

Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Bob Papp's Remarks

at the

Coast Guard Cutter SMILAX "Queen of the Fleet" Ceremony Atlantic Beach, NC

April 14, 2011

Good Afternoon Shipmates!

I am very excited to be here today to celebrate SMILAX and all who've sailed in her!

I would like especially thank Boatswain McAloon and his crew for inviting me to attend this special occasion.

I must admit, if SMILAX was a living being, she would probably be a little confused by all this pomp and circumstance!

Throughout the service we change the watch -- we commission and decommission cutters -- we hold changes of command -- and we even change homeports. But all of these ceremonies signal a beginning or an end. Today is different. Today, we have the rare pleasure of celebrating a continuation of service with perhaps a degree of change, for today we celebrate the designation of the SMILAX as Queen of the Fleet!

Research reveals that the "Queen of the Fleet" title dates back to 1896. It was given to a new cutter, the U.S. Revenue Cutter McCulloch. It wasn't formalized -- and thus things are a little fuzzy -- until the CGC Campbell was referred to as the "Queen of the Fleet" at some point between 1966 and 1982. The tradition has continued with each eldest cutter cutter in commission receiving formal acknowledgement as the "Queen of the Fleet."

Time-honored Naval Customs and Traditions like this -- I call them "the Manners of Our Profession" -- provide a link to the past. They bond Coast Guardsmen who have gone before with Coast Guardsmen who will carry our traditions into the future...

This ceremony preserves our identity -- it is a sign of respect to seniority, seamanship, and duty well performed -- and it celebrates our heritage as a unique maritime service.

While I attend as Commandant of the Coast Guard, I believe the invitation was extended because I, like the SMILAX have received a designation for being the oldest

mariner in the Coast Guard – it's the Gold Ancient Mariner's Hat! As the Gold Ancient Mariner, I always wear my Cutterman's device with an extreme sense of pride!

You can remove every one of my uniform devices except my Cutterman's device—it is the thing I value the most—not so much because of the way it was earned, but because it's a reflection of the Shipmates with whom I have had the honor and privilege to serve. Now of course, shipmates includes all Coast Guardsmen, whether aviators, marine safety inspectors, or otherwise – we are not just a sea-going service – we're a maritime service in the fullest sense – but events like this remind us that our roots, heritage and history, as well as the manners of our profession flow from the sea...

President Kennedy spoke of this deep attraction to the sea in a speech he delivered at the Americas Cup races in Newport, Rhode Island in September 1962:

“I really don't know why it is that all of us are so committed to the sea, except I think it's because in addition to the fact that the sea changes, and the light changes, and ships change, it's because we all came from the sea. And it is an interesting biological fact that all of us have, in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and, therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea -- whether it is to sail or to watch it -- we are going back from whence we came.”

The current SIMLAX crew's family trees are tied to the ocean, and have deep roots in the Coast Guard...starting with ship's Captain, Boatswain Scott McAloon. You'll note the picture in the program of the Coast Guardsman painting the hull numbers...that's his father BM3 Doug McAloon...

Indeed, I'm told one third of this crew has a family member who previously served in the Coast Guard. This crew is part of a long blue line of Coast Guardsmen – those who live by our core values of Honor, Respect and Devotion to duty – and, I would not be surprised if a few of their sons or daughters, nieces or nephews will find their way into our service! Indeed, we would be honored...

In that same sense goes this cutter. We honor the SMILAX's history today, but we know the ship has a long (but hopefully not too long) future ahead of it! I hope the Boatswain's Mates have plenty of gold paint in stock, as I doubt this will be the last time the numbers will need to be painted!

To put SMILAX's longevity in perspective, I think this fact sums it up well...Folks, the only U.S. Coast Guard or Navy ships that are older than SMILAX and still in commission have sails! That's right masts and sails...these vessels would be our own training barque EAGLE – EAGLE is older than SMILAX but, because she was first commissioned in the German Navy, SMILAX's Coast Guard commissioning date trumps EAGLE...and, of course there's the U.S. Navy's USS Constitution, still in commission in Boston...

While those might seem like extreme examples, the Coast Guard has many ships that are more than 40 years old – and that continue to sail long past their planned service life. One of my top priorities is the recapitalization of our aging fleet. The SMILAX is an example of the necessity of this initiative. You – our hard-working crews deserve modern ships, and the improved equipment and crew habitability they provide.

As I prepared to come here today, I really had to think. How long is 67 years? I don't want any tears in the crowd so I'll refrain from letting you know how much it cost to buy a gallon of gas when SMILAX was commissioned! In 1943 when SMILAX's keel was laid, Franklin Roosevelt was president. Our nation has elected eleven more presidents since then!

Now SMILAX has had a few close calls along the way. I want to share one with you. Rear Adm. Robert Durfey—then the Seventh District Commander--was asked to review the condition of SMILAX, and a sister ship, and recommend which of the two vessels should be decommissioned. Well, you now obviously know what Rear Admiral Durfey's decision was – he convinced Headquarters that SMILAX, because of her quote “good condition,” had a few more years of service left. That was 1977!

In 1977, I was just completing my first afloat tour out of the Academy on IRONWOOD...The Bee Gees had just released one of their greatest hits...Saturday Night Fever! Thank goodness Jimmy Buffett followed up by releasing Margaritaville! I think the album was titled “Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes” – and – for those youngsters in the audience – it was released on something we call a vinyl record...But I digress...

Like some of you who have served in SMILAX, Rear Admiral Durfey has retired, and his son, Robert Durfey Jr., joined the Coast Guard in 1979. Robert Durfey Jr. went on to serve 30 years as an officer before retiring in 2008. So, you see this old ship has outlasted the Coast Guard career's of more than one father and son! And I know you in her current crew will ensure she sails on!

And that is who I really want to thank today – you, the Crew of the SMILAX – both past and present. You have plenty to be proud of on this day. You have been good and faithful to this ship. Your efforts are the reason she sails on as Queen of the Fleet. So I want to congratulate you on this remarkable achievement.

So, if I could, I'd like to ask all SMILAX crewmembers, past and present, to stand and be recognized...

I regret having to ask you all to take care of such an old ship – but I am humbled by your extraordinary efforts...you stood your watch proudly...you completed your duties with pride...and you kept this cutter shipshape...You have shown us all what it means to Honor our Profession...and for that, we cannot thank you enough...

On the other hand, what else would we expect? After all, this is our chosen profession. This is our way. This is what we do. We are Coast Guardsmen. We are the men and women of the United States Coast Guard...and proudly so...

Semper Paratus!