



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

Navigation As Silent Art? The Story of the Rhode Island School for the Deaf's Voyage on the *EAGLE*

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Hearing the sound of waves lapping against the bow of the *EAGLE*, or even the rush of the wind up on the yardarm is something anyone in the Coast Guard takes for granted. Even the stillness of the night on board evokes images of romance at sea. Then, all of a sudden, the captain barks orders to the cadets and off they go in all different directions. But for six high school students who spent six days on the *EAGLE* in October 1986, it was complete silence. They were from the Rhode Island School for the Deaf and they were about to embark on the trip of a lifetime.

EAGLE's captain at the time was CAPT Ernst Cummings. He served as her captain longer than any other commander, from 1983 to 1988. It was his favorite assignment in the Coast Guard, as he enjoyed being able to take guests of various backgrounds on board and let them wallow in the sails of the *EAGLE*. One night, he and his wife, Mary, were having dinner with Peter and Maura Geisser. Mary Cummings was an elementary teacher at the Rhode Island School for the Deaf, and Peter Geisser taught art. Geisser was a frequent guest on the *EAGLE*, so CAPT Cummings asked when he would be on board again. He wanted him on a cruise down to Baltimore that winter, but school would be starting up again in a week. Geisser joked that the only way he could be on the *EAGLE* was if he could take all of his Art Appreciation students, mostly seniors, with him. CAPT Cummings called his bluff and asked how many there were, and that was how it all began. It would be a voyage both the crew and the students would never forget.

Geisser made arrangements with school administrators for the Class of 1987 to spend a week on the *EAGLE*. He knew he would be creating a stir – this was not the traditional approach to education – but he had the full support of the principal. Geisser put together a shipboard curriculum that met educational requirements – English: journal keeping and interviews with the crew; Science/Math: navigation, piloting, and engineering; Social Studies: history of tall ships, training

ships, and the EAGLE; Art: photography and drawing; Physical Health: survival at sea, safety, knots, climbing the masts, and becoming familiar with the ship; and Mental Health: isolation and teamwork of a sea voyage.



(L-R): Laura Lund, James Litvack, Suzanne Ferreria [top], Jeannie Desmarais, John Miller, and Lisa Wendoloski.

The seniors only numbered five – Jeannie Desmarais, Suzanne Ferreria, Laura Lund, John Miller, and Lisa Wendoloski. They had spent their entire academic career at the Rhode Island School for the Deaf, many since preschool. A junior, James Litvack, joined them. Deaf schools are very small, and it was not unusual for students in different grades to share a single class. Art instruction was revamped to include the fine points of seamanship for two weeks prior to departure. Litvack recalled going over safety rules – close every door behind you – and water conservation rules – shower on, shower off, soap up, shower on, and rinse. He had been on the EAGLE once before, but not for an actual cruise.

The more the class learned about EAGLE, the more excited they became at the prospect of sailing a training barque. Most were somewhat nervous about the idea of being on a boat, but not Wendoloski, who grew up sailing on the waters of Rhode Island with her family. But she remembers wondering if she would be able to sleep through the night on a rocking ship. Naturally, there must have been some hesitation as to how they would communicate with the hearing crew of the EAGLE. But they didn't worry too much, since Geisser, Mrs. Cummings, and two student teachers – Cathy Davis and Tony Dina - from the Rhode Island School of Design would also be on board as interpreters.

How did three hearing art teachers get involved with deaf education, much less nautical subjects? As Dina explains, it was seeing how sign language – a visual language – and how it was expressed through art. Art not only reinforced the intellectual and emotional development of deaf students, but also gave them a window to understand abstract concepts. Being on a ship is somewhat abstract in that there is a whole different language that is used at sea. Nautical terms are not used in everyday English per se, but mostly in the form of comparison or idioms. Thus, being on a ship instead of a classroom forces any first-time sailor to think a little differently, and perhaps it was art in a nautical form?

Geisser explained to the class that they were expected to assist the crew with some of the day-to-day operations of the EAGLE. No doubt the students had mixed reactions, thinking in American Sign Language – “me climb mast high, wow?”, “how communicate with crew?” ASL is not a structured or written language and there are many unique signs for “words” that do not even exist in the English language. Ferriera, in her daily jottings, notes that she “walked on the wing of the ship” – which Geisser thought was pure poetry! She was describing the climbing of the mast in written ASL per se!

In the meantime, the reaction among EAGLE’s crew about having six deaf teenagers on board was mixed. The ship’s executive officer, CDR Bob Petko, had reservations on how they would deal with the students in an environment that was highly dependent on verbal/auditory directions. How would the crew be able to fully explain what was expected of the students on board? As they would find out, visual communication was a universal language. Many of the crew learned to demonstrate safety equipment visually rather than verbally. Orders were conveyed visually, through ASL or home signs. Only a few seconds were lost in translation from ASL to spoken English, seconds that are crucial in any search and rescue operation. And the students grew accustomed to the low moan of the ship’s horn that sent vibrations cutting through heavy fog, causing them to jump initially.

Early in the morning of 14 October, a van transported everyone to the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. The sight of the EAGLE was enough to make Geisser seasick, and he disappeared for the first few days until it passed. None of the students experienced seasickness, perhaps because balance is centered in the middle ear. CAPT Cummings welcomed the group by inviting them to sign the ship’s visitor log. Miller spotted the signature of John F. Kennedy, who visited the ship in August 1962, and felt proud to add his own signature. He also remembers being struck by the sleeping arrangements – bunk beds in a very tightly enclosed space. He became almost claustrophobic because the bottom of the top bunk was only inches from his nose. Fortunately, he spent most of his time awake. Miller’s favorite thing to do on board was just to spend time with Mother Nature – gazing out at the open ocean, watching gorgeous sunsets, and wishing on the moon. Despite the chilly October weather, he fought to stay awake most nights and slept on the deck out in the open. After

a one 48-hour stretch, Miller fell asleep on a bench they called “the Coffin”, because it looked like one. His classmates tried to wake him up, but to no avail. Someone went to get water, but Miller was up and walking around before they could dump it on him. He saw the water and told Litvack to make sure that nobody bothered him because he needed to sleep. On the last night of the voyage, Miller got his revenge. As soon as Litvack was asleep, Miller shone a light into his face. Litvack grumbled and signed “off!” with a disgruntled expression on his face. Miller immediately apologized and swore he would not do it again....until Litvack was asleep again. Then Miller would start again....



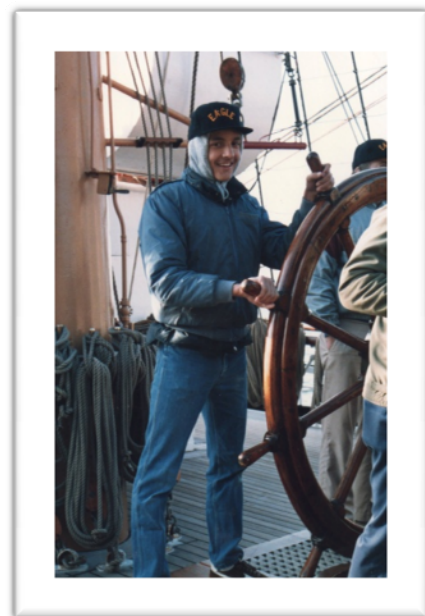
John Miller assisting with the ropes.

It was not all play for the six students on the EAGLE. Their final destination was Baltimore, Maryland, with a stop in New York. Geisser gave them homework assignments, much to their dislike – they were required to keep a journal, interview a crew member, draw some objects on board and explain their use, and write a poem. In addition to these, they had to participate in the day to day life of the EAGLE. They scrubbed the ship’s three giant steering wheels and had to learn to overcome fears of climbing what is similar to a rope ladder 150 feet in the air. Climbing the masts is no easy feat for anyone, but deaf people have “we can do it; we can be like anyone else except for the fact our ears just don’t work” imprinted into their brains most of their lives. Litvack was the only one who was afraid to climb the mast until the last day on board.



Lisa Wendoloski on the yardarm.

They also learned to tie knots, roll up/unfurl the sails, and did navigation work. During one 2 a.m. navigation lesson, Petko was showing Desmarais how to read the chart, with a half-asleep Geisser interpreting. Suddenly, Petko shouted “YES! That’s it!” He looked at Geisser as if he had just discovered America for the first time. However, the now wide-awake Geisser had no clue what he was talking about. Desmarais had understood the fine concept of navigation in just five minutes – and Petko had taught cadets who had taken much longer than that! In order to pinpoint a ship’s exact location, readings had to be taken in certain time intervals, probably no more than a few seconds. By the time a reading was completed, the ship had already passed that exact location. In Desmarais’s words, “You never really know where you are; you only know where you’ve been”. Hard work, but it added up to an experience of a lifetime.



John Miller at the wheel.

Stopping in New York on 15 October was a big deal – maybe many had not been to New York before or at least, never experienced seeing the city up close from a ship. 1986 was also the bicentennial

of the Statue of Liberty's arrival in New York from France. The students toured Liberty Island and Ellis Island, even climbing up the 102 steps inside Lady Liberty to get a bird's eye view of New York Harbor. Litvack was entrusted with Geisser's camera to document the visit, only to leave the leather case somewhere on Ellis Island. Wendoloski never forgot the sight of the twin towers as the EAGLE entered New York Harbor and today 9/11 is her mind forever tied with the EAGLE.

Leaving New York the next morning, LT Ivan Luke was conning the EAGLE. That meant giving the orders to the helm – the wheel - and the engine. The ship was moored at South Street Seaport, which is a tricky berth to get in and out of for any tall ship. If it was not done just right, the current would catch the ship and drift it towards the Brooklyn Bridge, which wasn't tall enough for the EAGLE to sail under. "Mary's kids", as LT Luke called them, were all at the helm, filling in for cadets. One crew member and one of the interpreters were on standby.

Just as they cleared the pier and sailed into the East River, LT Luke shouted "Left full rudder!" After a few seconds, he realized the rudder wasn't moving. He shouted the order once more, adding some insistence in his voice. Still nothing, and they were beginning to drift toward the bridge. Panicking slightly, he turned around and saw that something – to this day, he doesn't remember exactly what – had distracted all six students and the interpreter! Thinking fast, he faced the students and swung his right arm rapidly in a big circle in the direction they needed to turn the wheel. No problem – a universal visual language worked and the EAGLE was on her way to Baltimore. What deaf people lack in hearing, they make up with sight. It didn't help that there were a few older crew members who had significant hearing loss from years of loud noise on board Coast Guard vessels.

They were close to Baltimore, and EAGLE was to cruise through a canal, which was a shortcut. But, for some reason, the canal was closed, forcing EAGLE to add an extra day to the voyage. Miller was ecstatic, as he never wanted to leave the ship! Others were anxious to get back on land.

Being deaf was no easy feat on board, where being hearing is a requirement. A crew member is accustomed to climbing the rigging while listening to orders. But, in this case, orders had to be conveyed to the students before they climbed the rigging under supervision. A crew member always accompanied each student – and possibly an interpreter had to go along also! Many of the crew were willing to go out of their way to make themselves understood – some used body language, some used pen and paper, and still others used home signs. Only very few went as far as to actually learn some American Sign Language. CDR Petko was one of those few and was a favorite among the crew for the six students.



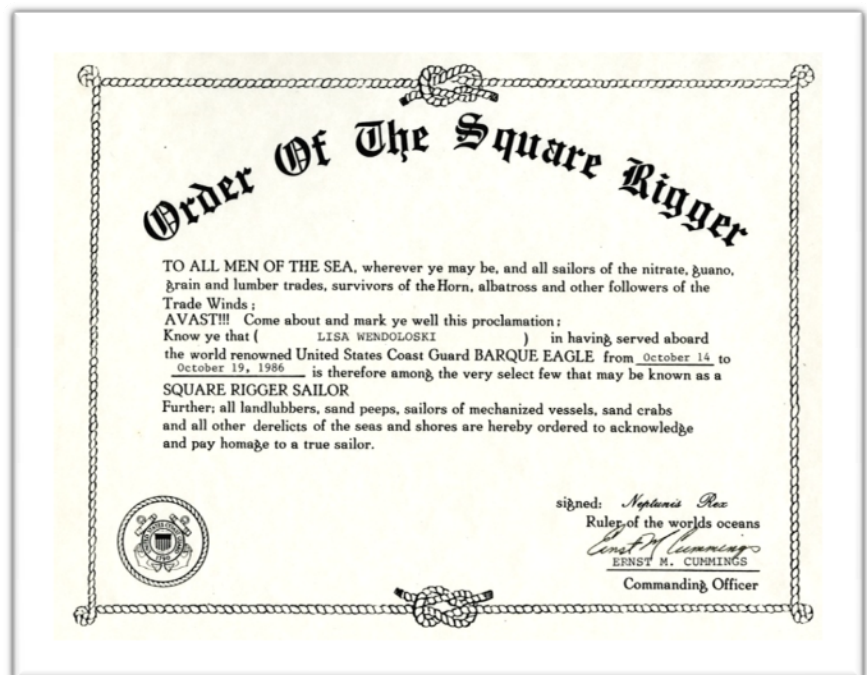
CDR Petko was instantly drawn to the beauty of sign language, graceful hand movements in midair, from the moment the students boarded the ship. Despite the fact he had visited RISD and met with the students prior to the voyage, he still felt overwhelmed by their enthusiasm on board. He likened it to being in a foreign country and having to learn some of the language in order to get around. Little by little, he picked up some signs from the students. He learned mostly from Ferreria, but all of the students pitched in here and there. Today, he's forgotten most of the signs, but still has a special place in his heart for deaf people.

Suzanne Ferriera teaches CDR Bob Petko the sign for the letter "U".

because of the canal incident, the RISD crew stepped off the ship and into the van for the ride back to Rhode Island. They didn't lose their sea legs for several days, and Miller wished he was on the EAGLE forever. It was the voyage of a lifetime, never to be forgotten, and it taught each person to be who they are today.

CDR Petko made such a deep impression on the students with his easygoing manner, thirst for sign language, and respect for deaf culture. Eight months later, clad in a crisp white Coast Guard uniform, Petko delivered the commencement address at the Rhode Island School for the Deaf. That day, he presented each student

Arriving in Baltimore on the morning of 20 October, delayed one day





with a certificate of service on the EAGLE (right). Today, Litvack cherishes that certificate more than he does his own high school and college diplomas.

John Miller today in his office with his EAGLE memorabilia.

24 years later, that voyage is but a fond memory in the minds of all who boarded the ship that October

morning. Miller, now the director of the Illinois Deaf and Hard of Hearing Commission, gazes upon his EAGLE memorabilia every day in his office and often uses it as an ice breaker in conversation.

Lisa Wendoloski Hollywood recently had the opportunity to visit EAGLE when she docked in Baltimore, Maryland this past February with her family. A flood of memories came back as she explored the ship and told the story of her voyage to her husband and two sons, who had come along. She wanted the boys to understand what it meant to be on the EAGLE, the pride of the United States Coast Guard.



Lisa Wendoloski Hollywood with husband Mike and sons Nick and Dylan on board Eagle, February 2010.

Looking up at the masts, ten-year-old Nick Hollywood thought about how brave his deaf mother was so many years ago to sail the EAGLE for almost a week – he would have been too scared! His brother, Dylan, just took it all in with the excitement of a seven-year-old. But no doubt there was a sense of pride in their hearts....deaf people can do anything but hear! And that was exactly the message Geisser had in the beginning...

