



*U.S. Coast Guard History Program*

## *Bear*, 1885

---

Builder: Alexander Stephen & Son, Dundee, Scotland

Length: 198' 4"

Beam: 30'

Draft: 17' 11"

Displacement: 703 tons

Cost: ??

Launched: 1874

Commissioned: 2 March 1885 in RCS

Decommissioned: 3 May 1929 (USCG)

Disposition: Foundered under tow off Chatham, Massachusetts, on 19 March 1963.

Machinery: Compound-expansion steam, 25 5/8" and 50" diameter x 30" stroke, 101 nominal hp (1885)

Complement: 51

Armament: 3 x 6-pound rapid-fire guns (1885)

---

### **Cutter History:**

The United States Revenue Cutter *Bear* was originally constructed as a sealer. She was built by Alexander Stephen & Son in their Dundee Shipyard (Yard No. 56) on the east coast of Scotland. She was completed in 1874 and delivered to W. Grieve of Greenock, Scotland. She spent the first ten years of her life getting her sea legs with a sealing fleet operating off Newfoundland. World-wide fame came to the *Bear* in the early 1880s shortly after the historic Greely Expedition to the Arctic came to a disastrous end. The Expedition, under the command of the then First Lieutenant Adolphus Washington Greely, U.S. Army, was one of two groups dispatched to the Arctic to set up a series of observation stations. Despite elaborately made plans, a series of misfortunes left Greely and his party stranded in the pitiless Arctic winter without adequate food and clothing.

To assist the Greely party, the United States Navy organized a rescue fleet of three ships, consisting of the USS *Bear*, USS *Thetis* and the USS *Alert*. On 22 June 1884, less than two months after her departure, the *Bear* sighted the pitiful remnants of the expedition. For months they had been surviving on rock moss,

leather sledding equipment, and whatever small game they could find. Many of the group had either died or gone mad from privation. Those who had survived resembled skeletons. The surgeon accompanying the expedition had committed suicide.

For a while it looked as though the *Bear's* career was over. Not long after her return from the Greely rescue, she was declared unfit for further service by the Navy. Then in 1885, she was transferred to the Treasury Department for use in Alaskan waters and the Arctic Ocean. That was the beginning of a 41-year career on the Alaskan Patrol which has yet to be surpassed. Her first skipper was Captain A. A. Fengar but in 1885 the colorful "Hell Roaring" Mike Healy, a dynamo of a man with an unpredictable temper, assumed command. Healy was a good skipper, and he commanded the *Bear* for more than nine years, longer than any other. In time, Healy and his ship became legend in the lusty, brawling Territory of Alaska.

The *Bear's* duties on the Alaskan Patrol were many. She carried mail which had accumulated at Seattle during the winter, as well as Government agents and supplies. On her trip south from Alaska, she transported Federal prisoners and other questionable characters whose presence in Alaska 'was undesirable. The deck of the *Bear* often served as a court where justice was dispensed swiftly but fairly. The *Bear* also conducted investigations, undertook crime prevention and law enforcement. She and other cutters like her were often the only law in that turbulent part of the world. The *Bear* also conducted soundings to improve charts of Alaskan waters, and her surgeon furnished medical attention and surgery to natives, prospectors, missionaries, and whalers. These duties are still part of today's Bering Sea Patrol.

Not the least of Healy's accomplishments was the importation of reindeer from Siberia to provide food for the natives who were never free of the threat of famine. As Healy reasoned it, the reindeer would also be an excellent source of clothing and transportation. The wisdom of this measure was dramatically proved a few years later during the famous overland trek to save marooned whalers near Point Barrow, Alaska.

Of all the *Bear's* exploits, none has captured the public imagination more than her Overland Rescue of 1897. It was in the fall of that year that Captain Francis Tuttle, the *Bear's* new commander, learned that eight whaling vessels and their crews, totaling about 275 men, were trapped in the ice pack off remote Point Barrow, Alaska. The *Bear* had only recently returned from her patrol duties, but at the order of the Secretary of the Treasury, she prepared to go to the rescue. This was the first time that an Arctic voyage was attempted during the winter season.

By 14 December 1897, it was clear that the *Bear* had come as far north as she could go. Approximately 85 miles off Cape Nome, the ice was so thick that she was forced to turn back. But before she returned, the *Bear* landed an over-land party on Nelson Island, near Cape Vancouver. It consisted of First Lieutenant D. H. Jarvis, Second Lieutenant B. P. Bertholf, and Surgeon S. J. Call, all of the Revenue Cutter Service. Equipped with dog teams, sleds, and guides, Jarvis and his companions set out for Point Barrow. Before them lay a 1,600 mile journey through frozen, trackless wilderness. But the "Overland Expedition for the Relief of the Whalers in the Arctic Ocean" as it was ponderously called, became one of the great epics of the north.

During the exhausting journey, Jarvis and Call collected a herd of nearly 450 reindeer. Driving the herd ahead of them in the face of icy winds the party reached Point Barrow about three and one-half months after being put ashore by the *Bear*. To the despairing whalers, the arrival of the relief party was nothing short of a miracle. Healy's foresight had paid off.

The *Bear*, which had been in service since 1885 was still around in 1917 when the United States entered World War I. For the duration of the war she served under the U. S. Navy. This, however, did not change her routine patrol of Alaskan waters. In 1929 the *Bear* was decommissioned and turned over to the city of Oakland, California, for use as a maritime museum. It was at this time that she served as the set for the filming of Jack London's "Sea Wolf".

The *Bear* was getting on in years now, but there was still some great moments ahead for the stout old ship. In the early 1930s, the famed Arctic explorer, Admiral Richard E. Byrd, USN, was looking for a vessel suitable for operating in ice in his Second Antarctic Expedition. Hearing that the *Bear* was available, he opened negotiations with officials of the City of Oakland, California, where the vessel had been serving as a

marine museum. The bargain was concluded for the incredibly low price of \$1,050 -- one of the best buys in history. An entry in her log for 19 June 1932, reveals that she was en-route to Boston for overhaul and refitting with a volunteer crew aboard.

Refitting completed, the *Bear*, on 25 September 1933 left Boston under the command of Lieutenant (j.g.) Robert A. J. English, USN. After a rugged trip, she reached the Bay of Whales and Little America in the latter part of January 1934. Once again in the United States Antarctic Expedition of 1939-41, Admiral Byrd called upon the *Bear's* services. This time, however, her boiler and engine were taken out and a modern diesel drive installed. Her auxiliary equipment was electrified. By 16 May 1941, she had completed her work in the Antarctic and was back at Boston.

By this time, the shadow of World War II was already stretching over the United States. In 1941, shortly after her return from the Antarctic, the *Bear* was assigned to the Greenland Patrol. She took part in the capture of the Norwegian trawler *Buskoe* which had, been fitted out by the Germans to transmit weather reports and information on Allied ship movements. The *Bear's* days of active service were now drawing rapidly to a close. In June, 1944 she was stricken from the Navy list of active vessels and turned over to the Maritime Commission for sale.

A Canadian steamship company purchased her in 1948 with the intention of converting her to her former role as a sealing vessel. But before this could be accomplished, the price of seal oil and skins dropped, and all work on her was stopped. For a while it seemed as though the *Bear* were doomed to end her days in obscurity on a Nova Scotia beach. She was spared this fate by Mr. Alfred M. Johnston of Villanova, Pennsylvania, who purchased her for eventual use as a commercial museum and restaurant near Philadelphia. The end came for the *Bear* as she was being towed to Philadelphia. Apparently, her old timbers were no longer strong enough to withstand the vicious battering of the North Atlantic.

Now the *Bear* lies in her final resting place at the bottom of the Atlantic. After a legendary career, spanning several generations, she has at last found peace. But to all men who are interested in the lore of the sea, she will remain a shining symbol of courage. Her story will continue to be told as long as men sail the seas.

---

## Imagery



No caption/photo number; 1910(?); photo by Corvino.



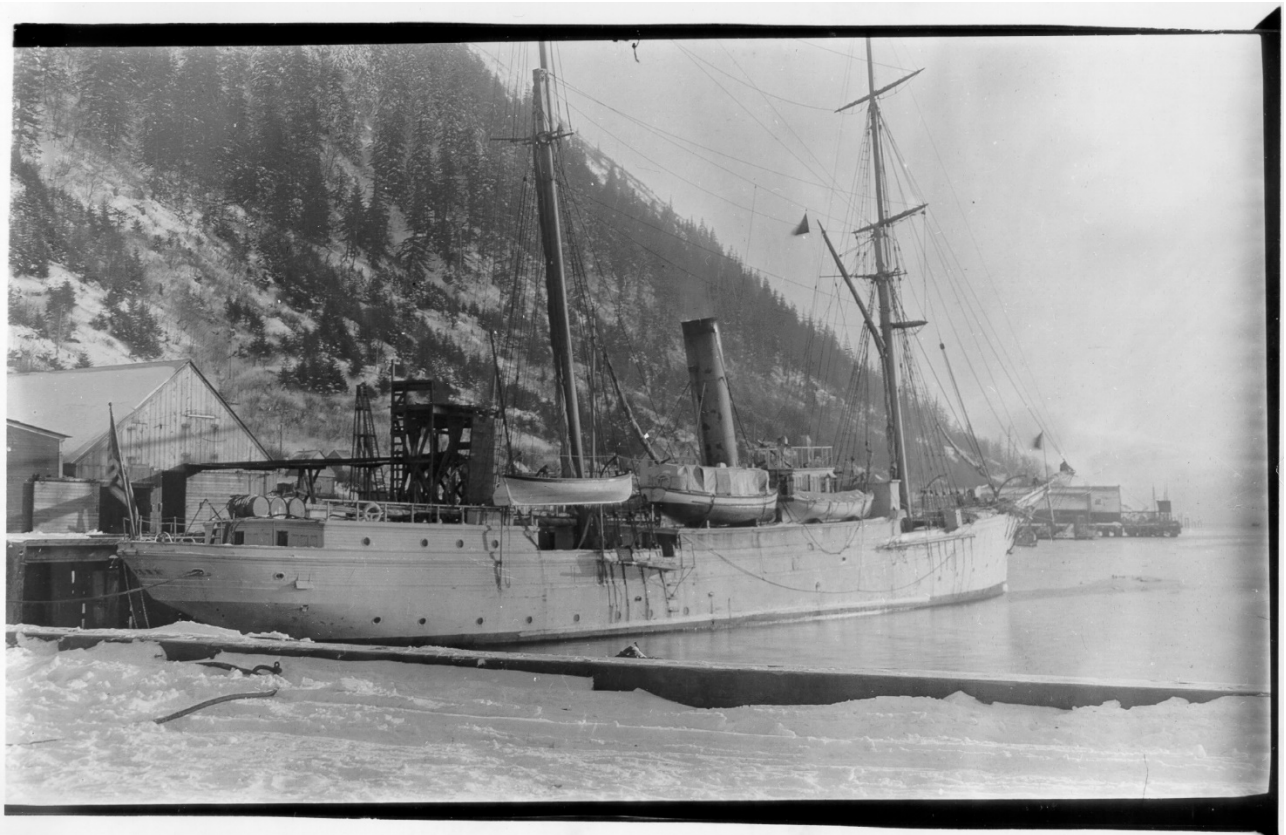
No caption/date/photo number; photographer unknown



"U.S.R.C. 'Bear' and S.S. 'Corwin' -- Roadstead, Nome, Alaska."  
No date/photo number; photo by Lomek Bros., Nome.



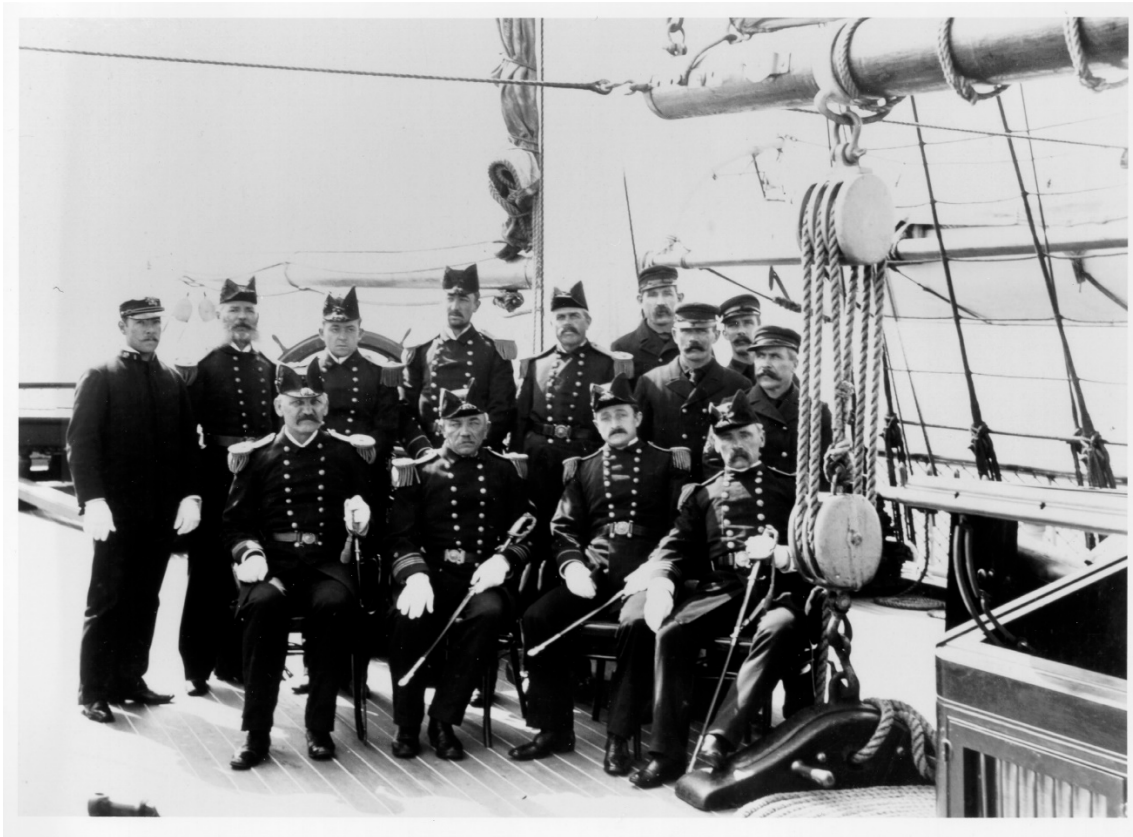
No caption/date/photo number; photographer unknown.



No caption/date/photo number; photographer unknown.  
*Bear* in Juneau, date unknown. Photo courtesy of the Alaska State Library.



No caption/date/photo number; photographer unknown.



"Back: Dr. Bodkin, Engineer Coffin, LT Daniels, LT White, LT Emery;  
Front: CH ENG Schwartz, CPT Healy, ENG Dorry, LT Buhner, Carpenter Cain, Master At Arms Baundy.";  
Summer, 1895; no photo number; photo from scrapbook of John M. Justice.



No caption; Summer, 1895; no photo number; photo from scrapbook of John M. Justice.





No caption; summer, 1895; no photo number; photo from scrapbook of John M. Justice.



"Hoisting Deer aboard the Bear, Siberia, Aug 28th 1891."; no photo number; photographer unknown.



No caption, date or photo number. Crew of *Bear* practice infantry drill.



"The Bear in the ice off Cape Romantzoff, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1900."



No caption, date or photo number. Photographer unknown.



"Unalaska, July 1918." No photo number; photographer unknown.  
Crewmembers after coaling *Bear*.



"SINKING OF THE BEAR: Her towline parted and foremast collapsed the famous former Coast Guard Cutter BEAR, 90-year old queen of polar expeditions and heroic rescues, begins her final journey down to the sea as the tug IRVING BIRCH stands by helpless to save her. The BEAR sank at 8:15 P.M., Tuesday, March 19, 1963, 90 miles south of Cape Sable, Nova Scotia, 260 miles east of Boston. The BEAR was due at Philadelphia on Wednesday, March 20th, where she was to be moored next to the historic OLYMPIA at the foot of Chestnut and Delaware Avenues. It was intended she serve the public there during her remaining days as a commercial restaurant, cocktail bar, and historic museum. She had undergone the restoration work for that last phase of her career in Nova Scotia where her last owner, Mr. Alfred N. Johnston of Villanova, Pa., had purchased her with hopes of saving the retired queen of polar exploits from the fate of rotting on the beach. She had left Nova Scotia under tow on Saturday, March 16th on that final journey down to the sea."; photo dated 19 March 1963;

Photo No. 1CGD-03-19-63(03);  
photographer unknown.

---

**Sources:**

*Bear Cutter File*, U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office.

Bixby, William. *Track of the Bear*. New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1965.

Burroughs, Polly. *The Great Ice Ship Bear: Eighty-Nine Years in Polar Seas*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company 1970.

Rankin, Robert H. and H.R. Kaplan. *Immortal Bear: The Stoutest Polar Ship*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1970.

Ransom, M.A. and Eloise K. Engle. *Sea of the Bear: Journal of a Voyage to Alaska and the Arctic, 1921*. Annapolis: United States Naval Institute 1964.

Rapaport, Stella F. *The Bear: Ship of Many Lives*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company 1962.

United States Congress. House. *Donation of Coast Guard Cutter Bear to Oakland, Calif.* H. Rp. 2095, 70<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 1929, Serial 8979.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Relief of Owners of Schooner Spokane Damaged by U.S. Revenue Cutter Bear*. H. Rp. 542, 60<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1908, Serial 5229.

\_\_\_\_\_. Senate. *Donation of Coast Guard Cutter Bear to Oakland, Calif.* S. Rp. 1471, 70<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 1929, Serial 8977.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Relief of Owners of Schooner Spokane Damaged by U.S. Revenue Cutter Bear*. S. Rp. 81, 60<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1908, Serial 5222.

Wead, Frank. *Gales, Ice and Men: A Biography of the Steam Barkentine Bear*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company 1937.

