

**Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Bob Papp's  
National Maritime Historical Society  
2012 Washington Awards Dinner Remarks**

at the

**The National Press Club**

12 April 2012

It's great to be here this evening. The Coast Guard is very much looking forward to commemorating the Bicentennial of the War of 1812 – as well as using this historic occasion to tell the story about the accomplishments of our predecessors in the Revenue Cutter Service.

I want to introduce Captain Steve Pope, from the Coast Guard's Atlantic Area Staff – he is leading up the Coast Guard's 1812 effort – he has a team of everything from maritime historians to volunteer Historical Ship's Company of Revenue Cutter Service reenactors ready to tell our story!

I am also pleased to report that the Cutter EAGLE just set sail on her 1812 cruise. She will make her way from New Orleans, back up to ports along the eastern seaboard including Mayport, Savannah, New York, Norfolk, Baltimore, Boston and New London, Halifax, Portland, and Newport.

I want to share just a short piece of the Coast Guard's War of 1812 history with you this evening.

As you may have heard, the Coast Guard is proud to be the Nation's oldest continuous sea service! But, what's the basis for this claim?

As you know, in 1785, the Continental Navy was disbanded -- there was no United States Navy when the federal government was formed under the Constitution.

Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton – who we consider to be the father of our Service – desperately needed to find a way to raise revenue and protect marine commerce – so he requested that Congress authorize the construction of several sea-going vessels to enforce the revenue laws. On August 4, 1790, Congress granted his request, and the predecessor of what would become today's Coast Guard was born!

From 1790 to 1798, our fledgling Nation was without a Navy. Our cutters were the only federal vessels in existence – protecting the coast, trade and maritime interests of our new republic. These cutters soon took on other missions including charting the local coastline, carrying supplies to lighthouses, and rendering assistance to mariners in distress.

During this same time, the United States was trying very hard to maintain its neutrality in the Napoleonic Wars (between Britain and France). This was getting harder and harder to do, as both Britain and France continued to violate U.S. sovereignty, with British ships boarding U.S. vessels and impressing their crews into the Royal Navy, and French privateers preying on U.S. merchant vessels.

Between 1806 and 1812, the Jefferson and Madison administrations tried to assert American neutrality through economic pressure by enacting embargoes and trade restrictions -- this prohibited U.S. ships from sailing with cargo – and put thousands of Americans out of work.

Similar to Prohibition in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it fell to the Revenue Cutter Service to enforce these acts. The acts were eventually repealed, but the failure of economic and diplomatic pressure contributed to the outbreak of war between the United States and Britain in June 1812.

When President Madison declared war against Great Britain on June 18, 1812, the United States had a fleet of just 16 Navy vessels, and 14 Revenue Cutters, to put up against the Royal Navy's 600 ships!

On the day war was declared, Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin sent a one-sentence circular to his customs collectors (who oversaw the revenue cutters) stating, "*Sir I hasten to inform you that War was this day declared against Great Britain.*" Gallatin ordered that the news be dispatched to U.S. Navy vessels by cutters stationed along the East coast.

During the war, the Revenue Cutters did not operate under the direction of the Navy, as they had during the Quasi War with France – instead the cutters took their orders from the Department of Treasury through the local customs collectors – the Treasury department did not officially sanction high seas revenue cutter combat operations – their focus remained on having the Revenue Cutters continue to enforce tariff and trade laws, and protect maritime commerce – this was at least as important to the success of the war as the number of enemy ships taken.

On June 25, 1812, just 6 days after war was declared, the Norfolk based cutter *Thomas Jefferson* captured the British schooner *Patriot* bound from Guadeloupe to Halifax with a cargo of sugar – this was the first maritime capture of the war. 17 captures by Revenue Cutters would follow.

Notwithstanding the Treasury department's focus on law enforcement, the Revenue Cutters often went into harm's way, and operated alongside Navy vessels in many encounters throughout the war.

A historic engagement took place from October 10-13, 1814. After a British sloop captured an American merchantman near New Haven, cutter *Eagle* (Captained by Frederick Lee) took on extra volunteer crewmembers and attempted to intervene. The

next morning, Lee found his cutter dangerously close to the 18-gun HMS *Dispatch* and her tender; Lee managed to escape capture by running *Eagle* ashore on Long Island.

*Eagle's* crew then dragged *Eagle's* cannon on shore, and atop a high bluff. A duel ensued with HMS *Dispatch*. When the *Eagle's* crew had exhausted their supply of large shot, they tore up the ship's log book to use as wads and fired back the enemy's cannon shot which had lodged into the hill.

An American captive on board the captured merchantman characterized the engagement as such: "*The cutter was stripped of her sails, and her guns dragged up to a high bluff, and there fought against the brig and tender with bravery until two o'clock. The brig opened fire against the cutter and our people on the hill about 9 o'clock, and by two the cutter's masts were cut away, and her hull appeared to us who were in the sloop, about 2 or 3 miles from the brig, to be a wreck.*"

After fighting for two days *Dispatch* departed. Captain Lee then returned to cutter EAGLE, patched her up and refloated her. However, *Dispatch* and its tender returned with the 36-gun HMS *Narcissus* and 7 barges. This overwhelming force fought off Lee's men and captured the damaged cutter. Lee later commented: "*The officers and crew, together with the volunteers, on board the cutter, have done their duty as American sailors.*"

Commemoration of Captain Fredrick Lee's actions will be held in July aboard the Lee Academy in Madison, Connecticut. The bell atop Lee Academy is purported to be from the 1812 EAGLE – Captain Pope's team is currently conducting research to validate this "legend."

The Revenue Cutters, because they were designed to operate in coastal waters to interdict smugglers, could operate in much shallower waters than the U.S. Navy's frigates – they quickly became the first line of defense to protect American ports and merchant ships – filling an important gap.

Because of their speed and agility, the revenue cutters also proved themselves particularly well adapted to serve as a source of naval intelligence . . . they monitored enemy naval movement, located British privateers, and provided news regarding American merchantmen. Revenue cutter captains gathered and shared this information with customs collectors, local officials, newspapers and military personnel. Their quick actions saved several towns from impending capture by British forces.

Overall, the revenue cutters distinguished themselves during the war – but early on they suffered heavy losses. The Service suffered our first Prisoners of War – something that would not occur again until World War II.

But the War of 1812 firmly established the protection of the Nation's coast and littorals as one of the Coast Guard's most important and long-lasting missions – as well as solidifying new missions such as intelligence collection and naval support.

Finally, I brought something with me:

Campaign Streamer for Maritime Protection of the New Republic 1790-1797.



The streamer was adopted on 30 December 1981 to recognize the heroic actions of the Revenue Cutter Service--the forerunner of the U.S. Coast Guard--which served as the sole maritime defense force protecting our young Nation from 1790 to 1797. Most notably, the Revenue Cutter Service fought against French privateers who were seizing British and Spanish ships in American waters. The Revenue Cutter Service undertook actions of great value to the United States, including the Service's efforts to prevent maritime smuggling, thus securing a reputation for excellence that continues to embody the U.S. Coast Guard today.

Campaign Streamer for the French Quasi-War 1798-1801.



During the period 1790-1799, Alexander Hamilton's fleet of 10 small Revenue Cutters assumed the task of protection of American trade in the absence of a regular Navy. During the 1790's this fleet engaged French privateers who preyed on American merchant vessels. Although out-gunned, and outnumbered, the cutters distinguished themselves. The cutter EAGLE captured five French vessels and recaptured seven American vessels. Cutter PICKERING captured the L'EGYPTE CONQUISE, a vessel with twice the armament and three times the complement of the cutter.

Campaign Streamer for the War of 1812.



Twelve Revenue Cutters were called upon to participate in "the second battle for independence." The battle was barely a week old when the cutter JEFFERSON captured the first prize to fall to the American fleet, the merchantman PATRIOT. In all, the cutters took 18 enemy ships.