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Fog, Men, and Cutters:

A Short History of the

Bering Sea Patrol

by

Dennis L. Noble, Ph.D.

The United States Coast Guard has a long history of service to Alaska. In 1865, the U. S. Lighthouse Service's tender *Shubrick*, then operating under the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, became the service's first unit to touch Russian Alaska's coastline. The tender was the flagship supporting Western Union's expedition to string a telegraph cable from North America to St. Petersburg, Russia. The plan was overtaken by the laying of the Atlantic cable. (The U. S. Lighthouse Service was made a part of the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) in 1939.) It was the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, however, that had the most contact with early Alaska. In 1867, the service transported the first federal officials to the new territory. From this modest beginning, cutters would eventually sail into the Bering Sea and the Arctic. The work in Alaska's western and northern waters would become known as the Bering Sea Patrol. In 1915, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service (USRCS) was amalgamated with the U.S. Life-Saving Service to form the USCG. The story of the USRCS and the USCG in the Bering Sea and Arctic is a study in microcosm of the multifaceted duties of the two services.

The reason cutters sailed into the cold, foggy, and largely uncharted waters of the Bering Sea can be traced to *Callorhimis ursinus*, the northern fur seal, with its much prized thick fur pelt. At least 80 per cent of the world's population of the northern fur seal returns each year to the Pribilof Islands, then known as the Seal Islands, to breed and bear their young. Some of the animals complete a migration of over 7,000 miles. When the United States took possession of Alaska, the Russian practice of a controlled harvest of the animals was continued. That is, the seals were generally killed while they were on the islands. By 1867, however, pelagic hunting--the killing of the seals at sea--was in full swing. This was threatening the extinction of the seals because many were lost due to wounding, most fur seals taken were breeding or pregnant females feeding at sea, and the loss of a female subsequently meant the death of the pup at the rookery. The Secretary of the Treasury was the federal government's official who regulated the killing of the animals, as this was a source of income for the United States' coffers. It was natural, then, for the Secretary to call upon the USRCS, which operated under his department and was formed to police the revenue laws of the government, to enforce the proper harvesting of the seals.

At first, only a few cutters were assigned to patrol around the Seal Islands. In 1880, the cutter *Corwin*, as a collateral duty, placed her bows over the Arctic Circle and cruised some 6,000 miles in the frigid waters of the far north. This marks the beginning of an annual cruise that continues to this day. During the Bering Sea Controversy of the 1890s, when the United States and Great Britain teetered on the brink of war over the illegal killing of the seals, the work of the service multiplied and more cutters were needed. The U. S. Navy also received the call to help, but when they were pulled out, the entire duty returned to the USRCS. A patrol commander was appointed in 1895, with his headquarters at Unalaska during the patrol season.

Patrols usually began in late April or the first part of May. The cutters would sail northward from ports on the West Coast, or Hawaii, making their first port of call at Unalaska for briefings and assignments. Then the ships would sail for their designated areas around the Aleutian Islands, the Pribilof Islands, or the heavy fishing areas. The cutters had the authority to stop, and board, vessels violating sealing and fishing laws. Patrol length usually stretched from 20 to 30 days and thereafter the ships would return to Unalaska for further assignments. After about a week in port, the cutters would be underway again to a new assignment. This routine was in force until at least October, when all the ships returned to their homeports.

Eventually, other duties devolved upon the cutters until they became, in effect, the only government known to those who resided in the isolated Bering Sea and coastal Arctic Regions. As a part of this government service, cutters provided badly needed rescue units. During the 1880-1881 seasons, for example, *Corwin*, under the command of Captain Calvin L. Hooper, searched the Siberian and Arctic Alaskan coasts for the exploring steamer *Jeannette* and two whalers, *Mount Wollaston* and *Vigilant*. In order to search as soon as possible, Hooper ordered two officers and an enlisted man overland by dogsled while *Corwin* waited for the ice to break up.

One unusual aspect of the Bering Sea Patrol was the Court Cruise. A cutter would be assigned the duty of transporting a judge, a public defender, court clerk and a Deputy United States Marshall to hear criminal cases in the isolated region. In 1911, for example, *Thetis*, homeported in Honolulu, Hawaii, arrived in Unalaska to find that her first assignment was to conduct the Court Cruise. The ship sailed to Juneau to take aboard officials and then the navigator shaped a course back to Unalaska for a conference at Headquarters. Captain C. S. Cochran was appointed foreman of a Grand Jury, along with two other USRCS officers making up the Grand Jury. The cutter then sailed to Nushagak, on Bristol Bay, at the time the largest cannery in the area.

Along with poachers, the court tried cases involving murder, arson, assault with a deadly weapon, and selling liquor to natives. After finishing the legal work, the cutter then retraced her trackline to Unalaska where the court again convened and convicted four Japanese

accused of seal poaching and sentenced them to the Valdez jail. *Thetis*, now a floating jail, sailed to Valdez and deposited her prisoners and ended the Court Cruise. She then returned to Bering Sea Patrol Headquarters for assignment to regular duties.

Within the logbooks and reports of the officers of the Bering Sea Patrol there runs a genuine concern for the plight of both natives and settlers in this remote region. Many officers would visit villages and leave food supplies for the destitute, while the ship's doctor would help with medical assistance. One example of officers trying to help the natives is the unusual experiment of importing reindeer into Alaska.

Who first proposed the idea of importing reindeer from Siberia to Alaska is open to debate, but there is no argument as to the importance of Captain Michael A. "Hell Roaring Mike" Healy And Dr. Sheldon Jackson, General Superintendent of Alaska. The basic plan was to bring the reindeer from Siberia to Alaska and teach the North American natives how to herd and raise the animals to provide a steady and dependable food supply. Healy, who was well known and trusted by the natives of Siberia, would purchase the reindeer and transport them to Alaska onboard *Bear*. Dr. Jackson would use his considerable influence among the general public and Congress to raise funds for the purchasing and care of the animals. Jackson would also be in overall charge of the training of the herders. Dr. Jackson would later write that the project could not have succeeded without the help of Captain Healy.

In 1892, the project began with 17 reindeer. Every year thereafter, until 1906, when the Russian government withdrew its support, various cutters would cruise the Siberian coast bartering with the Chukchi of Siberia for reindeer. The animals were then transported to the reindeer station at Port Clarence, near Nome. The herd grew to over a half million by the outbreak of World War II. The program proved that the animals could thrive in Alaska. But, in the final analysis, the major culture change of a people from hunter to herder could not be broken down. Even though this experiment in social engineering did not succeed, it does not detract from the concern felt by the officers and men of the Bering Sea Patrol for the welfare of those in their region of operations.

Five years after the reindeer project began, the animals did play an important role in one of the major rescue efforts in Alaska conducted by the USRCS. In 1897 eight whaling ships were trapped in the Arctic ice field to the east and west of Point Barrow, Alaska, the northernmost point in Alaska. There was great concern on the part of the ship owners that the 265 men who made up the crews of the whalers would starve during the long winter months. The whaling companies appealed to President William McKinley to send a relief expedition. The President, in turn, appointed the Treasury Department to organize the work and that Department ordered the *Bear*, just returned from the Bering Sea Patrol, to re-provision and go to the aid of the whalers.

In late November 1897, *Bear*, Captain Francis Tuttle commanding, sailed from Port Townsend, Washington, northward. The work would require great hazards and Tuttle sailed with a crew made up of volunteers. After fighting heavy gales and ice, *Bear* hove to at Cape Vancouver, Alaska. There was never any chance of the cutter pushing her way through the ice to Point Barrow at this late date. Instead, it was decided to put a party ashore and have them travel along the coast. The men would enlist the aid of natives, stop at a reindeer station to buy a small herd of reindeer, and then drive the animals to Point Barrow. Many veterans of the Arctic doubted that the cuttermen could make the long journey, knowing they would have to fight fierce gales, cold, and the Arctic darkness. There was, however, no other way for aid to reach the whalers.

In charge of the Overland Relief Expedition, as it became known, was Lieutenant D. H. Jarvis. Second in command was Lieutenant Ellsworth P. Bertholf, while Suregon S. J. Call made up the third member of the *Bear's* officers undertaking the expedition. One enlisted man, F. Koltchoff, accompanied the party some of the distance. The expedition also employed W. T. Lopp, Superintendent of the Teller Reindeer Station, and Charlie Ariserlook, a native reindeer herder.

On December 16, 1897, using dog sleds, sleds pulled by reindeer, snowshoes, and skis, the men began the expedition. On March 29, 1898, after traveling 1,500 miles and fighting subzero temperatures, blizzards, and the long Arctic night, the party arrived at Point Barrow. The expedition managed to bring 382 reindeer to the whalers, having lost only 66.

In the summer of 1898, *Bear* managed to push her way northward to Point Barrow and the expedition officers rejoined their cutter. For their work, Bertholf, Call, and Jarvis received a gold medal from the United States Congress.

Medical assistance to those within the patrol's area of operations is best demonstrated by the work of the Coast Guardsmen aboard the *Unalga* during the great Spanish Influenza pandemic of 1919. Captain F.G. Dodge, skipper of the cutter, found the village of Unalaska completely at the mercy of the influenza. Dodge requested volunteers from the ship to help in the feeding and nursing of the sick and in burial details. The men were issued facemasks and began their work. By the next day, all of Unalaska was stricken and the situation so bad that the entire crew was pressed into service. Captain Dodge, for example, wrote to Washington, DC, that "Master-at-Arms Bugaras with three men" were detailed to clean and open an orphan's home. The children were bathed, clothed, fed, and provided with beds (how an old time master-at-arms and crusty sailors felt about this assignment is not recorded). The cuttermen went about their nursing from May 27 until June 2, when Dodge reported, "situation in hand," with the general population needing at least two more weeks of nursing. Buried matter-of-factly within the report is the comment:

Commanding Officer has been confined to this vessel with influenza since the 29th…, but did not consider his case of sufficient gravity to report illness to Headquarters...

Reports from the Bristol Bay Region began to pour into Unalaska indicating that desperate medical assistance was also needed in that area. *Unalga*, now joined by a task force of USCG cutters and US Navy ships, set course to Bristol Bay. Dodge's command was assigned duties at Dillingham. The cuttermen found a grim scene. Dodge's report leaves very little to the imagination:

About three hundred sick /in this region, all natives, one hundred orphans, many unburied bodies being eatten (sic) by dogs, have sent burial detail ashore to bury dead and shoot dogs, one medical unit at Dillingham "....For the next eight days sailors and medical personnel worked in the region under terrible conditions. Dodge reported that at one time he had to send a Seaman Second Class back to the cutter because "his constitution could not stand the work…" Finally, some 33 days after first beginning their medical work, the *Unalga's* assistance was finished.

Captain Dodge's final report on this mission can be used to represent all the medical aid given by the USRCS and USCG in Alaska. Dodge felt "positive" that without the aid rendered by the personnel of the *Unalga*, "there would have been very few left alive at Unalaska and Dutch Harbor." He went on to commend his entire crew for their "zeal and attention to duty."

The examples given of law enforcement and humanitarian aid are only a part of the many duties that eventually were undertaken by the patrol. Cutters constantly monitored the fishing fleet and the hunting of marine mammals other than seals. Many of Alaska's fish and game could have been seriously decimated, or brought to extinction, without the work of the USRCS and USCG. Some of Alaska's wonders were first reported by scientist aboard the ships, or by an officer assigned to record the unusual sights. Indeed, some of the early cruise reports of the service are profusely illustrated with anthropological, botanical, and zoological drawings of a region that had never been recorded by science. Early cuttermen also led the occasional expedition into the interior. Third Lieutenant John C. Cantwell, of *Corwin*, in 1884, led an exploring party up the Kobuk River to see if it provided a rescue route to the Arctic. Even though the river did not reveal the needed waterway to the far north, Cantwell's work opened a new region to map makers.

The reputation of the Bering Sea Patrol's work rested squarely upon those who served aboard the cutters. Ironically, most histories of Alaska tend to mention the cutters--such as *Bear*, *Corwin*, *Lincoln*--rather than the men. Some officers, such as Healy and Cantwell, for example, have been given a few lines; the enlisted men, rarely. The reason for this anonymity can be traced, largely, to very poor service records. Prior to 1915, officer's service jackets were mainly simple hand-written journal entries housed in Washington, D.C., consisting chiefly of transfers and promotions. After 1915, traditional service records were begun, but due to

federal privacy law, these accounts can not be examined for at least 100 years. Enlisted men, on the other hand, signed aboard for an individual cutter and only for a period of one year, or the length of a cruise, much like a merchant seaman. There are, therefore, no service records at all for these men. In fact, this system was still in effect well into the 1920s. The only way we are able to glimpse some the early enlisted men is through mentions by officers in their reports or by locating a few of the surviving men.

Until 1877, when the USRCS established a School of Instruction in Maryland, which evolved into the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, most officers were appointed by the Collector of Customs of local ports. Most of the men appointed claimed merchant marine or U. S. Navy experience. Once signed aboard, the officers usually served for many years at sea as they were promoted through the officer ranks. This type of system could produce some very good seafaring leaders, which were needed to command ships in the far north. Captain Healy, for example, was widely known for his seamanship and abilities in Alaskan waters. The *New York Sun*, in 1894, claimed that Healy was a

good deal more distinguished a person in the waters of the far Northwest than any president of the United States…. To the Indians of that region he stands for the United States government… He has time and again suppressed disorder and prevented crime in regions a thousand miles from any legally constituted authority. He is the ideal commander of the old school, bluff, prompt, fearless, just. He knows the Bering Sea, the Straits, and even the Arctic as no other man knows them.

There was, of course, a danger in this system. The Collector of Customs was a political appointee and, according to the "spoils system" of the day there was a real chance that commissions were given, and revoked, on political fortunes. This type of arrangement began to pass out of favor once the officer corps began to be filled with men from the School of Instruction. While there were abuses under the old methods in the main, some excellent officers were enlisted. One of the better, but little known, officers to serve under the old system was Calvin L. Hooper.

In 1864, Hooper obtained a commission as Third Lieutenant in the USRCS, after serving in the merchant marine. He was commissioned in California and for the next 17 years, as he rose in rank, he served in a number of cutters in Washington and Oregon. His first command was as a First Lieutenant*Lincoln* in 1871. During this period, Hooper made three trips to Alaska. He then received assignments that transferred him to the Great Lakes and the East Coast. In 1878, Hooper received his captaincy and returned to the West Coast, this time to Port Townsend, Washington, to command *Wolcott*.

In 1880, Captain Hooper was assigned to *Corwin* and was the first USRCS officer to begin the service's duties in the Arctic. A newspaper account described the captain as being "quiet, unpretentious, studious, calm and resolute in the moment of danger--in brief 'every inch a

sailor.'" During the Bering Sea Controversy, the commander of the naval forces in Alaska, Captain Robley D. "Fighting Bob" Evans, noted the skill in which Hooper carried out his military assignments. When an inept Navy captain bumbled his mission, Evans turned to Hooper because he knew the USRCS officer was "an able, fearless man…[who] would carry out…orders." Hooper, operating in weather of dense fog, located and captured the British steamer *Coquitlan*, which was receiving illegal seal skins. The steamer was towed to Sitka as a prize and bonded for $600,000, which Evans thought "paid most of the expense of our summer's work."

When the USRCS decided to officially establish a Bering Sea Patrol, in 1895, the logical choice for its first commander was Hooper. Captain Hooper was also appointed to be superintendent of Construction and Repair for the West Coast, when not at sea. He held both posts for approximately two years and then received the command of the cutter *McCulloch*, one of the newest ships in the fleet. In 1899, he was detached from sea duty and assumed the duties of Superintendent of Construction and Repair on the Pacific Coast. One year later, on April 29, 1900, while still on active duty, Captain Calvin L. Hooper died at the age of 58 in Oakland, California. He had served for 36 years, with a large amount of that time in Alaskan waters. At the time of his death, he ranked number 7 of 37 captains in the service.

F. S. Sandel, who served aboard *Bear* in 1917, and Ira Ayer Beal, who served onboard *Hamilton* in 1938, must represent all of the enlisted men who sailed on the Bering Sea Patrol. Sandel served under the one-year enlistment system, while Beal signed on for a three-year hitch.

Beal found the ways of a sailor, over half a century ago, harsh. Physical force was still used to enforce discipline. Beal described his petty officers and other shipmates as "moderately intelligent [, yet] most had not finished high school, …rough, [who] drank too much, but were superb seamen!" Beal described a method used to train enlisted Coast Guardsmen to be:

superb seamen in small boats: When coming into San Francisco Bay we would be dropped at up to 15 knots [in a pulling boat] off Treasure Island. We would try to beat the ship to the pier at the end of 7th Street in Oakland. If we beat the ship we got steaks for chow; if we lost we were restricted & put on short rations....

Shipboard routine usually consisted of four hours on duty and four off. The men assigned to the deck force stood wheel watches, lookout duty, and received painting and cleaning assignments that are required to keep a ship maintained at sea. Sandel recalled the thing he hated most about his daily routine aboard the Bear was "putting on or taking in sail. [You would] go up clean and come down looking like a miner after a day's work" because the sails held the soot from the coal-fired steam engine.

Both of the former enlisted men agreed that the one complaint was the food. With a lack of refrigeration, there was no fresh meat once the patrol was underway. If a crewman was a hunter, the occasional reindeer, or ducks, sometimes improved the larder. Living conditions on the cutters, most particularly *Bear*, were far from ideal. The crew's quarters were tightly packed and conditions in the compartment, called by the cuttermen the "glory hole," could be appalling. This was especially true when rough weather caused crewmen to become seasick.

Off-duty hours at sea were spent in traditional sailor pursuits. Some men worked with line, making fancy work or belts, others gambled. Sandel recalled that with duty four-on and four-off, his principal "recreation was trying to get some sleep."

Both officers and enlisted men welcomed any break in their routine, especially if it meant getting off the cutter for a period of time. At some isolated locations, crewmen were allowed to tromp about the countryside. When the ships returned to Unalaska, much of the time in port was occupied by inspections, coaling the ship, and maintenance, but there were periods of time set aside for a degree of freedom. Some officers and men went on hikes, picking blueberries, and just relaxing. There was also planned recreation, especially on the Fourth of July. There were, for example, picnics and pulling boat competitions if more than one cutter was in port. Sailors, being sailors, if there was a location where drink was offered, many would pursue this type of activity. In general, however, given the isolated nature of the region and duty, the men were unable to have this type of off-duty pursuit too often.

The nature of the Bering Sea Patrol, then, was isolated and lonely. In the early years, some commanding officers were allowed to bring their families aboard. Captain Healy brought his wife and son aboard for one patrol, as did Captain Leonard G. Shepard.

Duty on the Bering Sea Patrol was also dangerous. Most of the islands in the Bering Sea had to be visited in small boats, which required open beach landings, always a hazardous undertaking. Some cuttermen were lost in these landings and buried in remote, unmarked graves. Life aboard a cutter was also dangerous. The Officer of the Deck aboard *Perry*, in 1896, recorded that a pennant had become fouled in the rigging and:

Seaman C. C. Mauethrop went aloft to clear the pennant. He reached the truck and endeavored for the space of a minute, to break out the pennant, when for some unaccountable reason, he fell to the deck and was instantly killed.

Seaman Mauethrop, incidentally, on April 18, 1896, unhesitatingly dived into a high sea to pass a line and assist a shipmate who was so numbed that he could not help himself aboard when his small boat capsized. A future Commandant of the USRCS--Worth G. Ross--then a First Lieutenant, witnessed the seaman's bravery and was one of many who recommended him for an award. Mauethrop was recommended for the Gold Life Saving Medal, the highest award that could be given for the saving of life.

Some of the enlisted men of the Bering Sea Patrol who died while serving in Alaska were buried where they met their fate, or were buried at sea and, thus, nothing remains to mark their final resting spot. Unalaska's cemetery, however, contains the burials of some USRCS and USCG enlisted men, the oldest so far located is that of Mauethrop. The sailor's shipmates throughout the Patrol took up a collection to erect a stone marker in his memory. Until World War II, cutters that were in Unalaska on the Fourth of July would usually send an honor guard to fire a salute over these graves. After the war, the practice halted. To be sure, the occasional cutter that happened to stop in Unalaska, would clear a grave. But, in general, the cuttermen were largely forgotten. In 1989, Unalaska Native Pride began a project to restore the old cemetery and the forgotten sailors will once again have their graves clearly marked.

World War II represented a large change in the Patrol's routine. The world conflict effectively stopped all normal activities. After the war, the Patrol's routines continued, but a Patrol Commander was no longer appointed, nor was a headquarters at Unalaska maintained. In fact, the Court Cruises were carried out until the 1950s, while native care was still in operation in 1960 and 1961. A cutterman from 1900 would fit into the patrol routines of 1960.

Technology finally caught up with the Patrol. Many villages that once could only be reached by ships, now were accessible to light aircraft. The U.S. Coast Guard, on September 4, 1964, announced the official ending of the Patrol because the term "Bering Sea Patrol" was "not sufficiently descriptive of the modern Patrol's many law enforcement and conservation tasks...." Accordingly, the Service announced a new name, the Alaska Patrol. This, in effect, put an official end to 97 years of work.

The cutters of the old Bering Sea Patrol sailed in a region that was isolated, full of discomfort, and with no little danger. But, despite these hardships, the life of a cutterman in the region had an appeal, or caused an *esprit de' corps* among its sailors. The registers of commissioned officers helped to perpetrate this feeling by giving a special section for those who sailed in northern waters. Sandel, more than 60 years after sailing in the Bear, would write: "If I wasn't so damned old, I'd sure like to do it again." Perhaps a bit of service doggerel best explains the fascination of duty in the cold, foggy Bering Sea:

Full many a sailor points with pride
To cruises o'er the ocean wide;
But they cannot compare with me,
For I have sailed the Bering Sea.
While though you've weathered fiercest gale
And every ocean you have sailed;
You cannot a salty sailor be
Until you've sailed the Bering Sea

Today, the U.S. Coast Guard continues to work in the Bering Sea, and Alaskan Arctic regions, enforcing maritime laws, providing search and rescue, humanitarian aid, and support for scientist. The men and women who now crew the cutters venturing into this still largely isolated region are building upon a foundation of over 100 years of service to Alaska. Their predecessors helped to prevent the extinction of the northern fur seal and other wildlife. Early cuttermen also established the precedent of helping those in need in the far north. Furthermore, as the Alaskan historian William J. Hunt has pointed out: "without the transport made available by the Revenue [Cutter] Service, the islands and mainland of the Bering Sea would have been virtually inaccessible to scientists and the progress of knowledge would have been considerably slowed." In short, the Bering Sea Patrol helped to bring a veneer of civilization to early-day maritime Alaska. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to point to another region in the United States where the multifaceted duties of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and the U.S. Coast Guard were so evident.

Portions of "Fog, Men, and Cutters" were presented in a paper and published as "The Sea in Alaska's Past: First Conference Proceedings" (1979) and portions appear in *Alaska and the Revenue Cutter Service, 1867-1915*, published by the Naval Institute Press in 1999.