

By Tido H. Holtkamp

# America's Tall Ship

This year the U.S. Coast Guard, which celebrated its 100th year in New London, Connecticut in 2010, marks the 75th year of its sail training ship, the *Eagle*. The Coast Guard considers August 4, 1790 its birthday. That's when President Washington authorized the building of 10 cutters for the new Revenue Cutter Service.

More than a hundred years later, on January 28, 1915, President Woodrow Wilson signed into law the bill that merged the U.S. Life Saving Service with the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and named the new entity the United States Coast Guard. The new service also absorbed the Lighthouse Service, the Steamboat Inspection Service, the Bureau of Navigation, Aids to Navigation, and Marine Safety, and today fulfills all these missions. Though it generally operates under the Department of Homeland Security, in times of war the Coast Guard serves as part of the U.S. Navy.



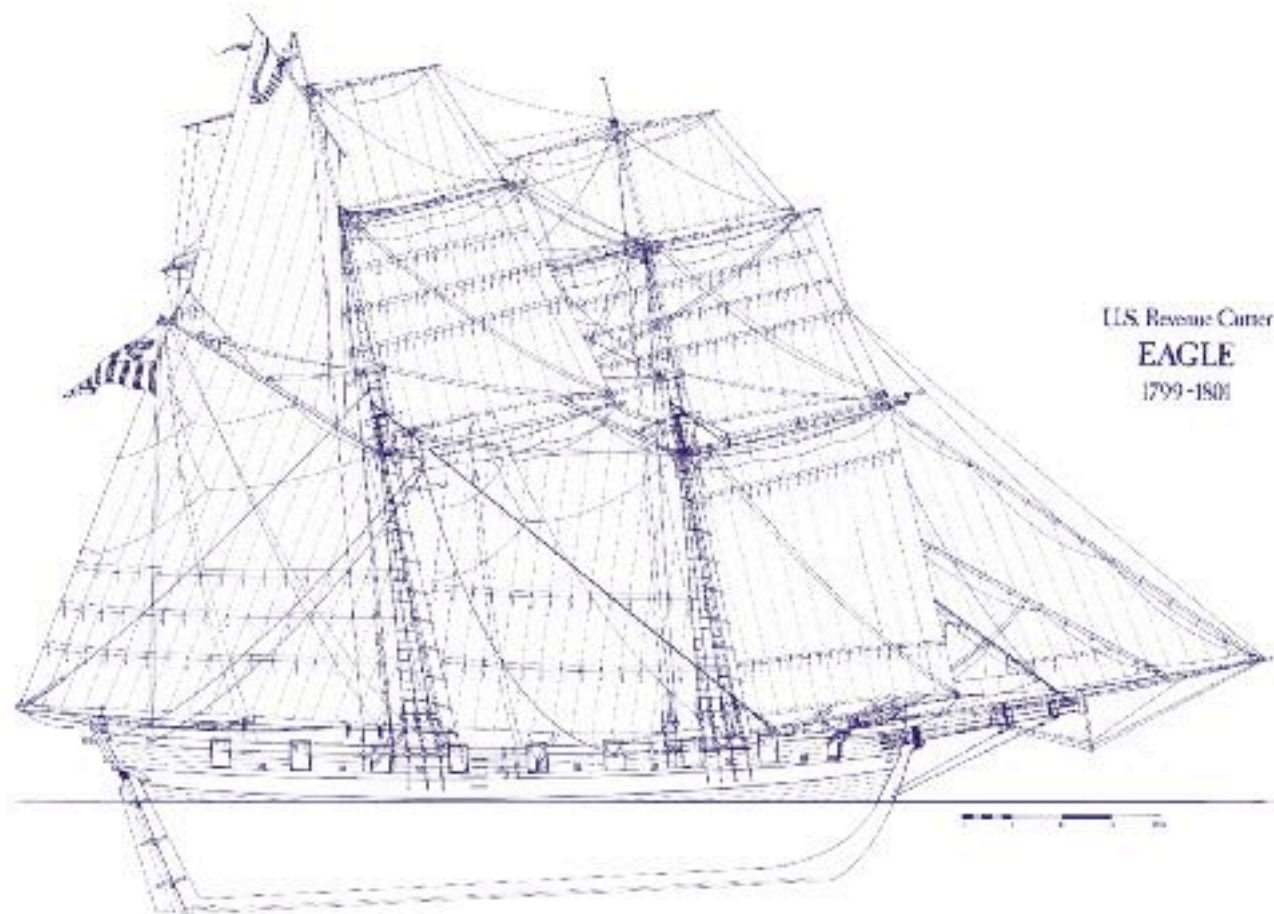


Illustration of the second of seven Coast Guard cutters named *Eagle*. U.S. Coast Guard

The U.S. Coast Guard today has about 40,000 men and women on active duty and employs roughly 6,000 civilians. In addition, approximately 30,000 auxiliaries (civilian volunteers) help with recreational boating. The Coast Guard's best-known vessel today is the barque *Eagle*, widely known as "America's Tall Ship."

#### Coast Guard ships named *Eagle*

The word "cutter" originally denoted a small sailing vessel with one main mast; today the Coast Guard calls any vessel more than 65 feet in length a "cutter."

Six other cutters have carried the name *Eagle*. The first, one of the original 10 cutters authorized by President Washington, was built in 1793 and worked as a revenue cutter out of Savannah, Georgia until 1799, when it was sold. (The navy sold a ship when it was no longer needed.) The third *Eagle* entered the revenue service in 1809 and was based in New Haven, Connecticut. During the War of 1812, while

trying to rescue another American ship in 1814, she ran into a superior British force off Port Jefferson, Long Island. Escaping to shallow water, the crew beached the cutter, dragged the guns up a cliff and kept firing at the British. *Eagle* was captured, and her final fate has been lost to history. The fourth and fifth *Eagle* cutters also served out of New Haven between 1815 and the early 1830s. The sixth *Eagle* patrolled against rum runners during Prohibition—out of New London until 1932, then from Charleston, South Carolina. The present barque is the seventh *Eagle*, and the fifth based in Connecticut.

#### The Role of Sail Training

Sail training, especially for officers, has been a part of the Revenue Cutter Service from the beginning. It includes work on deck and work in the rigging, often high up the masts.

Even in an age of technological complexity the Coast Guard continues to employ a sailing

ship to train its future officers in seamanship. Understanding first-hand the relentless forces of wind and wave, the sailor learns to recognize and respect both the ship's and his or her own limits. Officers develop confidence, courage, good judgement, and teamwork.

In 1876 the U.S. secretary of the treasury established the cadet system. In 1910, the Coast Guard Academy moved from Curtis Bay, Maryland to Fort Trumbull and in 1932 to its present location along the Thames River in New London.

During World War II sail training at the academy received a big boost from the Danish sail training ship *Denmark* that spent the war there. At the war's end, Admiral James Pine, the superintendent of the academy, heard that a German three-masted barque might become available for reparations (compensation for war damages), and immediately sent Captain Gordon McGowan to Germany to claim the ship.

#### The New German Sail Training Ships

When in 1922 the German navy needed a captain for its sail training ship *Niobe*, Count Felix von Luckner took the helm. Von Luckner had achieved fame for his exploits during World War I when he disguised his ship as a Norwegian vessel, passed through the British blockade, and sank many Allied ships. He gained world-wide fame with the book *Seeadler (Sea Eagle)* about his life and wartime adventures. Now, he captained a captured Norwegian four-masted freighter, the *Niobe*, re-fitted into a three-masted "jackass" (irregularly rigged) barque. Many experts considered her top-heavy, but she performed

well until on a clear, sunny July day in 1932 a sudden squall hit the *Niobe* near the island of Fehmarn in the Baltic. She capsized and sank, taking 69 lives.

With Germany in shock and all flags at half-mast, a public collection raised enough funds so that the admiralty could plan for another sail training ship. The navy stressed that the new ship must never capsize! The navy also demanded that the ship be ready for the next class of cadets in 100 days. In the past sail training ships had been converted from freighters or ships of the line; because this ship was built for sail training, the boat yard didn't

below: German cadets washing in cold sea water on deck *Horst Wessel*, February 1944. Courtesy Tido Holtkamp  
bottom: Hammock on board *Mircea*, 2000. Cadets slept in hammocks until 1976 when the Coast Guard began accepting women and installed small compartments with bunks. Courtesy of Tido Holtkamp



have to accommodate armament, guns, and torpedoes; and since she did not have to carry cargo, her hull could be more streamlined and built for greater speed. Choosing among several bids, the navy awarded the contract to the Hamburg shipyard Blohm & Voss.

Blohm & Voss chose a three-mast barque as the most advantageous design. Sails are either "fore-and aft sails" running in the direction of the ship, or "square sails" hanging from yards attached to masts and running perpendicular to the ship's direction. A barque has both a foremast and mainmast full-rigged (or square-rigged) and a mizzenmast fore- and aft-rigged. The 10 square sails—5 each on the fore- and mainmasts—yield a large sail area and give the cadets plenty of room for sail exercises. The 3 mizzenmast sails give the ship stability and maneuverability and can quickly be adjusted. An additional 10 staysails add sail area and maneuverability. Altogether the ship carries 23 sails.

Blohm & Voss completed their ship Nr. 495 on time. The navy named her *Gorch Fock* after the famous German author Johann Kinau, who had, under the pseudonym Gorch Fock, written the bestseller *Seefahrt ist Not (Seafaring is a Necessity)* and had died in the 1916 Battle of Jutland. On June 3, 1933 more than 10,000 well-wishers cheered as Kinau's mother christened the ship *Segelschulschiff Gorch Fock*. Her trial runs produced exuberant reports, and the navy called her a highly successful ship.

She became the first of "five sisters": *Gorch Fock* (1933), *Horst Wessel* (1936), *Albert Leo Schlageter* (1938), *Mircea* for the Rumanian navy (1938), and *Gorch Fock II* (1958). All are still in operation today, the safest and most accident-free series of sail training ships ever built.

#### The *Horst Wessel*

In 1933, Adolf Hitler renounced the Treaty of Versailles and began a general re-armament. Soon the German navy needed more officers and ordered another sail training ship built.

The *Gorch Fock* plans served as blueprints for the new ship but were modified with larger dimensions and some other changes: The outer hull walls were made of steel plates; the masts

and yards made of steel; two full-length steel decks were overlaid with solid teak and Oregon pine; and it had six bulkheads for seven watertight compartments. The crew could lower the three upper yards of the fore- and mainmasts—when they were not in use—so as to lower the ship's center of gravity. The crew could also lower the tops of the fore- and mainmasts when passing under a bridge.

In 1936, Blohm & Voss completed the second "sister." She ran 30 feet longer than the *Gorch Fock*, and many other dimensions also were increased. The new ship had more space for fuel, larger anchors, and a longer bowsprit. With a regular crew of 80, she could house 220 cadets in four below-deck compartments. The Reich leaders decided that henceforth all sail training ships would be named after heroes of the National Socialist movement, and the new ship would be named *Segelschulschiff Horst Wessel*.

Horst Wessel was born in 1907 in northwest Germany, the son of a Protestant pastor. He moved to Berlin as a student and became an ardent follower of the Nazi Party. Wessel joined the Storm Troopers, became a leader, and wrote a fighting song for them. He was shot and killed by a Communist in 1930. His funeral turned into a publicity success for the Nazis, and when the Nazis came to power in 1933, they made the "Horst Wessel Song" a part of the national anthem.

The *Segelschulschiff Horst Wessel* was christened on June 13, 1936. A large crowd, naval units, storm troopers, and Adolf Hitler himself attended the ceremony; his deputy Rudolf Hess gave the dedication speech. Under the rousing sounds of the "Horst Wessel Song," the ship slid into the water. After successful trial runs the navy commissioned the *Horst Wessel* on September 17, 1936, with Kapitän August Thiele her first "Kommandant" and Kiel her homeport. Thiele had previously commanded the *Gorch Fock*.

Thiele took the *Horst Wessel* on a number of cruises, including one to St. Thomas. After the Kristallnacht had made the plight of the Jews in Germany plain to the world, the British navy snubbed the crew during a visit to Britain.

With the outbreak of war in 1939 the German navy mothballed all three of its sail training

ships. *Horst Wessel* later served as a hotel for the training of marine Hitler Youth. In 1944, though, the navy re-activated all three ships for sail training and equipped them with anti-aircraft guns on deck. In late 1944, the *Horst Wessel* and the *Schlageter* sailed together into a storm. *Schlageter*, a ship identical to the *Horst Wessel*, hit a mine and suffered major damage. Fourteen crewmembers were killed, but with daring maneuvers Kapitänleutenant Schnibbe of the *Horst Wessel* kept the stricken ship afloat until help came. *Schlageter*, with three forward partitions filled with water and a vertical crack in mid deck, was quickly repaired.

### From *Horst Wessel* to *Eagle*

After the war, the fate of all German ships was to be decided by the victors.

Beginning in early 1946 Coast Guard Captain McGowan took possession of the *Horst Wessel* in Bremerhaven. With German and American help he got the ship fit for the trip to the U.S. He had a Coast Guard crew but no experienced tall-ship sailors. McGowan received unexpected help from a British officer in charge of German minesweeping operations who manipulated his system so that he could give McGowan 20 experienced German volunteers (who had all served as cadets on the *Horst Wessel* in 1944). McGowan renamed the ship *Eagle*, a name rich with Coast Guard history. On May 30 *Eagle* left for home via the Azores and Bermuda. The German and American crews worked well together. Leaving Bermuda, *Eagle* ran into a major hurricane, but she proved her seaworthiness. With many tattered sails she arrived in New London in early July 1946.

The Coast Guard Academy quickly incorporated the new ship into its training system. Learning seamanship and teamwork along with leadership, cadets spent time aboard according to class patterns, with senior cadets helping as instructors. Soon almost every officer in the Coast Guard had sailed on *Eagle* as a cadet and viewed his time aboard her as a proud experience. Many officers applied for positions on board *Eagle*, as did many enlisted men.

During the years 1947 to 1975 the *Eagle* followed a fairly consistent schedule of summer

cruises. The academy would commission her in the spring, then decommission her in the fall and close her for the winter. The academy would assign a commanding officer each summer, usually a member of the academy staff. He would lead *Eagle* on a summer-long cruise to Europe in the company of other Coast Guard vessels as part of a cadet practice squadron, and, after 1963, on shorter summer cruises to North American ports. Skeleton crews, cadet work parties, and sometimes the Coast Guard shipyard would do maintenance work in the fall.



*Eagle* sustained damage over the years, including that from a collision with a Philippine freighter in heavy fog in the Baltimore channel, January 1967. U.S. Coast Guard

Many U.S. presidents visited the ship. Most memorable was a visit by John F. Kennedy in August 1962. He not only gave a major speech from the deck, but he also surprised the crew with his knowledge of sailing.

*Eagle* became an able ambassador of the U.S.A. In 1972 Chancellor Willy Brandt invited her to the Olympic games in Germany, and *Eagle* came to Kiel with other tall ships. She also visited Quebec and other cities.

The ship had its share of accidents. Once she hit a pier in New York; another time she nicked the dock in New London. In a major accident in the fog in the Baltimore channel she met with a Philippine freighter and sustained major damage



President John F. Kennedy speaking aboard *Eagle*, August 1962. U.S. Coast Guard

to the bow and the foremast, and in 1972 she snagged a rope under the Gold Star Bridge in New London and had all three mast tops cut. She also lost two crewmembers in deadly accidents.

The years 1976 through 1987 brought major changes to *Eagle*. Her exterior assumed the same stripes on the hull that all cutters of the U.S. Coast Guard carry. She received a shiny new eagle as figurehead. When the Coast Guard became the first of all military services to include women in its officer corps, the living and sleeping quarters on board had to undergo major renovations: the old hammocks disappeared, and smaller compartments with bunks replaced them. The capstan, a mark of the old sailing days, also disappeared. The boatyard installed a pilothouse cleverly built into the superstructure so as not to spoil her lines. The ship also received a major physical overhaul, including a new teak deck and new machinery in place of the original German gear, and even beloved "Elmer"—the German diesel engine—had to go. New procedures brought the ship in line with the standards of the U.S. Coast Guard, and beginning with incoming Captain Paul Welling in 1976, she has remained in service year round.

In 1988 *Eagle* made her longest journey, more than 30,000 nautical miles in eight months, for Australia's 200th birthday. This trip made Captain Ernst Cummings the longest-serving captain, with five years in that role. *Eagle* also led the 1976 and 1986 tall ship parades in New York and a number of others both in the U.S. and abroad. In 1990 President George H. W. Bush created quite a stir when he ordered *Eagle* from Boston, where the ship was participating in

the armed forces. The Coast Guard keeps the ship on a steady maintenance schedule, makes sure the electronic gear is up to date, and even has brought her ballast on deck for cleaning. The ship today has the same fire and accident prevention services as any ship in the Coast Guard.

*Eagle* spent her first 10 years as *Horst Wessel* in the German navy as a training vessel for young men who would take on command positions in the German Navy. Except for her first ten years, the ship has spent her life in a noble profession indeed. May she continue for many years to come! ➡



Three cadets at the wheel, c. 2000. Courtesy of Tido Holtkamp

the July 4th Harborfest celebration, to Kennebunkport and back so he and his staff could watch fireworks from its decks.

The 1992 Tall Ships meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico commemorating Columbus's arrival 500 years earlier brought all five of the Blohm & Voss-built sister ships together (America's *Eagle*, Russia's *Tovarish*, Rumania's *Mercia*, Portugal's *Sagres II*, and Germany's *Gorch Fock II*), providing a field day for photographers and history buffs.

In 2010 the Immigration Service started to use the deck of *Eagle* for the swearing-in of new citizens, especially those who were members of

Tido H. Holtkamp was born in Germany. He spent two years in the German Navy during World War II and served on the *Horst Wessel* for six months as a cadet in 1944. After coming to the United States and serving in the U.S. Army during the Korean War he met his old ship again in New London in 1959 and has sailed on board many times. He is author of *A Perfect Lady – A Pictorial History of the U.S. Coast Guard Barque Eagle*, (Flat Hammock Press, 2007).