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## Going Ashore in Thule

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## Going Ashore in Thule

dave Schlitz

During those long-ago summers of the early '60's, I sailed away to the high Arctic as part of the crew of the *U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Westwind (WAGB 281)*. Two hundred plus Coasties were on board with an additional dozen U S Navy airdales (on detached duty to *Westwind*), who flew and maintained our helos. And one US Public Health Service Doctor.



*CGC Westwind entering North Star Bay with Mt Dundas in the background*

The *Wind*, as she was known to her motley crew, that is when we were not calling her something derogatory such as **White Arctic Garbage Barge**, was one of seven 1940's Wind Class Polar Icebreakers that had been built during the 'War.'

Our primary duty during those summers cruising Arctic waters was escorting Navy Military Sea Transport (MST) vessels and tankers through the ice fields of Baffin Bay. The ships were bound for Thule AB in northern Greenland where resupply had to be done during a two-month period in summer. The *Wind* would also render assistance to Danish vessels, if needed,

that were servicing the Eskimo villages along the northwest Greenland coast, or deliver scientists and supplies to far-flung outposts in the Canadian Archipelago.

When those assignments were completed, *Westwind* would head back to Thule and tie up at the DeLong Pier — a longish rock jetty and mooring area that jutted out into North Star Bay.



*Thule Air Base, Greenland. DeLong Pier can be seen slightly left of center sticking out in North Star Bay. Mt Dundas is the flat mesa-like mountain.*

There, at the end of our workday, liberty would be granted to all hands who were not in the duty section (the *Wind* ran three section liberty) or restricted to the ship. At 16:00—on those days when I didn't have the duty—I secured from my regular in-port workday routine. I changed from my dungarees and chambray shirt into my undress blues—the usual liberty uniform for Thule—and headed for the quarterdeck and liberty.

Once liberty was granted, I headed up to ‘downtown’ Thule. As you might very well expect, there were only a few places that us Coasties could go in Thule, like for starters, the local Air Force geedunk. A geedunk, for all you non-sailors, is a snack bar / rec hall kind of place. If you wanted to relax for a little bit, grab some burgers and a coke, and maybe shoot a little 8 Ball, it was the place to go. The geedunk was a place where a couple of the guys could sit on real chairs at a real table instead of the *Wind’s* long mess deck tables and ass-hurtin’ benches. As far as I was concerned the cheeseburgers, fries, and coke that I and my buddies all gobbled up in the geedunk tasted a hell of a lot better than back on the ship.

It was also, as far as us Coasties were concerned, the place to go for liberating Air Force parkas. Our cold weather gear—along with whatever passed for Arctic survival stuff that we had been issued—was all pretty much World War II vintage, well-worn from hard usage and only barely serviceable. A good deal of the gear had, over the years, been begged, borrowed, or in a few cases just outright stolen. The Air Force Zoomies, on the other hand, all seemed to have the bestest and latest stuff, including wonderful, brand-spanking new, well-insulated nylon parkas with fur lined hoods. Being the cumshaw-loving Coasties that we were, we soon came up with an almost foolproof way to ‘liberate’ the parkas.



After you walked into the geedunk, there was a coat room where our peacoats or foul weather jackets were hung on hooks, just like we had in grade school. The Air Force Zoomies of course, hung up their parkas. On busy afternoons and evenings, doubling up was the rule (just as it had been in school) since there were never enough hooks. It was therefore SOP for us to hang our peacoat over an Air Force parka. Since our uniform for liberty in Thule was undress (informal, if you will) blues, going ashore, most guys wore either their foul weather jacket or peacoat. The foul weather jackets were not big enough or bulky enough to hide a parka under. However, our peacoats were, especially with the oversized collars flipped up. After we finished our burgers and cokes, we would amble into the coat room and simply enfold the parka in our peacoat, tucking in the hood. Since it was ‘too warm’ to wear our peacoats inside we merely tucked them into the crook of our arm. Without batting an eye, we’d calmly stroll out of the geedunk with the parka ensconced in our peacoat, then hopped on the Thule Stage back to the Wind. Anyone with a purloined parka understood that it would at no time be worn while we were in Thule. Not on the ship and definitely not off it either. Never, ever.

During the summer of ’61, while in Thule, we also liberated chairs from the Air Force. The crews’ rec deck, for reasons unknown, was totally bereft of chairs. We only had a couple of small benches to sit on and these were anchored to the bulkhead. That meant either sitting on overturned GI trash cans or leaning over the table while standing to write letters, play games of chess or checkers, or maybe work on craft projects.

One sunny July afternoon, the Zoomie Motor Pool was called, and a pickup truck was requested to be dropped off at *Westwind* down at DeLong Pier. With the said vehicle delivered, Bosun Mate Bob hopped into the cab with his number one assistant, Seaman Joe, riding shotgun. Three other deckies jumped in the back and hung on for dear life as Bosun Bob zoomed off. The

Great Westwind Chair Hunting Expeditionary Force departed Delong Pier and headed for the USAF barracks area. Bosun Bob would back the pickup into a parking space by the barrack's entrance. Then the three seamen in the back would hop out and casually saunter into the barrack's dayroom and liberate three chairs.

After several stops, the back of the truck was loaded with a dozen chairs. Two of the guys in the back now had to squeeze into the cab while the third guy stayed there, balanced a little bit precariously, to make sure the chairs didn't fall off (didn't need to be losing any of the newly liberated chairs). The Great Chair Hunting Expeditionary Force returned to the *Wind* having completed an eminently successful mission. Cheers all around. The chairs were immediately transferred to the crew's rec deck and the Zoomie Motor Pool notified they could come and get their pickup truck.

Our other options for liberty in Thule were going to the movies or perhaps the PX to do a little souvenir shopping. The girls back home always enjoyed getting souvenirs from far way places; I know mine did. Or perhaps, head to the base gym if you felt like working out or playing basketball, or maybe just sitting and sweating in a nice hot sauna. And while we did visit all those places occasionally on liberty, as a rule, once we had cleared the gangway, we hopped on board the Thule Stage and headed straight for the Airmen's Club—or the NCO Club if you were a 2<sup>nd</sup> class petty officer or higher—which I was not.

Now, if there was one thing that the Airmen's Club was good at, separating you from your small change pretty much filled that bill. They had slot machines that took nickels, dimes, and quarters. One machine even took 7 dimes at once. Personally, I considered playing 7 dimes at the same time a pain in the ass—especially since the damn machine didn't pay off all that much. Consequently, I never played that stupid machine, preferring to stretch out my gambling

time on the regular one-armed bandits. Seven dimes at once is going to get you broke real quick. Usually I started with a handful of coins and played until I'd lost all those coins plus any I had won along the way. Once all my stash was gone and I had partially satiated the slots, I muttered a few very choice words about "stinkin' one armed bandits" and headed toward the lounge area where the bar was located along with the nightly entertainment.

Beers in the Club lounge cost a whopping 10 cents a can. As you might expect, beer was usually bought by the case ... make that by the cold case. Now, in those olden times, cans of beer did not come with pop tops and had to be opened with a church key. The bartender who sold you the beer would rip off the top of the case and open all 24 cans with his personal church key quick as a flash. Definitely had a helluva strong wrist and forearm. The buyer would then lug the case of opened beers back to the table where his very thirsty buddies eagerly awaited his arrival.

The most-often heard expression during the course of the evening other than the usual, "Now you guys ain't ever going to believe this shit" was "You fly, I buy." If you were willing to fork over the \$2.40 for the case, sure as hell somebody would go get it. The guys who had lost heavily (maybe 8, 9, 10 dollars) in the slots would often be the 'I fly' guys, at least until somebody realized they were not doing any buying. Sometimes, it's hard to straight face being broke—I know it was for me.

Mixed drinks were only a quarter. Consuming copious quantities of 7 & 7's, rum and cokes, or maybe a few screwdrivers during the course of the evening was also pretty much the norm. Myself, I was a Bacardi and Coke kind of guy. Maybe buy 2 or 3 glasses at a time to cut down on the number of trips back to the bar.

Needless to say, by the time the club closed at 23:00, sobriety was a quality not found among us imbibers ... and we were all imbibers. Walking out of the windowless club, instead of finding a dark and chilly night, we were greeted by the sun, still up at 23:00. Damn, that was definitely a bit mind numbing. All of us were already pretty 'numb' to begin with. Even with my agility greatly diminished, I usually managed to stumble aboard the Thule Stage (sometimes with assistance) and crumple into the nearest unoccupied seat. Although the conveyance was simply an Air Force version of a school bus, it was called by one and all, the Thule Stage. Throughout the evening, there would be announcements in the Airmen's Club, "The Thule Stage will be departing in 10 minutes for a tour of the base." I suppose if you wanted to, you could actually take a 'tour' of the base. None of us ever wanted to.

Nobody sat in the back seat of the Thule Stage—ever. Transporting thoroughly inebriated G.I.'s from the club to their barracks (or in our case, all the way to the *Westwind* down on DeLong Pier) along bumpy, oil-coated dirt roads was just about guaranteed to activate the old kidneys. Full bladders could only be contained for so long before they needed voiding. Hence the reason no one ever sat in the back seat. You might say the Thule Stage was ahead of Greyhound and Trailways in that regard, with their rear seat 'restroom.'

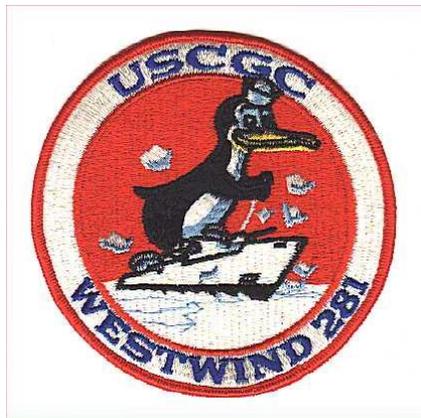
One of the highlights of our time in Thule was playing softball at the "Polar Grounds." On the way over, we would stop off at the Base PX and buy several cases of beer. Upon arrival at the field, all the beer would be dumped into a large, slightly battered metal 'bucket' (maybe 3' high, by 4' long, by 2' wide) and seemly always more than half filled with meltwater whose temp never got out of the 30's. That melt water kept the beers well chilled throughout the game.

Sides would be chosen, and the game would begin. Standard softball rules applied with one exception; players were allowed to take their can of beer out in the field with them. Hitting a

can with a batted ball was an automatic out. However, if you were clutzy enough to accidentally kick your own can over trying to field a ground ball or catch a popup, it was your own damn fault. Tough noogies.

The team with the most runs was considered the winner. Of course, there were times when no one was sure which team had the most runs. If there was any beer left, we might play an extra inning or two to see who could score some more runs. If the beer was all gone, we'd call it a day and plan to settle the issue at the next game, as long as there was enough beer.

Sometimes, on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, we'd go over to the base theatre if a decent movie was playing. A two-gallon bucket of popcorn cost a quarter. That way, if the movie turned out to be a dud, we could at least flick popcorn at one another 'til they politely asked us to leave, or as they usually did, throw us out on our keesters.



Even on those days when we didn't go ashore in Thule, we would find stuff to do. Playing cards on the mess deck after chow, prayer meetin's in out-of-the-way spaces, writing letters to our folks and girlfriends—you always had to be careful not to put the letter addressed to Melissa Sue into the envelop for Barbara Ann (yeah, I did that once). We also liked to call the local AFRS radio station, KOLD—"The One Thousand Watt Tower of Power on the Banks of

North Star Bay” and request they play Patti LaBelle and the Blue Bells’ “I Sold My Heart to the Junkman” and dedicate it to the crew of *CGC Westwind*. They never would.

On one Sunday afternoon, looking for something different to do, my buddy Jim and I thought it might be neat to go take a look at some of the Zoomies’ airplanes. Thule, unlike just about every other military base, had no security fence. It was surrounded on one side by water (ice during a large part of the year) and on the other, by completely barren landscape that stretched for miles and miles and miles. The nearest vestiges of civilization (small Eskimo villages) were hundreds of miles away.

Jim and I ambled along Thule’s dirt streets until we spotted some hangars. “Hey,” Jim said, “that’s probably where they keep the planes.”

“You think they got any of the fighter jets over there?”

“Could be.”

As we walked around the hangars, we could clearly see that our guess was correct. The jet fighters were right there in front of us.

Jim said, “Neat.”

“Yep, neat.”

“C’mon, let’s go check ‘em out.”

Next thing we know a jeep rolled up to us with its horn blaring. It had an AP marking on it. Jim of course, had to state the obvious. “I’m pretty sure they are not A & P guys making a delivery.”

Well, he was right about that—they were Zoomie Air Police and they wanted to know what the hell we thought we were doing. Jim and I explained to them that we were Coasties off the *Wind*—we even showed them our US Government-issued Coast Guard Photo ID cards—and we just wanted to see the jets.

They made us get into their jeep and took us back to their AP Office. The Sergeant on duty had so many chevrons and rockers that Jim and I thought that maybe he was a Zoomie-style Super Top Sergeant or maybe a Sergeant of All Sergeants or something. Anyhow, he called down to the ship and after they verified that we were who we said we were, he calmly and politely told us to, “Get the hell outta my friggin’ office and to stay away—far away—from any and all Air Force planes. You two assholes got that?”

Geez, what a bunch of grumps.

On a late summer afternoon, the newly formed (about 3 hours prior) *Westwind* Mountaineering Club set out from the ship to climb Mt. Dundas on the other side of North Star Bay. A half-hour ride took us to its base. It was a slow climb going up the loose rocks that formed the lower 85 percent of the mesa-like mountain. It felt like for every two steps up that we went, we slid back one. We tried our damndest not to get into a single file going up so we wouldn’t be constantly kicking loose rocks down on those behind us. After some 45 minutes of slip-sliding our way up, we finally reached the rock face of the upper part of Dundas.

We worked our way a little to the right and began to climb over and between some of the large rocks. After another ten feet or so, we reached a length of hawser line which had previously been secured around one of the big boulders at the top. We used it to assist ourselves in climbing the final part to the top.

Upon reaching the summit of Dundas, we stood around admiring the view. After a couple of minutes of this, we ambled over in front of the Rasmussen cairn for photos.



*The intrepid Westwind rock climbers atop Mt. Dundas.*

The stone marker we are clustered around in the photo is atop Mt. Dundas in Thule, Greenland and marks the cairn of that intrepid Greenlandic-Danish explorer, Knud Rasmussen. I'm the one wearing the 'cheaters.' As far as I can remember, this was in late August, since by September there was usually a lot more snow around.

After a while, succumbing to the call of nature, we all felt the need to tap a kidney; then it was time to start back down. We again used the rope, this time to lower ourselves down the face, climbed over a few more boulders until we reached the loose rocks, and kind of sat and half-slid our way to the bottom. The descent down the rocks took us less than 10 minutes. At the bottom

we boarded our transport back to the ship. The *Westwind* Mountaineering Club had successfully completed its climb to the top of Mt. Dundas. Only one we would ever make.

The end of August found us still in Thule where we waited for the last of the resupply vessels to finish off-loading and clear Wolstenholme Fjord; then the port would be closed down for the long, long, long winter. After all was finally secure come September, *Westwind* would nose out into the bay and head south, down across Baffin Bay, clear the ice fields, and at long last head back to our home at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

In the meantime, we waited. When the weather was bad enough that we couldn't play softball, we'd head over to the base gym for some basketball. However, unlike at the "Polar Grounds," the folks at the gym would not let us take our beers on the court—they kept pissing and moaning about it screwing up the floor. Afterward, we showered off, then luxuriated in a hot sauna. Walking out into crisp 25-degree temps after a hot time in the old gym was rather invigorating. Just what we needed to get ready for an evening at the Airmen's Club.

One Saturday night at the Club, the entertainment was a group known as the 'Four Wild Deuces.' They were one of our favorites, since they always put on a good show for us. Two men and two women. This particular Saturday night, for whatever reason, they kind of reactivated the Civil War.

Every 15 minutes, they would have all the guys from the South stand up and then they would play "Dixie." Fifteen minutes later, they would have the guys from the North stand up and they would play "Yankee Doodle." This went on for most of the evening with first the South, then the North trying to mightily out sing each other.

As they finished their last set, they launched into “God Bless America.” Before we were even aware of it, we were all standing with arms around one another’s shoulders singing for all we were worth, glasses and cans raised on high. We made them keep playing. We never wanted them to stop. Billy Yank and Johnny Reb, we might be, but on that night, we were Americans one and all.

Even now, some 60 years later, I can still feel the emotions that surged through me that night like patriotic electricity. All the rest of the guys seem to feel it as well. We were wired, from all the booze as well as all that adrenalin now coursing through our bloodstreams. When the Four Wild Deuces finally stopped playing, we remained standing and kept right on cheering and clapping for another 15 minutes. Then we sat and looked at one another with shit-eatin’ grins on our faces, until finally we staggered into the bright sunshine and boarded the Thule Stage.