



Rite of Passage

Sailing Trans-Atlantic
On The USCG Barque *Eagle*

Modern life is complicated. I needed a car, a bus, a train and a taxi to get to my square-rigger. When no cabs could be had, a young police officer offered me a lift. Musing on my last conveyance in such a vehicle, I thought, *My, how a touch of gray can change your circumstances.*

It was May 6, and I had come to New London, Connecticut, to join the Coast Guard training barque *Eagle* to sail her to Dublin, Ireland. A snotty, wet easterly met me at the pier, speaking more of March than May. The spires of New London and the I-95 bridge jutted from the murk, and a portion of a nuclear submarine was discernible across the Thames River at General Dynamics Electric Boat. It was a day for sitting beside a wood stove, not for going to sea, but here I was, and somehow it seemed altogether fitting for going aboard a sailing ship.

The next morning was organized chaos. Cadets lugged sea bags aboard. Human chains passed stores across the gangway and down into the deepest recesses of the ship. Station bills were posted and duties disseminated. I met my shipmates in passing and in passageways. Boatswain Aaron Stapleton instructed me in the use of a climbing harness and then escorted me — and the mayor of New London — up the foremast. By completing this evolution, I was qualified in the future to work aloft.

Once stowed for sea, all hands mustered amidships. Departing crew bade farewell, and new crew were welcomed. The pilot came aboard. The mayor went ashore. We slipped the lines and headed for the sea.



Nature provides some unforgettable memories for those aboard the *Eagle*, such as this August 2015 view of the Perseid meteor shower.

Departure

Our voyage officially began at New London Ledge Lighthouse, a brick mansard edifice that resembles an orphaned townhouse more than a beacon for mariners. Under power, the 295-foot *Eagle* shouldered through a lingering swell, passing Fishers Island, Race Rock and Montauk before plunging into dungeon fog, every line, spar and shroud dripping like the canopy of a nautical rainforest. Aboard were 225 souls: 57 permanent crew, 150 cadets from the Coast Guard Academy, plus reservists, auxiliaries and me, all under the command of Capt. Matthew Meilstrup, a 24-year veteran of the Coast Guard and the 28th American master of the *Eagle*.

Lilacs may bloom somewhere in New England in May, but the North Atlantic was a mess. Surface analyses showed two gales stomping across the Atlantic from west to east, each with winds topping 50 knots, and a particularly devilish maelstrom roiled the waters around Ireland. But the *Eagle* was built in the tradition of the great steel Cape Horners that were the high-water mark of commercial sail. If her builder couldn't get things right, no one ever would. Any ship can find trouble, and no smart captain goes looking for it, but the *Eagle* is a sailing ship and needs wind to make her go. Wind we wanted, and wind we would get.

Shakedown Street

A day later, the fog and diesel fumes gave way to clear skies and fair winds. Those who suffered *mal de mer* soon recovered, and the crew wasted no time putting everyone to work setting sail, bracing yards and trimming. The majority of those who sail aboard *Eagle* have little or no square-rig experience, so it falls to the permanent crew to direct, coordinate and teach the rest. There are two groups of cadets aboard: a cadre of upperclassmen and women who have just finished their third year at the Academy, and a much larger group that has just finished their first year. The older cadets sailed on *Eagle* two years ago, but that's a long time ago now.

It is oft noted how a shipboard community is a microcosm of society. These first few days are spent establishing our community and settling into the carefully choreographed routine of shipboard life. This elaborate dance encompasses cooking, cleaning, dishwashing, working, teaching, learning, eating, sleeping, making friends and learning to work with people who aren't your friends, just like real life.

Passagemaking 1

After several days of satisfactory progress under benign conditions, the ship's company is now acclimated. Good thing, too. Winds begin to build out of the northwest — 20 knots, 25, 30, 35 knots. *Eagle* is in her element, the embodiment of muscular grace rocketing east along the 40th parallel, bowsprit to the sunrise with a bone in her teeth.

As conditions vary, we set or strike sail and brace the yards for best effect. Our speed moves between 10 and 12 knots but is frequently 13 or 14 and occasionally more than 15 knots. The navigator, Tom Crowley, has found a slot between low pressure to the north and high pressure to the south. Together, they form a river of fair wind that coincides neatly with the Gulf Stream. Under these conditions *Eagle* is the epitome of a thing doing what it was meant to do.

Training Days

One of the first training objectives is for the cadets to memorize



A sextant sighting is taken at sunset.



Eagle carries 21,350 square feet of sail.



These cadets are at work on the *Eagle's* yardarm.

the names and locations of some 200 lines that control 23 sails on three masts rising 147 feet above the waterline. Clutching diagrams like prayer books, cadets move along the pin rails, grasping each line and uttering its name in words that may as well be Greek: port main topgallant bunt-leechline, starboard fore royal clewline, port main tack jigger.

This is more than an academic exercise. If cadets haul or let go the wrong line, they're either going to smash something or hurt someone, and the captain takes a dim view of both. Moreover, we are going to Ireland, and liberty depends on passing the line exam. Knowledge and safety are fine things, but liberty in Ireland — now that's motivation!

Despite the importance of learning the lines, learning to sail is not the primary purpose of this vessel. Anyone who has spent time in this environment knows that a ship under sail is arguably the greatest vehicle the world has ever known for transmitting lessons in leadership, teamwork, cooperation, coordination, communication and the importance of doing something right, exactly right. You can fool the world in some disciplines, but the sea will slap you silly the moment

you get complacent or try to bluff what you don't know. The trick with sail training is to put all of that across without losing limbs.

Valuable as these overarching life lessons are, *Eagle* serves other purposes. Over the course of the cruise, and in between sail handling, cadets cycle through practical training sessions led by faculty, ship's crew, and specialists from the Coast Guard Reserve and Auxiliary. Topics include damage control, firefighting, navigation, meteorology, engineering, maintenance — all of which they will need to know about when they step aboard their first cutter. And since the North Atlantic runs its own training program, the captain and crew must sometimes adjust their plans to the circumstances. If skies are clear, we bring out the sextants. If the seas are slight, we hold a boat drill. If a freighter breaks the horizon, it's time for radar plotting.

The upperclassmen and women play a critical role in teaching, mentoring and supervising the younger cadets. In doing so, they are training for what comes next. Everyone aboard, from the captain on down, is modeling how to be in the Coast Guard. These men and women understand that over the course of their careers their paths will cross; they will work with and for each other again. They will

rely upon one another, perhaps under harrowing circumstances. In consequence, the training philosophy is shaped by the idea that wisdom and knowledge are to be passed along, not withheld.

Though the ship is governed by a military hierarchy, the atmosphere is not uptight. On the contrary, *Eagle* is a happy ship, and no one is more responsible for the tone of a ship than the captain. As Capt. Meilstrup says: "If you can't make it fun, what's the point?"

Passagemaking 2

The wind remains fair but is dead astern now, and *Eagle* is rolling spectacularly. It is not uncommon to be conversing with someone across the dinner table and see their face abruptly replaced by the soles of their shoes as they topple backward and out of sight. In the finest tradition of the Coast Guard, food and beverages under the thrall of kinetics are often saved through selfless acts of heroism. And sometimes not.

With the approach of twilight, cadets are poised on the fantail, sextants in hand. They are quickly becoming proficient at the art of celestial navigation. It must be said that their good results are abetted by a slick computer program called Stella. You simply enter the time, the sextant angle and the name of the heavenly body (star, planet, sun, moon), and presto! Stella spits out a line of position and plots it on an electronic screen.

By eliminating the painstaking plod through corrections, interpolations and tables (all printed in tiny font), Stella leapfrogs over much of the human error and vexation that attends celestial navigation. Some might call it cheating, but I'm not so sure. If Stella can quickly demonstrate to skeptical, gadget-happy cadets that celestial navigation works, they are more likely to embrace it. Though Stella relies upon a computer, it is independent of satellite navigation systems. GPS "spoofing" is relatively easy to do, and no longer a theoretical concern, so there is rediscovered value in celestial navigation.

To drive home the point, the captain suppresses the GPS for most of the trip — we can't actually shut the thing down — and makes the students navigate via dead reckoning and celestial observation. Individual results vary, but ultimately the technique is validated. This experience acquaints students with another life skill: making judgments and decisions based on imperfect information.

History Lesson

Eagle was built as the *Horst Wessel* for the German Navy in 1936 at the renowned Hamburg shipyard Blohm + Voss. She is one of four sister ships built in the 1930s expressly for sail training. Long before the Nazis, the German seafaring community placed great store by training mariners under sail (and still does), even

This is more than an academic exercise. If cadets haul or let go the wrong line, they're going to smash something or hurt someone — the captain takes a dim view of both.

after sail ceased to be commercially viable. The *Horst Wessel* and her sisters were part of that tradition. In 1946, amid the rubble of bombed out Bremerhaven, the Coast Guard took charge of the vessel, renamed her *Eagle*, and sailed her back to the United States, where she has done duty training Coast Guard personnel ever since. Her sister ships have continued to sail in a similar capacity for Russia, Portugal and Romania. A fifth sail training barque of the same design was built in the same shipyard in 1958 for the German navy. Quite a testament to the durability of these ships, and the education they impart.

Passagemaking 3

We are 150 miles southwest of Ireland. The engine has been silent since somewhere off Nantucket. Over the past two weeks the wind has been southwest, west and northwest, stronger and lighter but always fair. Now it is on the port quarter at 25 knots. *Eagle* is leaning into the sea and scorching along at 12 to 13 knots. This is a passage to remember.



There are lessons to be learned, but the atmosphere aboard the *Eagle* is a happy one.

Psalm 107 speaks of how those who do business on great waters see the wonders of the deep. For our part, dolphins have been our constant companions, playful and exuberant in a way that lends a certain appeal to the idea of jumping in with them. But then we saw several very large sharks, all business in a way that put a swift end to all thoughts of briny frivolity. There is nothing funny about a shark. Whales have graced the scene, especially off New England, and the smaller pilot whales drop by from time to time. I spotted one ocean sunfish, wagging its dorsal fin, but little in the way of bird life beyond some ruffled sparrows blown off course and seeking sanctuary in our rigging.

The *Eagle* is the only active commissioned sailing vessel in U.S. military service.



Landfall

At 1621 on May 23, the lookout sighted Ireland, the auld sod. The rail was soon crowded with crew and cadets alike, drinking in the sight and chattering about their plans for Dublin. While we never doubted we would make it, there is a sublime quality to the excitement felt upon crossing an ocean under sail, and seeing your destination emerge from beyond the curvature of the earth, that does not lend itself to words.

All through the long May twilight, islands, headlands and distant mountains populated our horizon. At dusk's last gasp, the Fastnet Lighthouse, with a range of 27 nautical miles, commenced its 5-second luminous epistles out into the darkening Atlantic. Soon the lights of Irish homes could be seen twinkling across the water. Strange to think that our first view of Ireland was the last, and final, view for so many immigrants.

Finally fair winds abandoned us, and we were compelled to motor the final stretch, passing through waters off Cork where the chart shows the final resting place of the *Lusitania*, torpedoed in 1915.

Even on a voyage as inherently stimulating as this one, training can become a little hum-drum for teacher and student alike. Contrived

emergency scenarios may inject an element of realism, but it is hard to re-create the feel of an actual emergency. When "man overboard" was announced over the PA on the morning of May 25, there was no need to create a scenario. A crewmember working overside had gone into the drink. The good news: It was daylight in calm conditions, the ship was under power, and the seaman was wearing flotation.

Because of safety precautions already in place, a person had been assigned to monitor him, so the alarm was raised instantly. All hands, from the youngest cadet on up, followed their training and responded with the utmost professionalism. The seaman was back aboard within 13 minutes, colder and wiser but otherwise unharmed. A man overboard is a rare event in the Coast Guard and elsewhere. That these cadets got to experience one, with a happy ending, undoubtedly taught them more than any PowerPoint presentation ever will.

The entry into Dublin went smoothly, though we had to squeak through a drawbridge to get to the berth. The buoyage here is "backward," so everyone has to get "Red Right Returning" out of their minds and replace it with "Green." Not so hard to do here in the land of the shamrock. ■