

## "Escanaba, Coast Guard Cutter"

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**The *Onondaga*, sister ship to the *Escanaba*, in 1935. We do not have a clear profile photo of the *Escanaba* but at this time in their service lives, the cutters were nearly identical.**

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The following article appeared in the June, 1935 issue of the magazine *The Yachtsman* (pages 7-8, 16). The author was granted permission to visit and examine the newly commissioned cutter *Escanaba*, a 165-foot "A" Class cutter, while she was tied up in Chicago prior to her sailing on an icebreaking mission to the Straits of Mackinac. This was an annual spring cruise undertaken to open the Great Lakes to merchant traffic. Mr. Hobelman interviewed the officers and crew of *Escanaba* and was granted a tour of the entire ship, which he describes in great detail. It is included on our website for its historical interest; read on and find out what a First Class Cruising Cutter in the mid-1930's was all about!

Ed.

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THE DAY we went aboard the Coast Guard Cutter *Escanaba* to inspect her equipment and find out what made the wheels go 'round was the day before she started from Chicago to the Straits of Mackinac, to act as an ice-breaker and open the solid sheet of ice which forms each winter in the northern end of Lakes Michigan and Huron. Her mission was to open a way to traffic on the Lakes earlier than it had ever been opened before by natural means and to see that commercial shipping could be resumed in safety this spring before the ice had actually cleared away at nature's own sweet pleasure. A veritable deluge of favorable comment in the daily papers has since revealed how well Lieut.-Comm. Perkins, skipper of the *Escanaba*, and his men accomplished this purpose. It was done speedily and with that degree of efficiency which has always characterized the Coast Guard in its operations.

This branch of Government service has a creditable record, extending all the way back to 1790, at which time it was organized for the specific purpose of enforcing customs laws. However, like some other venerable institutions, it has gradually accumulated other functions--mostly duties connected with navigation and the safety of the traveling public. A large part of their time is occupied in assisting vessels in distress, rescuing mariners in danger, and saving life and property when accidents happen on the high seas or along the United States' coastline or within the bounds of such waters as the Great Lakes. In order to carry out these duties, the service maintains numerous vessels afloat as well as specially trained crews in strategically situated shore stations. The two branches--ashore and afloat--cooperate with each other, and district commanders are able to keep in close touch with all units operating in a given area by means of radio signals.

Some of the more modern innovations in the matter of services rendered by the Coast Guard are less known to the general public, such as furnishing medical assistance by radio in certain emergency cases, and such specialized aids as the

recent assignment of the *Escanaba* in acting as an ice-breaker, and so on. As a matter of fact, the *Escanaba* was designed and equipped for practically any one of the kinds of service enumerated above, with the ice-breaking added, for this requires something more than the older and smaller vessels have. Incidentally, she has a twin ship operating at present on Lake Erie.

Your correspondent undertook this assignment of inspecting the *Escanaba* and reporting on her equipment with suitable modesty, aware of how busy the ship's officers would be during their short stay in port; but there was a gratifying welcome and an esprit de corps which prompted everyone interviewed to give freely of his time and advice in affording ample opportunity to see everything. We found out a great many things about the *Escanaba* before we finished: that Lieut. Braswell can reel off figures from memory at a speed which would confuse even an Einstein; that Lieut. Stinson knows his South and can talk with equal authority on people of the lower rivers and deep-sea navigation; and that Lieut. Cronk can spin fascinating yarns about his boyhood in the Philippines and sailing in native dugouts or outriggers.

The *Escanaba* measures 165 feet over all and has a draft of 13 1/2 feet, with a 36-foot beam. She was built in Bay City in 1932, and her home port is Grand Haven, Michigan. She has a displacement of 1,000 tons and a cruising speed of 16 1/2 land miles per hour. One of her distinguishing characteristics, of course, is the heavy plating on the bottom for ice-crushing, a duty to which she has been assigned considerably of late.

The ship carries a crew of about 65, including a roster of some six officers: Commanding officer, L. W. Perkins, Lieut. Comm.; executive officer, P. B. Cronk, Lieut.; engineering officer, M. T. Braswell, Lieut.; navigating officer, P. L. Stinson, Lieut., jg-; communications officer, R. E. Mroczkowski, Lieut., j.g.; and a warrant machinist, A. Kenney. All of these officers are men young in years but rich in experience. The commander, L. W. Perkins, was last stationed at Coast Guard Base 2, in New York. Messrs. Braswell, Stinson, and Kenney came up here after

duty with the Coast Guard destroyer force on the Atlantic; Lieut. Cronk's previous station was on the cutter *Mendota* at Norfolk, and Lieut. Mroczkowski came to the Great Lakes service after duty on the cutter *Yamacraw*, based at Savannah, Ga.

The *Escanaba* has participated in over fifty cases of rescue work since coming to her present duty on Lake Michigan in November, 1932, and up to the time of our visit aboard her, she had cruised 15,965.2 miles in the course of duty. There is hardly space in a brief descriptive treatise of this sort to dwell on her notable achievements, but everyone will recall the newspaper stories of her work in connection with the disaster that came to the whaleback *Henry Cort* off Muskegan--a spectacular event, in which the first knowledge of the danger in which the steamer found itself was communicated by the *Escanaba* when she trained her powerful searchlights on the steamer and plunged into the strenuous rescue work.

She carries a 36-foot motor launch, containing a 20 horsepower engine which is capable of attaining a maximum speed of 10 miles per hour. This, and her other small boats, are swung on patent davits of the Whelan type, facilitating handling with greatest efficiency even when in considerable seaway. There is also a 19-foot surf boat with five single-banked oars, a craft of the sort familiar to all who have been around Coast Guard ships or stations.

Supplementing this equipment, the *Escanaba* carries two 26-foot Monomoy surf boats, weighing 2,100 pounds each when stripped. This type of auxiliary craft is designed for operation with a crew of ten men and a coxswain, and under ordinary conditions it is able to carry from fifteen to eighteen persons in addition to the crew. Other life-saving equipment to be found near-by includes the Franklyn buoys, carrying chemicals which light up as soon as the buoys hit the water. So that there may be no delay in getting these buoys overboard in an emergency, they can be released automatically from the bridge.

Up forward will be found two six-pound guns, used primarily for saluting and law enforcement. And nearby, on the forward deck, can be seen two patent anchors, each weighing 2,100 pounds and each provided with 135 fathoms of chain.

The engine room is compact and clean is the proverbial whistle. When it comes to explaining mechanical facilities, we are classed with the man who excused his own imitations by saying, "It isn't the heat; it's the stupidity." It is, to one who is accustomed to sailing yachts, amazing how much gear and engineering equipment can be crowded into a limited space. The two high pressure boilers, for instance, are notable for their height and not their length, and they use nothing but distilled water. Omitting much of the technical matter which Lieut. Braswell, the engineering officer, recited glibly, it should be recorded here that her fuel consumption per day when in port is 450 gallons, which includes heating, distilling water, etc.

There is a great amount of machinery in this department aside from the main plant. For instance, the *Escanaba* has a towing engine to maintain an even strain on tow-lines; she has a fire pump, which is called for but seldom, but rates 100 pounds through four 2 1/2-inch hoses; there are also the electric pumps, the circulator, and a complete machine-shop with \$5,000 worth of equipment--so well supplied and managed that there has had to be no work of this sort done ashore in a year and a half.

Mounting to the starboard bridge wing, under the guidance of Lieut. Mroczkowski, your correspondent was introduced to the gyro-compass repeater and an engine-room telegraph. Duplicates of this same equipment, of course, appear on the opposite wing and also in the pilot-house.

The wheelsman has everything in his favor on the *Escanaba*--not only an ample provision of modern navigating devices, skillfully arranged, but even a few additional novelties not ordinarily met. For instance, the clear-view window in front of the quartermaster, on which ice cannot form except under the most

extraordinary circumstances, is supplemented on the opposite side by another special window devised by the ship's own executive officer, Lieut. Cronk. However, the ship has been put to some severe tests during the past winter, and there were times, according to our informant, when ice three-quarters of an inch thick succeeded in forming on the clear-view window.

The binnacle is of the usual sort, with a magnetic compensating compass, U. S. Navy standard. This needs no describing, nor does the rudder indicator located within easy sight of the wheel. Like all such indicators, it shows on a simple dial the exact angle at which the rudder is fixed at any time. The Trident electric log can also be read from the bridge, and the engine-room control, similar to the repeaters on the wings of the bridge, is handy to the helm. There is a row of voice-tubes connecting with each department of the ship, and the radio compass is conveniently located-constituting a great aid when navigating under difficulties in checking position with absolute accuracy.

The fathometer, with the help of which the watch officer can determine the depth of water beneath him almost instantly, is also in a strategic position in the neatly arranged pilot-house. This handy piece of equipment which comes from the Submarine Signal Co. in Boston is of the type installed on all the larger naval vessels, and by flipping a switch the operator starts it electrically. The flash that registers on a small dial gives the exact sounding, the principle involved being based on the timing of a sound vibration traveling under water from the ship's plates to the bottom of the water and back. The Government sends certain of the men attached to these ships to special schools which give courses in the care and adjusting of these instruments, so that it is seldom necessary to send a fathometer all the way East to be repaired--there generally are qualified experts in the Coast Guard personnel of any area in which they operate.

There is also a course-recorder. This is one of those interesting bits of machinery which can be classified as a great boon to skippers and a mild nuisance to careless helmsmen; for it is under glass and behind lock-and-key,

and every time the rudder gets too much action and the wheel spins, the course is recorded in such a way that it cannot be erased. The graph is divided into degrees one way and into the time of day or night the other way, so that when the commander comes up from below, he can tell at a glance just what course has been steered the whole time he was away. When the line is jagged and jumps erratically, it is certain that the wheelsman has some explaining to do--and there is no concealing of jittery wheeling.

Aft of the pilot-house on the port side will be found the chart-room, a few steps lower, and with chart cases neatly arranged on one side, and a shelf of books (and you'll find none of that Zane Grey stuff here--that's down in the crew's quarters, if anywhere). The work-table is handy for the navigator when he lays his course, and the adjacent lockers contain the torpedo boat watches, which are what might be called tabloid chronometers. We were assured that they worked admirably well and gave as good results as grown-up chronometers under all ordinary conditions.

The corresponding space on the starboard side, next to the chart-room, is occupied by the captain's emergency cabin--a small but comfortable compartment containing a bunk and a few other necessities, to which the skipper may retire for a few winks when operating under a strain which precludes his going aft and below for extended intervals to his more capacious quarters used otherwise.

Leaving the pilot-house, we mounted the flying-bridge overhead. Here we got a glimpse of the incandescent searchlights, two of which are carried and both of which are controlled from the pilot-house. Above this vantage point, and a little forward, is the searchlight-platform (which looks like an oversized crow's nest that got placed a little low), carrying high intensity carbon-lights that are even stronger than the other lighting equipment and are controlled from this platform.

The signal system (aside from blinkers, radio, and such devices) is controlled from the flying-bridge, the usual flags being stowed in such a way that each can be hooked on the signal-halyard with a minimum of time wasted, and hoists can be manipulated with unusual rapidity.

One modern usage which will be unfamiliar to many is the placing of the radio call-letters so that the ship can be readily identified by airplanes when cruising off shore. In the case of the *Escanaba*, these are carried in conspicuous letters on the fly-bridge, appearing as a huge design in the floor covering. All Coast Guard vessels have their call-letters now displayed in some such location, which makes it easy for an aviator hovering above to glance down and immediately distinguish which ship he has sighted. "NRFG" is the designation of the *Escanaba*.

Resuming the journey, still under the guidance of the attentive communications officer, we passed to the deck abaft the bridge and pilot-house—a comparatively uninteresting place devoted entirely to the more utilitarian things, such as the conventional cork life-rafts, ventilators, and large well-aired lockers for stowing fresh vegetables in such a way that they will still classify as "fresh" when they reach the galley.

Immediately beneath the pilot-house was discovered the radio-room, containing three transmitters and four receivers. There were, among other things, two identical sets, which would make it possible on a rescue job to keep in touch with the shore and Coast Guard contacts on one set and with the ship in distress on the other set. The radio operator is on duty constantly when under way, and every three minutes there must be an entry in the radio log. They operate both on the Coast Guard and commercial wave lengths. At this point we asked how quickly the ship could respond, assuming that she was moored or idling in port when an emergency call came, and it was said she could get under way almost immediately, though due allowance might have to be made of a possible fifteen minutes to warm up the turbines.



Having assimilated most of the information available to one who boasts an insatiable curiosity about navigating facilities, we were escorted below to inspect the forecastle. Here we found a miniature carpenter shop, snugly arranged and apparently amply equipped. The ship carries two carpenter's mates to take care of such matters.

The refrigerators down here were large, adequate for commissary stores on a ship of this type--a 40-degree refrigerator for fruits, and a 26-degree unit to take care of frozen meats. There was also a well-furnished sick-bay in this section of the cutter, supervised by a pharmacist's mate who had been trained in the necessities for first-aid cases and emergency work--a situation which will safeguard anybody who might suddenly become ill or be injured, at least until the ship comes into port and can transfer the patient to a hospital on shore, if more skilled surgery or medical attention is indicated.

The ship's office appeared to have all the modern facilities of any office ashore, with the usual desks, steel files, and so on, all of which is under the guidance of three yeomen signed on for that purpose.

However, before leaving the forecastle, we had a hasty visit to the crew's quarters. They were eating at the time, and the aroma was such as would divert the attention of a far more astute and conscientious reporter than your correspondent. Nevertheless, we found the crew's comfort well considered, even including air-conditioning, and we sighted electric fans among the lockers and bunks. The only remaining feature in this part of the ship that we can recall was the two magazines for stowing arms and ammunition. Included in this department were wrecking mines used in destroying derelicts, as well as machine-guns and other modern armament. Reference has already been made to the two six-pounders on the forward deck.

Amidships, after mounting another ladder, we found the officers' quarters and captain's cabin, with the master gyro located near-by. Forward of this was the

ward-room, to which we repaired after our thorough inspection of the ship, for the excellent mess to which we had been invited.

The sailor-be he amateur or professional-has a good deal about which to worry. But he would have still more to keep him awake nights if it weren't for an ever alert Coast Guard, subject, more or less, to his beck and call. The Coast Guard skipper may maintain a poker face, refusing to display his inner amusement, when somebody pulls an especially heinous maritime howler; but he does his duty and lends his protecting arm to fools and skilled sailors alike. He probably remembers that old yarn about the harassed mother who viewed with some pardonable apprehension a growing tendency on the part of her hare-brained daughter to consort with all sorts and kinds of sea-faring Lotharios--with or without routine introduction, "Bevare dem sailors, Rosie," said she, "dey're a bunch of volves in ship's clothingk!"

So, from the captain down to the apprentice or aspiring cabin-boy, it behooves those who go down to the sea in ships to cultivate some sort of concept of the ways and habits of the Coast Guard.

