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Canadian hovercraft on way from England

A \$16-million, 75-tonne hovercraft built for the Canadian Coast Guard -- the largest ever to be exported from Britain -- was lifted this week onto a transatlantic freighter bound for Canada's east coast, where the state-of-the-art amphibious vessel will break ice and patrol waters in and around the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Named Mamilossa -- an Abenaki native word meaning he who goes from water to land -- the new, 28.5-metre machine will become the flagship of a fleet of four coast guard hovercraft stationed on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

"Everything we've learned since 1962, when we started operating hovercraft, has been incorporated into this design," Ron Miller, the coast guard's Ottawa-based director of operational support, told Canwest News Service on Friday.

He said the air-cushion vessel will be used to: break up harbour ice, clear outlets along the St. Lawrence River in spring to prevent flooding, deploy buoys and other navigation aids in summer, and provide support for search-and-rescue and security operations throughout Atlantic Canada.

SLIGHTLY LARGER

The Mamilossa is slightly larger than its east coast sister, CCGS Sipu Mui, and the CCGS Siyay, stationed in B.C.

The new vessel will replace the 22-year-old hovercraft CCGS Waban-Aki, which Miller said is scheduled to carry out icebreaking duties this month along the St. Lawrence but is nearing the end of its useful life.

Miller said the aluminum-hulled Mamilossa is more aerodynamic than the coast guard's other hovercraft, and has a more powerful "knuckle" boom crane for deploying buoys and other objects weighing up to five tonnes.

"It's the best constructed one we've got."

Built by the Isle of Wight manufacturer Hoverwork Ltd., the Canadian contract had been a boon for the island's economy.

The Quebec-bound Mamilossa was taken on test runs in the English Channel last week before being loaded onto a cargo ship in Portsmouth on Monday.

In Canada, after completing each round of duties in the waters of the St. Lawrence region, the vessel will be steered up a ramp onto land and stored in a Coast Guard facility in Trois-Rivieres, Que., Miller said.