

THE CAPTAIN AND THE IMMORTAL *BEAR*

Old salts know that ships are living entities and have souls. If a ship has a good reputation, then it takes on an almost mystical persona. In 1935, sixty-two years after she moved down the ways at Dundee, Scotland, the steam barkentine *Bear* maneuvered to the dock at her home port of San Francisco. In the milling crowd on the dock that day was naval officer and writer Frank Wead, who struck up a conversation with an old Arctic veteran while the two men waited for the mooring lines to snake over the side of the ship. Looking at the *Bear*, the old sailor said: "Too bad she can't talk. She'd tell some yarns. There's one in every timber she's got. If you put 'em all together landlubbers'd call it a fairy tale."¹

Capt. Michael A. Healy had assumed command of this long surviving cutter forty-nine years earlier. The experienced ice master immediately began adding to the yarns that the sturdy Arctic vessel was destined to carry "in every timber she's got." The U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, meanwhile, apparently had come to accept the wisdom of Healy's earlier proposal to divide the Bering Sea region into two separate theaters of operation, each with its own cutter. At about the same time, the U.S. Navy decided that it no longer needed a ship designed to work in sea ice.

Previously, in 1881, as a part of the United States' polar passion, the U.S. Army had dispatched a scientific expedition to establish a base camp at Lady Franklin Bay in Northeast Ellesmere Island, Canada. More than likely, it was the army's resentment over the navy's total monopoly on U.S. publicity in the polar regions that sparked this mission of discovery, rather than a desire to expand the frontiers of science. Army Lieut. Adolphus W. Greely's orders directed him to push northward from his base camp as far as possible. The army lieutenant reached Lockwood Island to the north of Greenland at eighty-three degrees and twenty-four minutes north latitude, a record for that time.

Lieutenant Greely had counted on a supply ship reaching the base camp in 1882. The ship, however, could not penetrate the ice. The final blow to the army's expedition came on July 23, 1883. Not only did the relief ship sink, its naval escort retreated without leaving behind any provisions. Lieutenant Greely, however, had planned for the possibility of a severed supply line. His plan involved a steam-driven launch and three whaleboats that had been deposited by the ship that brought the expedition to Ellesmere Island. The steam launch would tow the whaleboats and their occupants to safety. In reality, a storm capsized two of the boats, and the survivors just managed to make land near Cape Sabine, Ellesmere Island, with only a few provisions among them. Unaware that their relief ship had sunk, the men awaited rescue. It wasn't long before the Americans began rationing their food. After the food gave out, some of the men starved to death. Some of the survivors resorted to cannibalism.²

Meanwhile, back in the United States, newspapers clamored for the assemblage of another party to search for the missing Greely Expedition. The U.S. Navy heeded the call and mounted the Greely Relief Expedition, which comprised a rescue flotilla of four ships under the command of Comdr. Winfield S. Schley, who insisted that each vessel carry its own ice pilot and steam-powered launch. One of the ships—the collier *Loch Garry*—carried the fuel for the other ships. Great Britain assisted the expedition by donating the *Alert*, which, being the slowest boat least suited for work in the ice, became the reserve vessel. Commander Schley placed his trust in two steam vessels, both purchased by the U.S. Navy, to successfully rescue Lieutenant Greely's expedition.³

Designed as a steam whaler, the 1,250-ton, wooden-hulled *Thetis* was built by Alexander Stephen and Sons of Dundee, Scotland, and launched in 1881. The *Thetis* measured 188½ feet in length and 29 feet in the beam, with a draft of 17 feet, 10 inches. The navy purchased the *Thetis* expressly for the Greely Relief Expedition, and Commander Schley chose the former whaler as his flagship.⁴

The expedition's other important ship, the *Bear*, also began its life in the Scottish shipyard. Built for Walter Grieve, of Greenock, Scotland, and launched eight years before the *Thetis*, the *Bear* had a length of 198 feet, 4 inches; a beam of 30 feet; a draft of 17 feet, 11 inches; and a displacement of 703 tons. This steam barkentine had been built for the tough Newfoundland seal trade.

To prepare the *Bear* for work in dangerous ice fields, the shipyard lay her ribs of Scottish oak close together. (The closer together the ribs, the stronger the ship.) In addition to sails, a Scotch boiler and engine provided propulsion to a two-bladed screw (propeller). The screw “could be stopped with the blades

vertical in the wake of the keel and so offer little resistance to passage through the water when cruising under sail alone.” Above and below the waterline, the *Bear*’s sides were sheathed with Australian iron bark, “the toughest wood known.” The bottom of the ship was covered in yellow pine, which in turn was covered with a coat of copper paint and an anti-fouling mixture to stop the boring Teredo worm and inhibit sea-growth and barnacles. The foremast and mizzenmast were made from Norwegian pine, while the largest mast, the mainmast, was made of a hollow iron tube. Three shillings were placed where the masts would sit, “heads up for luck, to pay for the passage of her crew to Charon and across the River Styx in case she was lost at sea.”⁵

With his four-ship relief expedition assembled, Commander Schley set out for Greenland. He allowed the two ships that could make the best time through the ice, the *Bear* and the *Thetis*, to move at their own rapid pace.

Lieutenant Greely recorded in his journal:

By the morning of the 22nd we were all exhausted, and it was only through the energy of [Sgt. Julius] Frederick or [Sgt. David L.] Brainard, I do not remember which, that we obtained, around noon, some water. That and a few square inches of soaked seal-skin was all the nutriment which passed our lips for forty-two hours. . . . Near midnight of the 22nd I heard the sound of the whistles of the *Thetis*, blown by Captain Schley’s orders to recall his parties. I could not distrust my own ears, and yet I could hardly believe that ships would venture along that coast in such a gale.⁶

Commander Schley found only seven men, out of the Greely expedition’s original twenty-six, still alive. The doctor in the relief expedition later stated that not one member of the small group of emaciated men could have lasted more than a few days longer.

The relief expedition carrying the survivors arrived at Portsmouth, Virginia, amid a tumultuous welcome. The U.S. Atlantic Fleet that lay at anchor in Portsmouth greeted the expedition, “having dressed ship with every available flag and pennant.”⁷

For their outstanding work, the navy rewarded most of the ships of the expedition by selling them off. The *Thetis*, however, did not suffer this fate. The U.S. Navy laid her up in the New York Navy Yard until 1887, then reactivated and assigned the *Thetis* to naval duties in Pacific waters.⁸

The same act of Congress that purchased the *Bear* for the relief expedition, however, also ordered that the ship be sold immediately after the expedition’s return. By this time, new nautical technology was causing the beginning of the

end of wooden ships in the navy, and the *Bear* became an anachronism overnight, no longer fit for naval service.⁹

Around the same time the Greely Relief Expedition was fighting its way through Greenland's ice, Captain Healy's request for another cutter to work in Alaska made its rounds within the Treasury Department. By 1885, rumors had begun circulating throughout the service that, true to its penny-pinching ways, the Treasury Department had come upon a deal for a ship that had proven itself in the ice. More important even than its record in the ice, the ship meant the Treasury Department would not have to undergo the expense of building a new cutter. Healy, responding to the rumors, wrote, "It is generally understood that the *Corwin* is to be relieved by the *Bear* for Arctic duty. If such a change is contemplated, before it is made I would respectfully call the serious attention and consideration of the Department to the fact that nineteen feet of water, which I understand is the draught of the *Bear*, is altogether too great to make her an effective cruiser on the shore of the Arctic Ocean. With such a draught, all effectiveness as a cruiser against contraband trade and as an aid to vessels that might become stranded would be seriously impaired if not totally destroyed."¹⁰

Captain Healy felt a shallow draft vessel was best for Arctic work. Using his best bureaucratic wiles and language, he ended his 1885 report with the observation that since he had "cruised for a number of years in every portion of Alaska, from Sitka to Point Barrow, and among all the islands, and served on this duty much longer than any other person under the Government, I should understand the needs of the country in this respect; therefore the foregoing suggestions are made as a matter of duty only, and with becoming deference and hesitation."¹¹

Even as Healy penned his reservations, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service obtained the *Bear* in 1885. After Captain Healy reported to his new command in 1886, he began to modify his views about the cutter.

Over the coming years, Captain Healy's cruises to the north in the *Bear* followed a general routine. Around April, officers and crew reported on board and began preparing for the months ahead of them. Orders, mail for the isolated areas of Alaska, and supplies for the crew started arriving. During the first year that Healy commanded the *Bear*, three cutters made the long voyage north. The area of operations for each of the cutters closely followed Healy's suggestion of dividing the region into northern and southern areas. The *Corwin*, Captain Healy's former command, worked south of Bering Strait, along with the newer *Rush*. Both cutters concentrated on protecting the seal herds.

The *Bear's* main patrol area encompassed the northern section of the Bering Sea and into the Arctic. The cutter also made a stop at the Pribilofs on its way north and again after turning south toward Unalaska.

Every year that Healy sailed northward, his orders included special duties related to tasks that can broadly be defined as either humanitarian or scientific. On his first cruise in command of the *Bear*, for example, Healy searched for any trace of the whaling ship *Amethyst*. The ship had not returned to her home port of San Francisco after the 1885 Arctic whaling season.

Captain Healy began his first cruise in the *Bear* by ordering his navigator to shape a course from San Francisco to Departure Bay, British Columbia, where they would stop for coaling. After the crew's hard, dirty labor of heaving coal, the *Bear* sailed through the beautiful Inside Passage to Sitka. After a brief stay, the cutter made its transit across the Gulf of Alaska to the harbor of Unalaska.¹²

By this time, Healy had over thirty years of sea experience. He began his career in the age of sail and now worked during the slow transition from sail to steam. One third of his three decades at sea had been spent in the dangerous waters of the Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean. Now, following a short visit at Unalaska, Healy would sail his new command, the *Bear*, for the first time into the Bering Sea.

As the *Bear* began to work northward, many a Bering Sea Patrol sailor subscribed to a bit of doggerel penned by someone who sailed in the patrol:

Hear the rattle of the windlass as our anchor comes aweigh;
 We are bound to old Point Barrow and we make our start today;
 Keep a tight hold on to your dinner, for outside the South wind blows,
 And unless you are a sailor, you'll be throwing up your toes.¹³

Although in 1886 Healy's area of operations was officially north of the Pribilofs, the captain briefly patrolled the islands looking for poachers, as well as inquiring about the missing whaler *Amethyst*. Hearing no news of the missing ship, and finding no evidence of illegal sealing, he ordered his navigator to shape a course northward.

When the *Bear* encountered the ice pack, the cuttermen began observing the pack's movement and looking for leads in the ice, information that might prove useful to them later. Healy then ordered the cutter southward to locate the whaling fleet. When he encountered the ships, they were working their way northward along the Siberian coastline. He informed their masters of his ice observations, then sailed back to Alaska's Arctic coastline where Healy and his

crew began escorting whalers through the ice and helping any that ran afoul of the pack. During the years that Healy commanded the *Bear*, the cutter usually met the whaling fleet somewhere near Port Clarence, which lies northwest of Nome and just south of the Bering Strait. There, he sent small boats ashore to obtain fresh water in large wooden casks. As the whaling fleet and the *Bear* awaited the opening of the pack, their crews passed the time “gamming,” visiting and talking with each other.

In 1886, once the whalers were on their way to the bowhead whaling grounds, Healy visited a number of villages along the northern coast of the Bering Sea, checking for illegal liquor, providing medical aid, and asking around for any sign of the *Amethyst*. Eventually, the cutter made its way to Barrow. According to the few old salts who sailed in the Arctic region, the Eskimos had names for everything. Carrying on a tradition that began with the *Corwin*, the natives called the *Bear* the *Oo-mi-ak-puck pe-chuck ton-i-ka* (no whiskey ship). If Healy allowed anyone ashore at Barrow, he ordered the *Bear* moored to shore ice and used dog sleds to make the trip to the beach.¹⁴

The *Bear* then cruised among the whaling fleet along the northern shore of Alaska. The cuttermen helped any whaler having trouble in the ice, while the cutter’s doctor ministered to the sick and injured. Whenever Healy spoke with a whaler, he asked if the ship’s master had sighted the *Amethyst*. With not a single villager from along the Bering Sea and Siberian coastline or any ship’s master reporting a trace of the missing ship, Healy reasonably concluded that the whaler, along with its crew, had been lost to the sea. Healy followed the old whaler’s belief that the *Amethyst* was now assigned to the “legendary armada of the Arctic; [where] ghostly vessels, gripped fast in the pack, manned by frozen, soulless corpses, circle endlessly around the Ice Pole of the north. The Eskimos believe that their masts grow into icicles, extending to the skies, up which the souls clamber to Heaven.”¹⁵

As the bowhead hunting season drew to a close, the *Bear* began working southward. Once again, Healy’s cutter patrolled around the Pribilof Islands, looking for any late-season poachers. Finally, the *Bear*’s bow pointed southward and began the long journey back to San Francisco.

Homecoming fell on October 17, 1886. Upon arrival, the crew received their pay, and most of the enlisted crew struck out for the tender mercies of the Barbary Coast. There, they mixed with the likes of Calico Jim, who was “reputed to have reached the zenith of his career when he shanghaied six policemen, sent one after the other to arrest him.” The officers of the *Bear* “were placed on ‘waiting orders’ or temporarily to duty on other cutters,” while the *Bear* remained

out of commission, watched over by a skeleton crew until the following spring. During the patrol, Michael A. Healy passed his forty-sixth birthday.¹⁶

Captain Healy's general routine while sailing in the north varied little from his first patrol. Most old salts agree, however, that while sea duty may consist of many days of routine monotony, one never knows when that monotony will give way to something unusual. Probably the best description of Captain Healy's career in the north is that his routine consisted of nothing routine. For example, in 1885, in his last report as commander of the *Corwin*, Healy wrote that thirty-three whalers visited the Bering Sea and the Arctic, the majority of which were "more or less damaged by ice." In addition, Healy reported five of these whalers as missing. Among the missing, Healy listed the bark *Napoleon*, commanded by Capt. S. P. Smith, of New Bedford, Massachusetts. It was during Captain Healy's second patrol in the *Bear*, in 1887, that the saga of the *Napoleon* unfolded.¹⁷

At 7:10 p.m. on Tuesday, May 5, during a gale, the bow of the *Napoleon* slammed into a large piece of ice. The bark shook with the force of the impact. Almost immediately, the crew, some of them only half dressed, spilled out of the forecastle as water gushed knee-deep into the crew's quarters. On deck, freezing sea spray flew over the ship. Captain Smith faced a hard command. He had to give the order to abandon ship.¹⁸

Smith managed to maneuver the sluggish *Napoleon* into a position that protected the small boats from the advancing ice as they were lowered into the frigid water. Within fifteen minutes of striking the ice, all of the bark's crew had huddled in the boats. Shivering from fear and cold, they watched as the *Napoleon* slowly listed and then capsized. The events that led to the sinking of the *Napoleon* happened so fast that its crewmembers had scrambled into their boats with only the clothes they were wearing. Stored in the lifeboats they discovered only a small supply of ship's biscuits to sustain them. The whalers now faced an Arctic storm, hundreds of miles from any source of rescue. Yet another danger confronted the survivors: the ice had begun to close in around them.

Eventually, the four boats struck out for shore, two of which were rescued by another whaler. The other two boats managed to reach the Siberian coast carrying only four survivors, among them boatsteerer James B. Vincent, of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

In the end, only Vincent survived. An elder of the Chukchi adopted him and taught him how to survive in the harsh climate. Vincent was accepted as a member of the elder's small village of about 125 people. He dressed the same as everyone in the settlement.