

Wreck of Storied Revenue Cutter Found



Appearing very different from her last Greenland visit in 1884, USS Bear (AG-29) returned in 1944 as part of the Coast Guard's Greenland Patrol. *U.S. NAVY*

One of the America's most iconic ships, which sailed the high seas in the Revenue Cutter Service, Coast Guard and Navy from the Arctic to Antarctica, has been found on the bottom of the ocean. The U.S. Revenue Cutter (USRC) Bear served for nearly 80 years before sinking in the North Atlantic in 1963, and now has been found.

"Today, I'm pleased to announce that with a reasonable degree of certainty, we found the final resting place of the historic revenue cutter Bear, a steamer ship purchased by the United States government in 1884. They went on to patrol the Arctic for 41 years," said Rear Adm. Nancy Hahn, deputy director for operations of the NOAA Office of Marine and Aviation Operations and deputy director of the NOAA commissioned officer corps.

"After nearly two decades of searching, NOAA Ocean Exploration, the NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries' Maritime Heritage Program, the U.S. Coast Guard, and a number of academic research partners have located with reasonable certainty the final resting place of U.S. Revenue Cutter Bear," said Brad Barr, expedition coordinator in the NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries Maritime Heritage Program.

The search for the location of the famous ship was conducted from Sept. 14 to 28, and located it approximately 260 miles due east of Boston and 90 miles south of Cape Sable, Nova Scotia.

The Oct. 14 announcement was made pierside next to the Coast Guard's medium icebreaker USCGC Healy in Boston, which has just transited the Northwest Passage from the West Coast.

"Having served for nearly 80 years, including in the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, the U.S. Navy, and as a ship of exploration in the Antarctic, Bear is considered one of the most historically significant ships in U.S. history for its long and meritorious service," said Barr.

"Knowing where the wreck of Bear is located provides an opportunity to preserve what remains. Given its location in Canadian waters, whatever preservation of this significant historic site is deemed necessary and appropriate will be another story yet to be written," Barr said.

The 198-foot, 700-ton ship was built by Alexander Stephen & Son of Dundee, Scotland, for the sealing trade in 1874. Bear entered government service and was deployed extensively in some of the most inhospitable waters on Earth. It was acquired by the U.S. government in 1884 for the Navy's rescue mission to save the starving men of an Arctic expedition led by Army Lt. Adolphus Greeley.

The following year the Treasury Department placed it into service as a revenue cutter, spending more than four decades patrolling the Bering Straits and Arctic.

In 1897, under the command of Capt. "Hell Roaring" Mike Healy, Bear crewmembers conducted the famous "overland rescue of 1897." Led by executive officer, Lt. Davis Jarvis and a rescue team that included 2nd Lt. Ellsworth Bertholf, U.S. Public Health Service Surgeon Samuel Call and three enlisted men, they drove a herd of 450 reindeer 1,600 miles to rescue the men of eight whaling ships stuck in the ice at Barrow, Alaska.

Alaska was a far more dangerous maritime frontier in the late 1800s than it is today. According to Coast Guard Historian Dr. By William H. Thiesen, "Bear secured witnesses for a murder

case; transported Alaska's governor on a tour of Alaska's islands; shipped a U.S. Geological survey team to Mount Saint Elias; carried lumber and supplies for school construction in remote locations and the Arctic; delivered teachers to their assignments; carried mail for the U.S. Postal Service; enforced seal hunting laws in the Pribilof Islands; supported a Coast & Geodetic Survey team; provided medical relief to native populations; served life-saving and rescue missions; and enforced federal law throughout the waters and shorelines of Alaska."

Bear reverted back to the Navy during World War I, and the supported relief operations in the in and around Alaska during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. It served until 1929, when it became a museum ship in Oakland, California. But it didn't stay in port for long. Adm. Richard Byrd purchased the ship to support the 1933-35 and 1939-1941 Antarctic expeditions. When World War II broke out, Bear served again under a Navy commissioning pennant, patrolling the waters around Greenland. After the war, the ship was sold with the intent it be returned to commercial service as a sealer, but the fur market was such that its owners abandoned it. Eventually, a promoter saw a future for the storied ship as a restaurant and attraction and had it towed on a final voyage to Philadelphia in 1963, but it never arrived.

"At the time of the loss of Bear, it was already recognized as a historic ship," said Joe Boyd, maritime heritage program coordinator for the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries.



A possible stern tube of the shipwreck explored in 2021. *NOAA / MITech*

The story the Bear doesn't end with its loss in 1963. Instead, a new chapter in the Bear story opened when the search for the historic ship began in 1979 with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Dr. Harold Edgerton, inventor of the side-scan sonar. He deployed his revolutionary technology from a

Coast Guard buoy tender near the last known position of the Bear before it left the surface. They were unsuccessful in finding the Bear, but that effort launched a 40-year quest that included not only MIT, but the Canadian government, U.S. Navy, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Coast Guard District One, the Chief Historians Office, Coast Guard Research and Development Center, the Coast Guard Academy and NOAA.

“Identifying the final resting place of the Revenue Cutter Bear is just another example of knowing that Coast Guard joining forces to do more collectively than either of us could do individually, and showing how we work together to advance our collective missions. What makes this effort to locate the Bear special is the partnership that made it possible and incredibly valuable experience we both gained during the search for the historic vessel,” said Hahn.

“Each moment of the surveys that led to this exciting discovery was put to use to improve crew readiness, enhance skills essential to searching for sunken vessels, including adapting existing Coast Guard ships to deploy and recover remotely operated vehicles. NOAA has been in the shipwreck survey business for a very long time,” Hahn said. “And we can tell you that we are profoundly impressed by the Coast Guard’s ability to adapt to this new challenge and apply what they’ve learned throughout this project.”