

Captain Eugene Burden, in Port Lockroy, Antarctic Peninsula Region (1946 – 47)

By Dr. George Burden

Family tradition always had it that my great-uncle Captain Eugene Burden had carried scientists to the Antarctic Ocean in the 1940s, and that he had brought a film crew down to provide footage for the 1948 British film, *Scott of the Antarctic*. Perhaps this information provided me with the impetus I needed to brave the waters of Antarctica aboard Karlsen's Shipping's MV *Polar Star* during December 2001. In any event I knew that I was not the first member of the family to "burden" the Antarctic with his presence, so to speak. Since I was one of the few on *Polar Star* who did not get sick in the thirty five-foot swells past Cape Horn, I figured some of the family's maritime heritage must still run in my veins.

Most of my discoveries about Captain Eugene were made by serendipity after my return from the Antipodes. By coincidence a good friend of mine, Joseph G. Frey, Chairman, Canadian Chapter, had written an article for *The Medical Post*, and interviewed Dr. Richard Butson, Honourary Chairman, Canadian Chapter, who, as a newly minted medic was the ship's doctor for the Newfoundland vessel MV *Trepassey*. I recognized the latter as the name of the converted sealing vessel Captain Eugene had skippered in Antarctica. A little on-line search revealed that in 1946 and 1947 he had carried research teams of the Falkland Islands Dependency Survey (British Antarctic Survey) to the very waters I had just explored. He had even made regular supply stops to two of the places I had visited, Port Lockroy and Deception Island.

Port Lockroy has an active British post office and I found that my great-uncle's vessel was commemorated on a 4 pence stamp minted by the British Antarctic Territories in 1993! We had landed there December 14, 2001, directly on the ice and exactly on the ninetieth anniversary of Amundsen's discovery of the South Pole. The base, which was abandoned in 1962, has recently been restored to its appearance in the 1940's. At that time it was part of Operation Tabarin, and was founded to monitor the activities of German submarines in the South Atlantic. It must have looked almost exactly the same as when Captain Eugene first visited here.

My next step in my quest was to track down Dr. Butson, who participated in mapping the last 1,000-miles of uncharted coastline left on Earth, for which he was awarded the prestigious Polar Medal, as well as the George Cross for extreme bravery. Joseph Frey was able to arrange an interview with Dr. Butson' who now is retired and lives in Hamilton, Ontario.

Dr. Butson was delighted to take my call and wove me some great yarns about the season he spent aboard MV *Trepassey*. She was a converted sealing boat, wooden-hulled and stabilized with sails, though driven by a diesel engine. Quarters were cramped and Butson describes how he shared a cabin with the Third Engineer, whose main qualifications seemed to have been working on trains in Newfoundland before signing on. The engineer wore his boots in the bunk and warned Dr. Butson to "keep his distance" at night.

Like *Polar Star*, the *Trepassey* hit high seas when she passed Cape Horn and began her crossing of the Drake Passage. Almost everyone was seasick but the ship's cook seemed even more ill than this would warrant. Captain Eugene asked Dr. Butson to have a look at him and an incarcerated hernia was discovered. As surgery was impossible and an untreated hernia would have been fatal, Butson took the desperate measure of pressing forcibly on the hernia and reduced it, thus saving the crewman's life. (No doubt the doctor ate well the rest of the trip.)

Captain Eugene was a master mariner who could handle a vessel in any kind of waters. In his later years he taught navigation in St. John's. Prior to the First World War he navigated frail wooden schooners all over the world and during the war he served as an able seaman on a British destroyer. In 1918 the British Crown awarded him a medal for his role in the daring rescue of the survivors of the SS *Florizel* disaster. After the war Captain Eugene piloted a tern schooner to Antwerp and there saw his old destroyer. Hailing her, he was invited aboard and met his former captain. "Who's the master of that schooner?" queried the captain. "I am" replied Captain Eugene. "What! You mean you can navigate and spent the war as an able seaman on my vessel? If I'd known, you'd have had a commission and been posted on the bridge. Why didn't you tell us?" "You never asked" was his terse reply.

Word must have eventually spread for at the outbreak of the Second World War he received a commission as lieutenant-commander. For much of the war he acted as harbourmaster in St. John's forming up convoys for their perilous dash to England.

Captain Eugene's ability as a navigator and his exposure to the ice and stormy waters of the North Atlantic gave him the experience to handle the treacherous seas of the Antarctic. In fact the only recorded misadventure on board MV *Trepassey* was a small fire which occurred off Stonington Island, well below the Antarctic Circle. Three vessels were at anchor in the bay, one American, the *Port of Beaumont*; one hailing from the Falklands, the *Fitzroy* and the third was Captain Eugene's ship. Since American vessels are "dry" an invitation was extended to the Yanks to come over and celebrate a bit. Unfortunately the celebrations got a little out of hand and someone started a fire. Luckily the blaze was quickly extinguished, as was the party. The British base on Stonington Island was called *Trepassey House*, in the tradition of naming bases for the vessel that first transported the materials and staff to found the station.

Captain Eugene was a bit of an entrepreneur. Dr. Butson recalled that he purchased three surplus American vessels for the bargain price of sixty thousand dollars. Shortly afterwards the British offered him sixty thousand dollars for one boat, leaving him with two free ships. On another occasion he decided to augment his stamp collection. The British operated post offices in several of their bases, canceling or franking stamps with the rare and thus highly desirable British Antarctic Territories postmark. Prior to one visit, Captain Eugene addressed several dozen letters to himself. On arrival at the base he took them to the postmaster who franked each one, then handed it back with a fresh British Antarctic Territories cancellation mark.

Dr. Butson confirmed that there was a cameraman on board *Trepassey*, a Canadian named Moss, who was tasked with getting background footage for the movie *Scott of the Antarctic*. Most of the movie, he said, was filmed on a glacier in Switzerland, but footage of the northern portions of the Antarctic Peninsula were worked in to add authenticity (though this was many hundreds of miles away from the Ross Sea from where Scott actually embarked on his ill-fated voyage). Ironically I already had a copy of this movie at home and watched it once again in an altogether new light

Another destination shared by Captain Eugene and I was Deception Island, an active volcano which sank long ago into the Antarctic Ocean. Skilled captains can pilot their vessels into the crater via a break in the cone called Neptune's Bellows. *Polar Star* entered here and we cruised around the caldera, where superheated waters bubble and steam along the shoreline. The last eruption of this volcano occurred thirty years ago and destroyed several bases.

Captain Eugene guided MV *Trepassey* into the same caldera more than fifty years ago. Dr. Butson relates that they discovered three men, gaunt and in rags whose station had burned and who had spent the season in a lean-to, subsisting on penguins' eggs and seal meat. Their first request was for a tot of rum.

No doubt my great-uncle had many other adventures now lost to history. Still, it was an incredible thrill for me to find I had retraced my Uncle Eugene's steps and to speak with someone who had shared his Antarctic adventures. I'm now trying to track down a first day stamp issue with his ship on it. I'm sure if he were alive he'd have a good chuckle that the British Antarctic Territories postal service would mint a stamp commemorating his vessel. Perhaps it was a means of showing appreciation to one of their best customers of the 1940s!

Captain Eugene's memory began to suffer in his later years, but in moments of lucidity his wit and eloquence would shine through once again. Near the end he was asked what were his future plans. He shook his head ruefully and replied, "The mate just took a bearing and we are not far from the Celestial Shore." Captain Eugene passed away not long after.