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CRUISING CLUB OF AMERICA AWARDS BLUE WATER MEDAL TO JARLATH CUNNANE

New York, N.Y. (January 18, 2006) – Jarlath Cunnane, a retired construction manager, boat builder and adventurer from Castlebar, County Mayo, Ireland was selected by the Cruising Club of America to receive the prestigious Blue Water Medal at the club's annual Awards Dinner in New York on January 17, 2006. The award is made to Cunnane as builder and skipper of the Irish yacht, *Northabout*, which completed the first east to west polar circumnavigation in October 2005, during a four-year voyage that started in Westport, Ireland in June 2001. The crew of *Northabout* passed through the Northwest Passage to Alaska and Western Canada where they spent the next two years cruising. In 2004 they sailed to Russia, wintering the yacht at Khatanga, Siberia, where they were stopped by the ice. In 2005 they completed the voyage to Ireland via the Norwegian coast and the Caledonian Canal.

Upon receiving the news that he was being honored with the Blue Water Medal, Cunnane said, "I am overwhelmed and nearly speechless."

The Blue Water Medal was inaugurated by the Cruising Club of America in 1923 to "reward meritorious seamanship and adventure upon the sea displayed by amateur sailors of all nationalities that might otherwise go unrecognized." Previous Blue Water Medalists have included such luminaries of the cruising world as Alain Gerbault, H.W. Tilman, Carleton Mitchell, Eric and Susan Hiscock, Sir Francis Chichester and Bernard Moitesssier.

Making the presentation to Jarlath Cunnane will be CCA Commodore Edward S. Rowland of Hamilton, Mass.

Through The Fabled Northwest Passage

Construction of the 49 ft. aluminum cutter began in Cunnane's workshop in April, 2000. By February 2001 the hull was finished and on June 1 the boat was launched and taken to the quay at Westport, Ireland for rigging, final fitting out and loading of stores. Meanwhile preparations in the form of charts, weather and ice information and communication with authorities were well underway. On June 23, 2001 with a crew of six aboard, some final details still to be done and sea trials not yet started, the boat departed for Greenland. Seven days later the crew sighted the stark headland of Cape Farewell, Greenland's southern tip.

During the month of July they sailed up the west coast of Greenland in increasingly icy conditions, while watching the ice maps for indications that Baffin Bay would be sufficiently clear of pack ice to make the crossing to Canada. On July 29 they had reached Qaanaaq, 70 miles north of the Thule Air Base and with ice-free water to the west, they sailed to Lancaster Sound and entered the Northwest Passage. By good fortune, the ice in Peel Sound, the gateway to the inner sections of the Passage, was mostly free of ice at least two or three weeks ahead of normal. From there, they entered and successfully navigated the shallow, rock-strewn, difficult portion of the Passage with only a brief stop at two small settlements.

A final stop for fuel and water and a few repairs at Tuktoyuktuk, at the mouth of the Mackenzie River and they were on their way for the final leg across the top of Alaska. At this point the weather forecasts warned that they could expect colder than normal conditions, and indeed they were. With Point Barrow, the most northern point in Alaska, still 500 miles ahead, the lead between the shore and the offshore pack ice began to close up and new ice began to form behind them. It became a race against time as they

rounded the western tip of Alaska, passed through Bering Strait and entered Nome, Alaska on September 2, 2002. With the Northwest Passage successfully behind them, *Northabout* was hauled ashore for the winter.

The Northeast Passage – Part One

Having sailed the Northwest Passage in 2001, *Northabout* spent the next two seasons cruising Alaska and Canada's Inside Passage. By 2004 the call of the north tempted them again and they set out from Prince Rupert, British Columbia for the Northeast Passage over the top of Russia. The first challenge was to obtain the necessary permits, a difficult process, which involved several trips to Moscow. On July 7, 2004 they departed Canada for the 2000-mile voyage to Anadyr, Siberia via Dutch Harbor, Alaska with a crew of seven. Once through the tedious but friendly formalities of entering Russia they were joined by Slava, the required Russian ice pilot, and headed for the Bering Strait and the start of the Passage.

The ice reports were favorable as they passed the easternmost tip of Russia on August 4 and headed west. Within four days a white reflection in the sky, known as "ice blink," was seen, denoting the presence of sea ice ahead and prompting a course change toward shore to avoid the heavier pack ice outside. They stopped at a pair of depressing and partially deserted towns along the Siberian coast and at Tiksi caught up with a Dutch sailboat named *Campina*, which was being sailed solo after having been forced to overwinter in this dreary place on the Lena river.

As they were approaching Cape Chelyuskin, the northernmost point on the coast and the halfway location on the Northeast Passage, they received a radio message from *Campina* that she was disabled in the ice and needed to be towed about 30 miles to deeper water to reach a rescue vessel. This was a very difficult and dangerous operation, but it was undertaken without hesitation by *Northabout* and carried out successfully in spite of the heavy ice conditions. It was now September 7 and with new ice forming, the navigation season was clearly over. They now retreated up the Kheta River to Khatanga where the boat was lifted aboard a large steel river barge and secured for the winter.

The Northeast Passage – Part Two

In June 16, 2005 an advance party of two came to Khatanga to oversee the lift-out from the barge, the stepping of the mast and other preparations. The remainder of the crew would arrive in mid-August when the sea ice was expected to break up. On August 21 *Northabout* departed and once out of the river found herself in heavy ice, which soon brought her to a stop. With help from a large icebreaker nearby she was able to reach open water and proceed past Cape Chelyuskin and on to the west.

The crew's optimism was soon shattered when they learned that a severe northwesterly gale was imminent and that they would have to retreat to the lee of Bolshevik Island. Four days later the gale ended and they were able to enter the Kara Sea with a convoy of ships headed by two nuclear icebreakers. With the sea now mostly ice free, they made a brief stop at the dreary, nearly abandoned port of Dickson and a short visit ashore at White Island. As they passed the forbidden island of Novaya Zemlya they were warned of an approaching major storm, so they pressed hard to cross the Barents Sea and reach Murmansk.

On September 5 they entered Murmansk where they encountered the "paper curtain" again, spending 1 ½ days getting their port clearance papers. Now, with the Northeast Passage behind them, *Northabout* rounded Norway's North Cape and sailed down the Norwegian coast and across the North Sea to Scotland's Caledonian Canal. The final leg down the Irish Sea brought them to Donegal Bay and their home port of Westport, Ireland on October 12, 2005.

About Cruising Club of America

The Cruising Club of America is dedicated to offshore cruising and "the adventurous use of the sea" through efforts to improve seamanship, the design of seaworthy yachts, safe yachting procedures and environmental awareness. Now in its 83rd year, the club has 10 stations throughout the U.S., Canada and Bermuda, with approximately 1200 members who are qualified by their experience in offshore passage making. In even numbered years, the CCA organizes the Newport to Bermuda Race in conjunction with the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club. It also sponsors several Safety at Sea seminars and hosts a series of "Suddenly Alone" seminars for the cruising couple.

For more information on the CCA, go to <http://www.cruisingclub.org>.

