

Vilhjalmur Stefansson

Canadian arctic explorer (1879 – 1962)



Stefansson was born in Manitoba, Canada, of Icelandic descent. He was educated at the universities of North Dakota and of Iowa and studied anthropology at the graduate school of Harvard University. He was an instructor there for two years.

In 1904 and 1905, he made archaeological researches in Iceland and in 1906-07 he lived with the Eskimos (the Inuit) of the Mackenzie. In 1910, Stefansson discovered a group of previously unknown Eskimos, the blond Eskimos, who had never before seen a white man.

During 1913-16 he took command of an expedition to explore the regions west of Parry Archipelago for the Canadian government. Three ships, the *Karluk*, the *Mary Sachs*, and the *Alaska* were employed. Stefansson abandoned his main ship, the *Karluk*, when it became stuck in the ice in August/September 1913, leaving the crew with Captain Robert Bartlett stranded on the frozen Arctic Ocean. The *Karluk* was eventually crushed, and sank in January 1914. Four men made their way to Herald Island, but died there before they could be rescued. Four other men tried reaching Wrangel Island north of Siberia on their own but perished. The remaining members of the expedition made their way to Wrangel Island where three died. Remaining survivors were picked up by a fishing schooner.

In 1921, he encouraged and planned an expedition for four young men to colonize Wrangel Island, where the 11 survivors of the 22 men on the *Karluk* had lived from January to September 1914. Stefansson had designs for forming an exploration company that would be geared towards individuals interested in touring the Arctic island. The four young men all perished. Stefansson's reputation was largely destroyed by this disaster and that of the *Karluk*.

Stefansson's discoveries included new land and the edge of the continental shelf and his journeys and successes are among the marvels of Arctic exploration. Later in life, he was Director of Polar Studies at Dartmouth, and he helped establish the US Army's Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory (CRREL) in Hanover, New Hampshire.