
SCENE

27

CG ICEBREAKER *NORTHWIND*—1959-1960 (BERING SEA PATROL)

This transfer was going to be an easy one—only fifteen hundred miles from Long Beach to Seattle. We would use a procedure that worked well before. On moving day, when the house had been vacated and all our household possessions were in the custody of the moving van company, we would go to a nearby motel for a restful night and be fresh for hitting the road next morning.

Boxes of china and furniture of all sizes were on the front lawn and were slowly being swallowed up by that huge van. The driver took full responsibility and signed the inventory. There was nothing left for us to do, so we left for the motel. We had made a reservation at a resort motel high in the San Bernardino Mountains. We had just settled in when daughter Karen announced she didn't feel well...swelling in the throat. With driving instructions from the resort manager, Karen and I headed down the mountain. We found the doctor who gave us some pills and said he didn't think it was the mumps. The MUMPS!

Karen seemed okay the next day and off we went. After one night on the road somewhere, we arrived in Portland for a night with Mary's sister Helen and her husband John. After an early breakfast, we were off again, ignoring the fussy, whining little Scott. In just a few minutes, we were on the freeway, and Scott got even for the lack of attention—he upchucked all over the backseat! U-turn back to Helen's for cleanup detail.

We found a nice motel, and I reported for assignment to the **Coast Guard icebreaker *Northwind*** (WAGB-282). I complained of a sore throat and the Public Health doctor

said I had the MUMPS and was "grounded." The ship would sail, and, when I was no longer contagious, I would be flown to Juneau to join the ship.

We had arranged to rent the house occupied by the officer I was relieving, and we moved right in. Now I would sail on a six-week cruise, leaving Mary on her own with four children and a dog. (Good luck, my love!)

At this point, I want to pay **tribute to Coast Guard wives**, who travel from station to station making homes for their families. Support facilities found on the bases of the large services are seldom available to Coast Guard families. They must utilize local facilities such as schools, doctors, grocery stores, pharmacies, churches, etc. Local neighbors are often vitally important and are usually very friendly thanks in no small part to the fact that the Coast Guard is a humanitarian service. (In this case, Mary went to the next-door neighbor and introduced herself. The lady was polite, but said she had become very fond of the preceding Coast Guard couples who had rented that house. But just when they became good friends they were transferred...and she wasn't going through that again!)

How do these women do it? Far from their homes, young women having first babies without their mothers being in attendance? Coping with illness and not knowing where to turn? Making the household furnishings somehow fit? And how frightening to be left ashore while their husbands leave on long sea patrols or fly a plane out of a hurricane's path, leaving the family to cope.

Those who have not lived the life of a service family will never really know how much credit the service wife deserves.

Bering Sea Patrol

First, let me refresh your memory about the early history of the Coast Guard. Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury of the United States, had ten ships built to enforce customs laws. His motive was, of course, to collect money. The vessels were called Revenue Cutters. They were assigned to the Treasury Department. Their flag was the Treasury Department flag with the Coast Guard shield mounted on it. The Coast Guard remained in the Treasury Department until the Department of Transportation was formed in 1965.

In 1867, the Revenue Cutter Service transported the first federal officials to the new territory of Alaska. The reason was to protect the northern fur seal. The Russians practiced a controlled harvest of the animals, and this procedure was continued even after the U.S. purchased Alaska. But pelagic hunting was threatening to lead the seals to extinction. The Secretary of the Treasury was the official who regulated the killing of the fur seals, as this was a source of income for the United States. He naturally ordered his Revenue Cutter Service to enforce the proper harvesting of the seals.

While cruising the Bering Sea and visiting its shores, the cutter men observed destitute villages in desperate need of food and medical care. Whaling and lawlessness was uncontrolled among the sailors and caribou herders. 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. Along with poachers, the court tried cases involving murder, arson, assault with a deadly weapon, and selling liquor to natives. The cutter's captain was made a Marshall and the executive officer a Deputy Sheriff. (On my cruise I was designated a Deputy Sheriff! But I never did get a case.)

The old **Coast Guard cutter *Bear*** participated in a project to bring 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. The project started in 1892 with a small herd that grew to half a million by 1941.

A remarkable rescue mission took place in 1897 when eight whaling ships were trapped in the Arctic ice field near Point Barrow. There was great concern that the 265 men who



For my rotation back to sea, I was assigned as Executive Officer of the CG Icebreaker *Northwind*

made up the crews of the whalers would starve during the long winter months. The *Bear* sailed north, but it was November and the ice pack was consolidating. There was no way the ship could get through. It was then decided to form the **Overland Relief Expedition**. They put ashore at Cape Vancouver and bought a small herd of reindeer. Using dog sleds pulled by reindeer, and on snowshoes and skis, the men traveled fifteen hundred miles 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.



Icebreakers are working vessels, not set up for ceremonial duties. They are equipped to handle heavy cargo, and the crew was known as a “dungaree gang”

The patrol I was on was very different. We cruised to designated villages. We were expected, and by radio we reported our pending arrival. The ship had a helicopter by which means the Dental Corpsman and I were flown in ahead of the ship's arrival. I would meet with the village leader and approve the place for the medical and dental exams. (Usually in the schoolhouse.) The Medical Doctor and the Dentist would follow.

Due to the introduction of candy bars, soft drinks, and sweets, the villagers had very bad teeth. Since the ship could not return for another year, the solution for diseased teeth was to pull them.

On one occasion, the prettiest native girl was in the chair. The Dentist pulled a tooth. It got away from his forceps and landed right square in the middle of her crotch. All eyes stared for a second or two, then the Corpsman said, "Do you need any help, Doctor?"

I will close this Scene with a Song of the Bering Sea Patrol:

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.