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Top 10 facts about the International Ice Patrol

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1. When was the [International Ice Patrol](#) formed?

Shipping areas in the North Atlantic have always been hazardous to navigate. The hazards of the North Atlantic captured global attention in April 1912 when the [RMS Titanic](#) sank after it struck an iceberg. The incident prompted maritime nations with ships transiting the Grand Banks off Newfoundland, Canada, to establish an iceberg patrol in the area. Since 1913, the U.S. Coast Guard has been tasked with the management and operation of the patrol. Except for the years of World Wars I and II, the ice patrol has been active each ice season since its inception.



A Coast Guard C-130, based out of Air Station Elizabeth City, N.C., flies past an iceberg in the waters near Newfoundland, Canada. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Brandon Brewer.

2. What are the specific duties of the ice patrol?

Their mission is to monitor the iceberg danger near the Grand Banks of Newfoundland and provide the iceberg limit to the maritime community, including ice and current conditions.

3. Who makes up the ice patrol?

The ice patrol is a U.S. Coast Guard unit however the [Canadian Ice Service](#), ice patrol and [U.S. National Ice Center](#) collaborate under the [North American Ice Service](#). The ice patrol produces North American Ice service reports from February through July when icebergs may be present on the Grand Banks and the Canadian Ice Service produces the reports the rest of the year when icebergs are normally restricted to Canadian coastal waters.

4. Why aren't there ice patrols in other areas other than the Grand Banks?

This is the only location in the world where icebergs endanger a major shipping route, and the ice patrol provides accurate and timely iceberg information to assist transatlantic mariners in avoiding them. Maritime traffic between Europe and North America typically follows routes that are intersected annually by an average of 500 icebergs.



Coast Guard Petty Officer 1st Class Ken Farah of the International Ice Patrol searches for icebergs from an observation window in a Coast Guard HC-130J Hercules airplane. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Thomas McKenzie.

5. What defines an “ice season” and when is it?

The ice season is the seasonal period when icebergs can be present on the Grand Banks. The [International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea](#) defines the “ice season” as the period between February 15 and July 1, however the commander of the ice patrol can extend the period based on conditions.

6. What is the International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea?

SOLAS – or the International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea – is generally regarded as the most important of international treaties concerning the safety of merchant ships. The first version was adopted in 1914, in response to the sinking of the Titanic. The main objective of SOLAS is to specify minimum standards for the construction, equipment and operation of ships, compatible with their safety.

7. How did the Coast Guard patrol for icebergs in the past?

Iceberg detection in the past relied on visual sightings from boats on patrol in the area. As airplane performance improved however, the ice patrol integrated airplanes into reconnaissance operations and after 1960, surface patrol craft took a secondary role to aerial reconnaissance.

8. How does the Coast Guard patrol for icebergs now?

Iceberg reconnaissance is conducted primarily with aircrews from [Air Station Elizabeth City](#), N.C., in an [HC-130J Hercules](#) airplane, the perfect platform for their mission. Using the airplane's specialized sensors, radar and visual observations are employed for iceberg detection and identification.

9. Why do modern vessels still need the ice patrol?



Icebergs are not sea ice: they're floating fragments of glaciers or ice shelves. National Science Foundation photo by of Patrick Rowe.

The seas where the North Atlantic shipping lanes pass near the Grand Banks are particularly challenging for mariners due to frequent fog and high seas. The combination can make it extremely difficult for even a modern vessel to detect an iceberg and avoid it. If there were no ice patrol, vessels would have to reduce risk of collision by either slowing speed considerably or avoiding the Grand Banks entirely. Every additional sea mile or hour adds to transportation costs and delivery time. In this age of "just in time" delivery, longer and more costly voyages equal higher costs and higher prices for consumers.

10. Are icebergs really still a danger?

As recently as 2010, a vessel ignoring the ice patrol's warnings collided with an iceberg. Fortunately the damage was not catastrophic and the vessel was able to divert to a safe port. The vessel required considerable hull repairs and was unable to return to sea for some time. No vessel heeding ice patrol's warnings has ever collided with an iceberg.

Check out the [International Ice Patrol](#)'s website for more information, or you can read about the [opening](#) of the 2012 season.

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