

news

The Northwest Passage's own night watchman

Man has been assisting boats through passage for two decades

by Kassina Ryder

Northern News Services

Ikalukutiak/Cambridge Bay

For sailors trying to make it through the infamously dangerous Northwest Passage, Peter Semotiuk is more than just a voice in the night.

Semotiuk works in Cambridge Bay as an electronic technician for a private contractor at the North Warning System (formerly the DEW line).

In the evenings, he sits at his radio and broadcasts weather and ice conditions to assist voyagers attempting to do what Franklin couldn't.

"I know there are a couple of government stations that operate and they could try to call them but they can't always get them," Semotiuk said.

"This way they can have more of a personal contact, you know. I can chase information for them or get ice information or talk to their

families and so on and so forth."

For the past 20 years Semotiuk has been providing this service to explorers and sailors of small craft – commercial tourist vessels and tugboats do well enough on their own – ever since his own adventure through the Northwest Passage in 1988. He said the experience showed him there was a great need for boats to be able to have contact with someone onshore.

Awkward passage

"Back in 1988 I had done the Northwest Passage myself, on a friend's boat and that time it was kind of awkward to do it," he said. "We had no GPS really and so on and it was hard to get ice reports. I have an amateur radio licence and a marine band licence ... I thought it would be OK to provide this sort of assistance to people, knowing how

perilous it sometimes is."

Gary Ramos knows how awkward the passage can be. He left his home in Alaska in 2005 on his boat, the Arctic Wanderer, in an attempt to sail around the North Pole. Engine trouble left him in Cambridge Bay, and the next summer the season ended before he could get the parts he needed to continue. On one night of his journey, Ramos decided he was going to spend the night on an island near the Dolphin and Union Strait. He radioed Semotiuk and told him his plan.

"He said, 'Well, you're not going to be able to get in there, the ice has got it jam packed' and I said, OK, Peter, where do I need to go from where I'm at?" Ramos said. "He basically directed me to where I needed to go to keep out of the heavy ice."

He said if he hadn't talked to Semotiuk, he almost cer-

tainly would have gotten stuck.

"I consider him invaluable," he said.

Wilf Wilcox, a unit leader for the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary in Cambridge Bay, agreed. He said Semotiuk's help is important for all vessels attempting the passage, but it's especially important for people who may be unprepared for the journey.

"I know that some of the boats that come through here are woefully ill-equipped and those are the guys that really benefit by having Peter," Wilcox said. "Some of the boats that come through are very self-sufficient, everything is state-of-the-art and they don't need a lot of assistance, but some of these boats that come through, they might think that they're well geared up for Arctic travel but once they get here they find they're not quite as ready as

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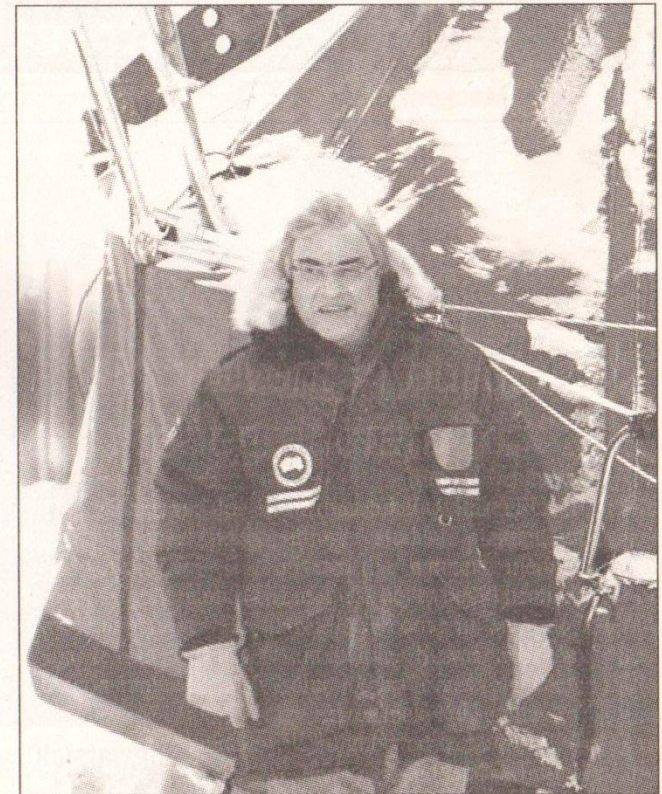


photo courtesy of Gary Ramos

Peter Semotiuk stands in front of Gary Ramos' boat, the Arctic Wanderer, in Cambridge Bay in February 2006.

they thought they were."

Semotiuk said he has received calls from five boats that are going to attempt the voyage this year and he expects the passage will be kind; it was ice-free for almost

two months last year.

"There have been years when it hasn't been open at all so to see something open for a month or more is unusual and it definitely has been that way," he said.