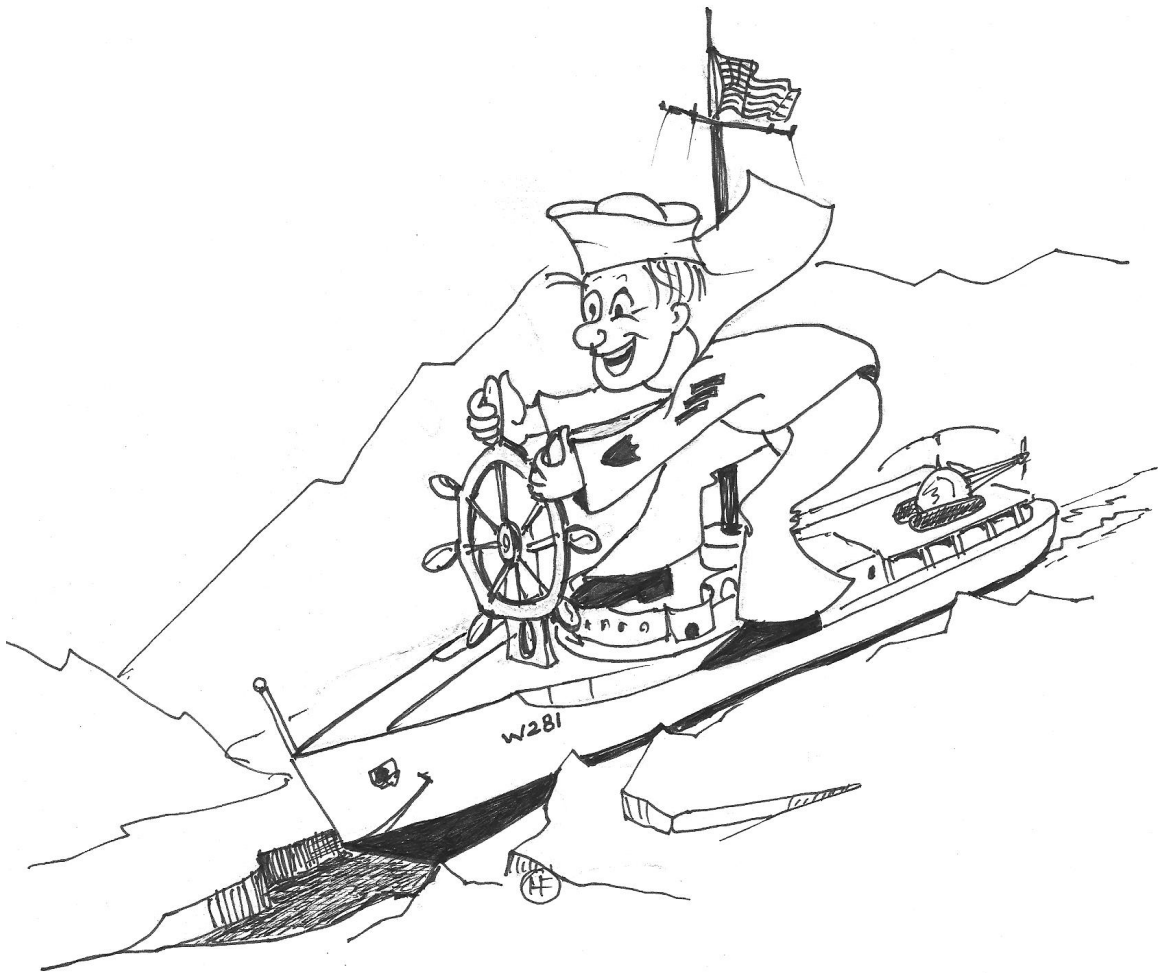


Contributed by LT. Keith Midberry, USCG Ret.

## A VERY COOL SUMMER

Aboard the USCGC Westwind 1953

By Harry Franklin, Jr.



**N**osing a big fat icebreaker into an opening in an ice field and experiencing the sensations of lift, thrust, penetration and acceptance is like riding the back of a mating sea monster. It is exhilarating if you are the helmsman controlling the act but bone chilling at the thought of this hoarfrost slicing into the rigid inveterate ice pick, the skin of which separates you from the Artic Ocean water. But thrusting effort is sustained in anticipation of opening the icy fissure through which the convoy will pass bringing the encounter between icebreaker and ice field to climax. If this sounds somehow erotically inviting, do not be fooled by the rhetoric. It has its euphoric moments but the ice breaking monster can also be an insatiate backbreaker for its crew.

Coast Guard icebreakers are work ships. In winter they grind a passage for shipping through the frozen Great Lakes. Currently under the aegis of the Department of Homeland Security, Coast Guard icebreakers make ice fields navigable for shipping in the United States, the Arctic and Antarctic, as they have for decades. Courageous Coast Guard captains and their crews have opened



otherwise impenetrable frozen extremes of the planet to expeditions for exploration while helping to ensure our national security.

Serving on the now decommissioned CG Cutter Westwind WAGB 281 in the summer of 1953 I was a naïve young sailor on an adventure. That experience was my introduction to what it meant to be an integral part of a proud service dating back to its

inception under President Thomas Jefferson. He formed the Revenue Cutters for the protection of American shipping from marauding pirates thus beginning the long and proud tradition of what was to become the United States Coast Guard. Along with each of my shipmates, I was a cog in the wheel that turned the mechanism protecting our country from attack by highly sophisticated marauders of the nuclear age.

U.S. REVENUE CUTTERS  
INTERCEPTED MAURADING  
PIRATES 1790

My experience on the Westwind taught me the importance of efficient performance by a ships crew. That efficiency encompassed essential teamwork from the operation of sophisticated instrumentation to camaraderie among crew members in the simple application of knots and nomenclature tediously learned in boot camp. More importantly, however, was the revelation of the true purpose of trips like Nanook '53. It was not simply to routinely supply Canadian/American weather stations, as we were told at the time. It was for the defense of our country. In 1953 the Korean War was about to end with the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower to the presidency of the United States, but the Cold War was getting hotter. The threat of attacking aircraft



traversing the polar cap en route to our continent was the reason for the DEW Line, (Distant Early Warning). The American Air Base at Thule Greenland was established as a first line of defense along with additional Radar stations extending 3000 miles across Canada and Alaska.



A TYPICAL BARRACKS ATOP THE PERMAFROST AT THULE AIR STATION

Radio Moscow broadcasts were piped onto our mess deck nightly. The woman propagandist spoke to her American military audience in impeccable English. She described Capitalism with great distortion and distain. Proclaiming that it produced starving souls languishing in the gutters of New York City, she evoked laughter and ridicule from the crew at her assumption of our gullibility. At times she spoke directly to “the airman at Thule Air Base”. One of the legends told at Thule was of Moscow Molly informing the air base that one of the lights was out on the runway, inferring that Thule Air Base was closely watched.

Sustaining the operation of Thule airbase required supplies of every description in quantities filling the bellies of United States merchant vessels. The Coast Guard and Navy icebreakers were path makers through ice fields for convoys of cargo ships whose thin hulls would not withstand the crush of pack ice. A long line of freighters followed our lead. Sailing into the swath cut by our prow, they navigated cautiously through water riddled with bits of ground ice in our wake. The silhouette of the long convoy against a gray, hazy sky, smoke wafting from its stacks, gave testimony to the fact that we were the life line to our military defense in Thule Greenland.



The life Line to Thule Air Base

I was twenty years old, farther from home than I'd ever been. Awed at the sight of ice bergs, glaciers and the frozen seascape frequently enveloping us, I bonded with my ship and the crew which kept her heart beating. I performed my duties on deck as assigned by the Boatswains Mates, I stood my watches as ordered, holy stoned decks, pulled, pushed, carried and operated the demands indigenous to my job. I waited with my shipmates in anticipation of infrequent mail call or more frequent ice berg sightings. I was impressed with the aura of the purple snow capped mountains of Labrador and thoroughly enjoyed the fun of being initiated into the Polar Bear Club at the Arctic Circle crossing. In retrospect, this voyage was much greater than a personal venture for the purpose of edifying an unsophisticated young sailor. Nanook '53 was a voyage with serious purpose. That purpose obliterated the inconveniences of the winter that was the summer of 1953, for the crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Westwind. That purpose was the perpetuation of a shield designed to protect the western hemisphere from nuclear attack.



Ship's diver frees cable entangling Port screw during unloading at Thule



Scanning for bergs



1400 hours, clean sweep down fore and aft

A sailor's life throughout the trip was routine to a large extent. Daily activity was pretty much the same whether in sun, snowstorms, fog, rain, rough seas or ice. Meals had to be prepared, engines needed maintenance, living spaces needed cleaning, and we still chipped paint and primed the surfaces with red lead before adding the finishing coat of white paint, temperatures permitting. As a seaman one is required to learn a multitude of tasks. Lack of experience does not inhibit participation even in jobs demanding skill. That is how you earn your stripes. Whether wrapping hawser around bollards, line to cleat in docking procedures, manning the quad 40 mm guns in general quarters drills, assisting in life boat drills or standing helmsman watches on the bridge, a seaman was kept involved in the operation of the ship. A night's sleep could be postponed by a 1200 to 0400 "watch" somewhere on board sustained by a cup of the worst warmed over coffee in the world. At times a call for deck force help somewhere on board, just as you reach the steam table in the chow line, would postpone some much needed grub until an urgent task was secured. At anchor in Thule the crew had some unloading from its hold to accomplish, but the bulk of the cargo was in the cavernous bowels of freighters whose crews had the brunt of that enormous task. Later as the ship moved on to Point Resolute, northwest of Thule on Ellsmere Island, the Westwind crew loaded heavy cargo for supplying the Canadian /American weather station at Resolute.





SILENCE ON THE SURFACE OF THE ICE PACK

Although “liberty” was available while at Thule the first time we disembarked was at sea in the midst of a gigantic ice field. It was a short respite from the ship to run around the surface of the frozen ocean, climbing an iceberg with sea legs in need of a good stretching. Strangely, walking away from the ship over the frozen Arctic Ocean was a startling experience, in silence. Never before had my ears been so keenly searching for sound. It was a “quiet” new to my range of experience. Only the low drone of the ships generators was audible wafting hauntingly over the surface ice not unlike the visible mist that regularly rolls over San Francisco Bay. It hovered over our icy platform even at a distance that shrunk our ship to postcard size from our vantage atop a remote iceberg. The soulful unchanging tone was a sonorous beacon reassuring us that our ride home was still within reach. Nothing stirred on this vast, white stillness shielding us from Arctic waters below. Intermittent chunks of brash were jutting up from the surface. They had become frozen solid while rolling over at a previous time in transition from liquid sea to quiescence. Taking on the appearance of seismic plates they interrupted an otherwise smooth white blanket drawn over that expanse of the Arctic Ocean. Neither the chirp of a bird nor the buzz of an insect interrupted the pristine silence isolating the droning of the ships generators from the silence in which it was enveloped. Nowhere would one feel more infinitesimal in this world than here at the brink of global apex. We stood upon icy scaffold temporarily suspended atop silent currents the metamorphosis of which would deny lasting evidence of our ever having been there. Nevertheless, Scripture tells us that our every hair is counted, that we are intrinsic to the grand design. A fleeting pause to take it all in was simultaneously humbling and edifying.

Penguins are native only to the Antarctic and there were no Polar Bear nearby to emulate. But most of our group looked much like a colony of slipping, sliding penguin as we mounted the largest iceberg in sight. Others, like sure footed arctic Polar Bear, seemed reach the summit quickly. Returning close to the ship this recreational sojourn was enhanced with cases of beer broken out of the hold where they awaited this auspicious time for permission to be consumed. Each man had his ration of two cans to celebrate his achievement of walking on water albeit in solid form. But trepidation, not unlike that of St. Peter’s, gripped us whenever our feet met water in the few but unexpected softer spots of the ice platform separating us from the depth of frigid water below. We were delighted to climb back aboard our welcoming safe haven amidst this desolate location on Earth’s surface, a venue most unlikely to have ever been inhabited by another soul. Radiantly white as the ice upon which it rested, the Cutter Westwind appeared as stationary in its space as were the bergs jutting out of the expansive incrustation enveloping them. It was our home away from home and the only link

available with the developed world. Our sturdy ship in that unusual place in time and space still lingers in my memory as the cocoon of my emerging maturity.

Point Resolute is, or at least was, a Canadian/American Radar station on Ellsmere Island west of Greenland. Deep into the polar region it is virtually isolated from shipping. Only in the month of August, when the ice was soft enough to make it possible, could an icebreaker penetrate the oceans surface to reach this outpost. We loaded our 269 ft. ship with supplies across its 66ft beam from quarterdeck to stern and set out for Resolute. Four rugged individuals manned this remote station in August 1953, having been in the arctic a full year at an income of \$5,000.00, tax free. This was, ostensibly at least, a civilian job. It required skill as a radar operator, a radioman, a cook and one would expect, as an all around handyman. An oil drum for heating fuel, food, electronics, movies, and a host of other necessary supplies including two men to relieve those who were returning to the states, were unloaded at Resolute. These men spent a year in isolation with temperatures of 60 degrees below zero, without sunlight for months, within a small shack, a critical link in protection of the free world. Those we brought back with us were bearded, withdrawn and seemed introspective at best. They had been essential to the DEW Line.



CLIMBING AN ICE BERG ON THE ARCTIC OCEAN

Returning to Thule Greenland we were anchored in the adjoining bay. We were able to set foot on terra firma with the help of seamen Mattiacci and Barley, coxswains of an LCVP which



AN ARCTIC BREW

ferried us to and from liberty on the Thule base. The earth at Thule is perma frost, impenetrably frozen. The trestlework that carries pipes and service lines over roads and across the surface of the earth was necessary since burying those lines was impossible.

U.S. Airmen, ubiquitous on the base, were contrasted by the oddity of sailors in their midst. They welcomed us in the best tradition of United States military protocol. There were no bars with USN swabbies to challenge the Hooligan Navy as was the case at a previous port

in Argentia Newfoundland. It was a peaceful encounter with the Air Force for which we were very appreciative. Their commissary was abundant, the cold beer and food a refreshing change from the ships stores.

Speaking of airmen, we had helicopters on board for the purpose of scouting leads in the ice fields. Like military pilots everywhere they were required to put a specified number of hours in the air each month in order to be paid "flight skins". While supplementing the time spent flying ahead of the ship in search of leads in the ice, extra time in the air was spent taking some of our crew on flights. These flights fulfilled the USN pilots flight standards while giving guys like my shipmate Bill Thomas

and me our first ride in a copter. (Bill and I have recently reestablished our relationships of 55 years ago and join two other Westwind shipmates for lunch periodically). Just a plastic bubble covering the seats and instrument panel of the little Bell helicopter, made it feel like a ride on a magic carpet. We flew over an Eskimo village somewhat deserted since its inhabitants migrated to the air base, then onto a birds eye view of our ship, and finally over the harbor and surrounding rugged terrain. I took a roll of film that produced several photos still in my possession. The Navy Lieutenant piloting the copter was very reassuring to me as a novice flyer. He explained the operation of the rotor-winged craft and its ability to go into auto-rotation for a safe landing without the benefit of power. I was impressed and comfortable throughout the flight. Subsequent conversations with helicopter pilots at the CG Air Station, Floyd Bennett Field N.Y., one year later, revealed the opposite side of the coin. I was informed that failure of any one of many moving parts on this type of aircraft is likely to cause it to drop like a rock. Rides in rotary wing aircraft have not been a high priority for me since.



The Westwind carried two Bell Helicopters to locate leads in the ice fields



Service lines were provided by trestlework over roads and grounds since Burying lines was impossible in the permafrost at Thule Air Base



The liberty section was transported to Thule base via the ship's LCVP tender.  
(sailors front row left to right: Cox, Limebach, Bossert rear: Franklin  
Coxswain Barley, Bannon and coxswain Mattiacci)

Still anchored in Thule Bay, one afternoon we noticed a rowboat approaching the ship. Two Eskimo men dressed in eclectic garb combining US military hand-me-downs with native Eskimo skins approached the Jacobs ladder. Anxious to meet the real Arctic natives, a crewmember, Dick Bannon, a particularly friendly and loquacious sailor who would later become very successful in the insurance industry as salesman and executive, enthusiastically invited the wary Eskimo up the Jacobs ladder and onto the mess deck. Our exotic visitors were not very clean. Their smiles were friendly but revealed the fact that they had given up several teeth to decay and those remaining were darkened by decline. Word spread that native visitors were onboard bringing the event to the attention of one of the officers who quickly ordered the confused arctic aliens off the ship. His fear of bringing something communicable onboard was well founded but disappointing to a crew anxious for experiencing some local color in what seemed a colorless environment. Harry Serres, log room yeoman published our newsletter, "The Big Wind". He probably had a column about our brief encounter with the Eskimos since his periodical was always full of local scuttlebutt at sea and in port. Serres later attended journalism school, as encouraged by his friend Alex Haley, author of Roots. He wrote about Coast Guard events and later did publicity for the US Air Force as a member of that military branch.



Eskimo visitors at Thule Greenland



In September as we sailed down the coast of Greenland en route to home port in New York City, nights at sea were spent passing the time in any one of many cramped spaces aboard ship. Small groups played cards on the recreation deck within reach of the hard to keep filled, Coke machine. Others were perched on mess deck tables watching movies from the ships inventory. Some guys were huddled down on the deck between the rows of racks in the crew's sleeping quarters smoking and telling "sea stories" to the amusement of their shipmates, usually the greener of the crew. Much of the talk was of home and pre-enlistment or post-enlistment events and plans respectively. A lot of "big fish tales" only credible to the more gullible of the group, but nonetheless humorous, were a satisfying way to pass the time. Sometimes one of the crew would strum his ukulele and sing his favorite country songs with occasional requests from his shipmates, which sometimes included "Hey knock it off! ... Will ya?"

The crew of approximately 200 men, onboard the Westwind, was disciplined and generally cooperative. Our leadership was authoritative but not authoritarian. Everyone understood military expectations and infractions of the code were relatively minor in nature. A Captains Mast was held for violations such as oversleeping, failure to report on time for a duty watch but I do not recall any more serious infractions during the arctic trip. In contrast, when in port, liberty in the city could produce lesser behavior among those prone to living it up on the seedier side of town. Generally speaking my recollection is of a hard working, friendly and exuberant crew who enjoyed a good time and usually made the best of any situation. There were events to brake the daily regimen such as the initiation of the "blue nosers" crossing the arctic circle for the first time, when hair was cut in clumps, kitchen condiments were splashed over the novices among other hazing activities orchestrated by an "old salt" in Neptune's garb. On any given day the recreation room was filled with sailors waiting to be scalped by "Indian Joe", a career sailor of native American vintage, who was the ship's barber. Life was pretty good and most times good humor prevailed from chain locker to fantail.



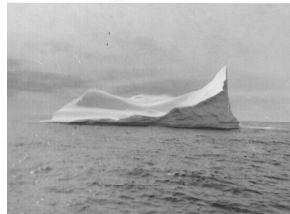
"Blue-Nosers" slopped and cropped, now "Polar Bears" having crossed the Arctic Circle.

We returned from Nanook '53 to an overwhelming New York greeting in mid September. Welcoming fountains of water cascaded around our gleaming white cutter, courtesy of many New York harbor tugs and fireboats who knew how to make a ships arrival a real event. The deck force had TheWestwind cleaned up for our reentry into the port of New York and the crew was ready to partake of the last vestiges of summer. Beach time and bathing beauties were topics of discussion along with trips home to family and friends.

The DEW Line was fortified, the ship was not only in one piece after being battered by icy seas but couldn't have looked more beautifully formidable than if it were a frigate in Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet.....and we were back in New York City.

The proud tradition of the cutter Westwind has generated warm memories for many sailors. Captain Ralph Curry was first to assume command after her return from Eastern Europe where she sailed under a Russian flag during WWII, per our lend lease program. Captain Curry was diligent as he sat in his big leather swivel chair peering through his porthole whose glass pane spun rapidly to prevent freezing. As we broke through heavy pack ice he would rush to the wing of the bridge to monitor the path of lumbering chunks of ice sliding across the hull en route to what could be a disastrous encounter with a propeller blade. I believed it was his pure determination emanating from a providential confidence that prevented a disastrous collision of ice and prop thus ending our mission. USCGC Westwind compiled a remarkable record of Arctic, Antarctic and domestic patrols making her the pride of the USCG and of all hands having sailed aboard her. She was decommissioned in 1988. Memories of her linger in the minds and hearts of hundreds of Coast Guardsmen across the United States. Westwind crew reunions are held bi-annually in many states and old salts visit the USCG Web Site or Jacks Joint.com and Fred's Place.com, all replete with stories and memories of the USCG and the United States Coast Guard Cutter WESTWIND WAGB 281. Golf shirts and caps with the Westwind image and name embossed are available and worn by former crew members. The very first time I wore mine I walked into a beach café in Marathon Key Florida and was immediately greeted by a former crewmember who served on the Westwind in 1983. I was delighted to talk with him. Since then I join three former shipmates Dick Bannon, Bill Thomas and Frank O'Connor, whom I first met in boot camp at Cape May New Jersey in December 1952, for three hour martini lunches in taverns close to our suburban Philadelphia PA. home. Great conversation and lots of laughs spawned by shipboard memories melt the 50+ years since Nanook '53. More remote to my home but close via cyberspace, shipmates Harry Serres and Irv Bossert ,Nanook '53 alumni, keep in touch regularly from the west coast. Thanks USCG and CGC Westwind for helping us find purpose in our youth in service to our country and for the good and enduring friends we made on board ship and at each of our assignments.

END



HF/10

A brief personal bio:

- My four years in the U.S. Coast Guard began at Cape May Training Center December 1952
- TDY at Ellis Island (Spring 1953);
- Aboard the Cutter Westwind - Arctic Trip (Nanook '53);
- Schooling at CG Training Center Groton Conn.(YN/SK Jan.-March 1954)
- Another TDY at Ellis Island (Spring 1954)
- CG Air Station Brooklyn NY (54-55)
- Intelligence and Law Enforcement Division Third CG Dist.Office 80 Lafayette St. NYC (1956)
- Transferred to inactive Reserve (12/56) until honorably discharge December 1960.
- College (1957-1960) BS University of the Arts Phila. PA.
- Taught school, earned M.ed., Temple University, Phila. PA 1964: married a beautiful young teacher (now in our 46th year of marriage)
- Appointed school principal for 25 years, retired from public education 1996
- Adjunct Professor, Arcadia University 1996- 2004
- Time for travel: Painting pictures, keeping fit at the gym and enjoying visits with the nine grandchildren on east and west coasts produced by our four off spring. we enjoy wonderful neighbors long standing friends and of course old CG shipmates. Life is Good, Thank you Lord.