They were filled with vigor to press the fight. The retreats from BE-5 at Eskimoness and BE-4 at Ella Island had definitely left a bad taste in their mouths. It was the middle of May and sledge conditions were deteriorating rapidly. Immediate action was required. Needing to also defend BE-3, Poulsen divided his forces. Despite still being armed only with hunting rifles, a three-man team consisting of Ziebell, Olsen, and Jensen was dispatched to Ella Island. In yet another bit of irony, four machine guns were airdropped by an American aircraft shortly after the sledges had departed Scoresby Sound. As it turned out, the automatic weapons weren't needed. The Germans, who had briefly occupied BE-4, had departed for their base at Hansa Bay.

On 25 May 1943, nearly three months after the Sledge Patrol's first encounter with the Germans, a flight of U.S. Army Air Force B-24 Liberator bombers flew from Iceland and attacked the German base at Hansa Bay. The squadron was led by the Air Force's most experienced arctic aviator, Colonel Bernt Balchen. The Germans staunchly defended their position, exchanging fire with the U.S. aircraft. Remarkably, no U.S. aircraft were hit and no Germans were killed. The base buildings were damaged, but *Sachsen* survived. However, most importantly, the meteorological equipment was destroyed, bringing an end to weather station Holzauge.

Cutter *Northland* Arrives at Hansa Bay

A month after the air attack, the entire crew of weather station Holzauge, with the exception of Dr. Rudolph Sensse, was evacuated by a German long-range sea plane. Prior to their departure, the Germans burned the remaining building and scuttled *Sachsen* with explosive charges.

Dr. Sensse had set out alone by dog sled to search for Ritter. Unfortunately, his sledge and dog team had fallen through the rapidly deteriorating ice. He was captured by the *Northland's* landing party when the cutter made its way through the ice to Sabine Island in late July. Sledge Patrol Captain Neils Jensen traveled with *Northland*. Searching the local area for survivors of the air attack, the Coasties located Dr. Sensse at the Sandodden hunting station by following the

sound of classical music he was playing on an old-style crank phonograph. In the last of the ironic twist in the saga, he was wearing sledge patrolman Eli Knudsen's anorak (heavy winter coat), complete with bullet holes. Dr. Sensse had removed the anorak when treating Knudsen for his wounds after the deadly incident at the station months earlier. After weeks on his own, surviving on the meager rations at the hunting station, capture by the Americans was undoubtedly a blessing.

The Sledge Patrol's Mission Continues

While American forces were bringing a final end to the German base at Hansa Bay, the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol was rapidly recovering from the loss of its station at Eskimoness. A new "Blue East Five" headquarters was established at a hunting station a few miles south at Dodemandsbugten (Deadman's Bay). The station was later shifted north to Daneborg in 1944. The sledge patrolmen continued their long, often solidary patrols along the vast expanses of Greenland's rugged northeast coast.

Sledge Patrol Station at Daneborg, BE-5 (Danish Arctic Institute photo)

They would face off one more time in armed conflict with the enemy. Code named Operation Bassgeiger, the specially equipped ice capable trawler *Coburg* established a German weather station at Cape Sussi on Shannon Island. Transmissions from the station were detected by an American listening station and reported to the Sledge Patrol. On 22 April 1944, a six-man Sledge Patrol assault team led by Captain Niels Ove Jensen attacked the Bassgeiger station.

Niels Ove Jensen (Danish Arctic Institute photo)

Lt. Helmuth Zacher (Danish Arctic Institute photo)

During the firefight, the German military commander, Lieutenant Helmuth Zacher, was killed. The Sledge Patrol team was eventually forced to abandon the assault and retreat, but the skirmish led to the Germans abandoning the station, and evacuating the crew by airlift. The Coast Guard reached the abandoned station in August, inventorying the equipment and documenting Lieutenant Zacher's gravesite.

The War Ends but the Sledge Patrol Lives On

On 5 May 1945, Greenlanders celebrated the liberation of Denmark. The Island's formal political and economic connections to Denmark were reestablished. However, United States' wartime influences had changed Greenland forever. It took time for the reformists in Greenland and traditionalists in Copenhagen to settle the way forward in the post-war years. Those discussions are ongoing today.

Liberation of Denmark Celebration, Gothaab (Nuuk), 1945 (Danish Arctic Institute photo)

The United States awarded the Legion of Merit Medal to Sledge Patrolmen Captain Ib Poulsen, Captain Niels Ove Jensen, Lieutenant Marius Jensen, and Corporal Eli Knudsen (posthumously) for their valor in action against the enemy.

The North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol was disestablished at war's end. In reality, this was more of a short-lived pause rather than a demise. In some ways, it wasn't even much of a pause. Immediately after the war, some members of the unit stayed on, reverting to their original "police" status. They continued to patrol and hunt as they had done before, providing a visible presence of Danish sovereignty in the region.

Escalation of the Cold War and worries of Soviet claims in the Arctic soon led to a desire for improved, systematized surveillance of North and North-East Greenland. The North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol was reorganized in 1950. The name was later changed to Resolute Dog Sled Patrol and eventually to Sirius Dog Sled Patrol. Informally known as *Siriuspatruljen* (the Sirius Patrol), the present-day patrol is an elite Royal Danish Navy unit that continues to ensure Danish sovereignty in northeast Greenland.

Dog Star Elite Military Unit

A branch of the Danish Special Forces, the sled patrol takes its name from Sirius (colloquially known as the "Dog Star"), the brightest star in the night sky. Identical to its WWII predecessor, the unit conducts long-range reconnaissance and enforces Danish sovereignty in the Arctic wilderness of northern and eastern Greenland. As in the 1940s, patrolling is usually done in pairs, using dog sledges, sometimes for up to four months and often without additional human contact. Its area of responsibility now includes the Northeast Greenland National Park, the largest national park in the world.

Operating under the Joint Arctic Command, the Sirius Patrol is headquartered at weather station Daneborg, at Sandodden, where North-East Greenland Sledge Patrolman Eli Knudsen is buried. Its mission is essentially identical to its WWII predecessor, including providing critical meteorological data.

(Left) Sledge Patrol candidates line up for test in the winter survival course – a 62-mile 'march' on cross-country skis. (Right) Sledge Patrolman Jens Bonde checks in with a patrol team. (Christian Science Monitor photos by Denver David Robinson)

Selection for the Sirius Dog Sled Patrol is an arduous process. Recruits must have already completed basic Armed Services training before applying and must be eligible to gain a secret security clearance. Recruits must pass level 5 of the Defense Forces physical testing, the highest level that can be attained in the Danish Special Forces. Once selected, the few recruits that have made it through the initial stages must undergo significant training to ensure they can undertake their required responsibilities. This course takes a minimum of 8 months to complete, and covers a large range of topics, including: weapons training, arctic hunting, veterinary skills, meteorology and winter endurance. They also receive specialized medical and dental qualifications.

(Left): Anders Kjærgaard, commanding officer of Sledge Patrol Sirius, and Rufus Gifford, US ambassador to Denmark, travel across the frozen Kong Oscar Fjord with Sledge Team. (Right): Sirius Dog Sled Patrol Crest. (Christian Science Monitor photos by Denver David Robinson)

Patrol units generally work in teams of two, with around six teams operating in a given year. Overall, there are only 14 Sirius Patrol members – six new recruits, each paired with a longer serving sled patrol operator, as well as two additional radio operators at the headquarters station. Patrols can last up to 26 months without a break or return to base, and personnel are not eligible to take any leave during their time on duty. Patrols run year-round – including during severe arctic winter months. The Sirius Dog Sled Patrol is undoubtedly one of the most elite military special forces units in the world.

The weapons the patrol carries reflect the harsh operating conditions. The primary weapon used by the Sirius Dog Sled Patrol is the M1917 Enfield bolt-action rifle chambered in .30-06 Springfield. They also carry the Glock 20 pistol chambered in 10mm Auto. One of the few military units still using the M1917 Enfield, it is chosen for its long-proven ability to function reliably in the Arctic. The unit employs an ammo mix of armor-piercing military rifle rounds, good for stopping an aggressive polar bear at long-range, and civilian hollow-points, essential to bring down an enraged mux ox.

The Crown Prince and Pop Culture

Interestingly, Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark served as a member of the Sirius Dog Sled Patrol during the early 2000s. His service included a 2,200-mile trek through Northern Greenland between February and May. He celebrated his birthday on patrol, and the expedition also marked the 50th anniversary of the unit.

The Sirius Patrol was featured in the March 2022 episode of the acclaimed Danish political drama series "Borgen," aired on Netflix. In the episode, a two-man Sirius patrol unit faces off against a small Russian military team attempting to recover information from a secret drone that had crashed in northeast Greenland in violation of Danish sovereignty.

Sirius Dog Sled Patrol (European Security & Defense photo)

The Little-Known, Lasting Legacy of the U.S. Coast Guard Greenland Patrol

"He also was largely responsible for the creation of the Greenland Sledge Patrol, a contingent of intrepid [native Inuit Greenlanders] and Danish hunters who, recruited by the Greenland government and supplied by the U.S. Army, spent the war patrolling the coastal regions on dog sleds."

This one-line summation about Edward "Iceberg" Smith's role in creating the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol is all that many Coasties know about the patrol's history. It was written by Coast Guard Historian, John A. Tilley, as part of a 20-page pamphlet that he authored, titled "The Coast Guard & the Greenland Patrol." It was published as a centerfold "pullout' in the

Coast Guard's official magazine, *The Command's Bulletin,* in the runup to the service's bicentennial celebration in 1990. It remains one of the most referenced works on the Greenland Patrol. Few in the service understand that the North-East Greenland Sledge Patrol, brainchild of Iceberg Smith and Eske Brun, was also a very successful "proof of concept." The unique unit that they created in Scoresby Sound lives-on today. Who could have imagined that more than eight decades later, in an era of powerful icebreakers, satellite imagery, supersonic aircraft, and precision guided weapons, that a dozen or so men patrolling on dog sledges would still be essential and important? The Sirius Dog Sled Patrol is an extraordinary legacy of the U.S. Coast Guard's defense of Greenland during WWII. The dedicated Danish sailors who serve today can trace their roots directly to those original 15 volunteers who met with Iceberg Smith and the crew of the cutter *Northland* in September of 1941. Semper Paratus!

Gallery of Sled Patrol Photos by greatworldwar2.com (photos courtesy of tumblr)

Greenland Patrol Memorial, U.S. Coast Guard Academy (author photo)

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