

## Lieutenant Charles Eliot Winslow and His Heroic Rescues in Command of the Coast Guard Cutter *Argo*

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When terrorists attacked the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, New York's Motor Vessel *Sightseer XII* (pictured above) came to the rescue. The tour boat helped ferry thousands of evacuees from lower Manhattan across the Hudson River to New Jersey. Due in part to *Sightseer XII* and the selfless efforts of her captain and crew, the U.S. Coast Guard recognized the vessel's owner, Circle Line Sightseeing Tours, with the 9/11 Medal. However, 9/11 was not the first time this sturdy vessel had rescued those in peril. As the Coast Guard cutter *Argo*, *Sightseer XII* performed a number of heroic rescues during the dark days of World War II.



**M/V *Sightseer XII*, formerly the Cutter *Argo* and now a Circle Line Cruises vessel, ferried stranded New Yorkers from Manhattan across the Hudson after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. (Courtesy of Circle Line Tours of New York City)**

In 1933, *Argo* (WPC-100) became the first in her class of 165-foot Coast Guard cutters put into service for Prohibition enforcement. During the war, the service conscripted her and her sisterships to escort commercial vessels along the East Coast. The cutter carried a crew of seventy-five men and provided a solid platform for radar and sonar equipment; an armament of twenty millimeter and three-inch guns; as well as depth charges and anti-submarine weapons. As convoy escorts, *Argo* and her sisterships typically took up station on northbound and southbound convoys, tracked underwater contacts, and attacked anything that resembled the sonar signature of a U-boat.

During the last three years of the war, *Argo*'s fate would be closely linked to that of Charles Eliot Winslow, a successful paint salesman in Boston. Winslow held a deep sense of duty and, with war clouds forming on the horizon in 1940, he chose to enlist in the U.S. Navy. In 1941, at the age of thirty-one, Winslow found himself called to active duty with the rate of seaman second-class. In his first assignment, he served out of Boston on board USS *Puffin* (AMc-29), a fishing boat converted into a minesweeper. In November 1941, he decided to take a competitive examination for an officer's commission in the Coast Guard Reserve. He passed and by December he had resigned from the navy to accept an ensign's commission in the U.S. Coast Guard.

In late 1942, after serving as executive officer on the weather ship *Menemsha* (AG-39), Winslow received appointment to the anti-submarine warfare school in Miami, Florida. After graduation, the Coast Guard promoted Winslow to lieutenant junior grade and assigned him to the *Argo*. Beginning in February 1943, Winslow served as senior watch officer and navigation officer on board the cutter, but he rose rapidly through the ship's officer ranks. In April, the

Coast Guard promoted him to executive officer of *Argo* while he served concurrently as gunnery officer. After only two months as the cutter's executive officer, the Coast Guard promoted Winslow to commanding officer of *Argo*, a position he would hold for the remainder of the war.

On the morning of January 6, 1944, convoy NK-588 steamed south out of New York



LTJG Charles Eliot Winslow in his dress blues sitting for a formal portrait. (Courtesy of the Winslow Family)

harbor into a gale with nearly forty mile-per-hour winds and wave heights of nearly twenty feet. The convoy consisted of a tanker; the navy patrol gunboat USS *St. Augustine* (PG-54), a converted 300-foot yacht that served as the convoy's escort command vessel; and the Coast Guard sisterships *Argo* and *Thetis* (WPC-115). That night at 10:00pm, the *St. Augustine* encountered a strange vessel sixty miles southeast of Cape May. Unknown to the warship's crew, the unidentified vessel was the American tanker *Camas Meadows*, steaming unescorted out of Delaware Bay under blackout conditions. The master of the tanker had taken ill to his cabin leaving the third mate to serve as officer-on-deck (OOD). The ship had a green crew and no one on the bridge knew how to send or receive blinker signals.

Farther back in the convoy, *Argo* had also made radar contact with the darkened tanker and the cutter's OOD reported the contact to LTJG Winslow in the captain's cabin. Winslow ordered the contact's position transmitted to the *St. Augustine* by the coded talk-between-ship (TBS) system. The cutter's radioman sent the message and received acknowledgment from the lead escort. Meanwhile, *Argo*'s lookouts made visual contact with the ship and noted that the *St. Augustine* had left her convoy station, steamed toward the mystery vessel and challenged the ship by blinker and by flashing running lights. *Argo*'s OOD altered course so the cutter would swing wide around the stern of the ship crossing ahead and he presumed that *St. Augustine* had executed a similar course change.

The dark silhouettes of the *St. Augustine* and the tanker appeared to meet miles in the distance; but unknown to *Argo*'s bridge watch, the *St. Augustine* had actually altered course in front of the tanker, setting the two vessels on a collision course. Within a few short minutes, *Argo*'s OOD observed the bow of the 300-foot *St. Augustine* rise out of the water at an odd angle, fall back into the water, and disappear. Given the state of the stormy seas, he and the others on the bridge thought the escort had ridden up a large wave and dropped back into the accompanying trough. However, the men on *Argo*'s bridge had actually witnessed the demise of the patrol gunboat as the tanker rammed into *St. Augustine* amidships, cut deeply into the escort's hull, and pushed the mortally wounded gunboat briefly before separating with her. The *St. Augustine* flooded and slipped below the waves, vanishing in less than five minutes.

Still miles away from the scene of the disaster, *Argo's* OOD asked his radarman if he still had *St. Augustine* on the screen. The radarman indicated that he no longer had a contact for the patrol gunboat. *Thetis* tried to raise the *St. Augustine* by voice radio with no success, so *Argo's* OOD tried to contact the vessel by TBS. The darkened tanker came to a stop and turned on all of her running lights, an act prohibited during wartime in waters known to harbor U-boats. By this time, *Argo's* OOD feared the worst, called LTJG Winslow for assistance and ordered *Argo's* crew to general quarters.



CG Cutter *Argo* returning to port after escort duty. Originally designed for Prohibition law enforcement, this type of cutter was particularly seaworthy and maneuverable. With the U.S. entry into World War II, the ship was attached to the Atlantic Fleet as a convoy escort. (Courtesy of the Winslow Family)

Winslow swung into action as soon as he stepped on the bridge. He ordered a course change straight for the unidentified vessel brightly illuminated in the heavy seas dead ahead. He also ordered the signalman to communicate with the vessel by blinker to find out what had happened. After repeated queries, the tanker blinked back “survivors to the left of you.” After several more unanswered signals, the tanker responded that it had rammed the escort and was taking on water.

After pounding through heavy seas for nearly twenty minutes, *Argo* arrived at the scene of the disaster. The cutter’s crew began sighting groups of survivors on life rafts and individuals floating in the frigid water waving the red lights attached to their life jackets. Winslow ordered all of *Argo's* searchlights activated and began navigating through the wreckage to collect survivors. Winslow focused initial efforts on saving those in life rafts and grouped together in the water before the storm could scatter them across the wind-swept seas. Later, *Argo* located individual survivors and, after that, threw lines over bodies to see if they showed signs of life. If the bodies failed to react, *Argo* moved on to search for survivors still riding the heavy seas.



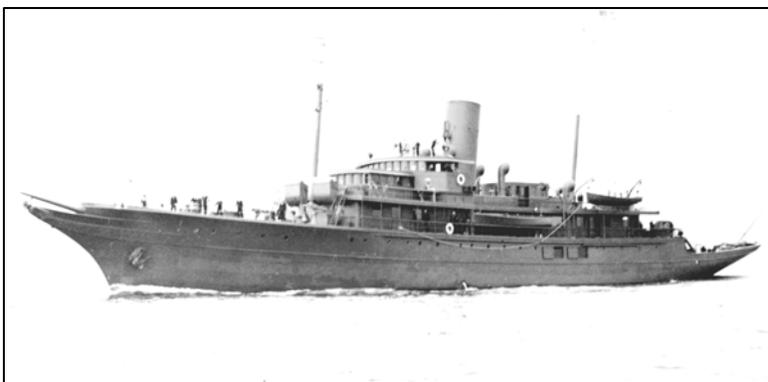
LTJG Charles Eliot Winslow at sea on board Cutter *Argo*. Notice the forward 20mm cannon barrel located under his arm. (Courtesy of the Winslow Family)

*Argo* remained on scene during the early morning hours of January 7 and through the rest of the day as Winslow and the crew searched for more survivors. The *Camas Meadows* also remained on scene during the early morning hours of January 7, before steaming back to Cape May to survey the damage to her hull. Meanwhile, the navy and Coast Guard launched a massive search and rescue operation, involving ships, planes and blimps, in an

effort to locate more survivors. *Argo* had rescued twenty-three of *St. Augustine*'s survivors, while *Thetis* accounted for another seven. In addition, the search and rescue effort located sixty-seven bodies out of the patrol gunboat's total losses of 106 crewmembers.

A board of inquiry, convened to determine the cause of the accident, found greatest fault in the fatal maneuver that put USS *St. Augustine* in the path of the *Camas Meadows*. The board also found the tanker's crew too inexperienced, with several having no previous sea time. In addition, the board determined that the tanker's radioman had little knowledge of emergency procedures; and that the only crewmembers qualified in signaling had taken to their bunks, preventing the tanker from communicating with the *St. Augustine*.

For his role in the *St. Augustine* episode, LTJG Winslow received a commendation from Navy Secretary James Forrestal for "outstanding service." According to the citation, Winslow maneuvered "his ship through heavy winds and debris-littered seas" with "outstanding tactical skill." Coast Guard Commandant Russell Waesche also commended Winslow, writing, "I am pleased to commend you and the members of your crew for initiative and resourcefulness manifested throughout the task, which was made more hazardous and difficult by strong winter winds and prevailing high seas."



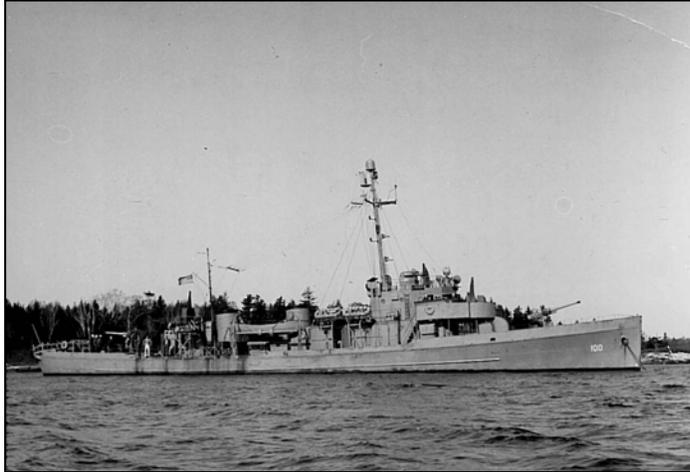
The ill-fated patrol gunboat USS *St. Augustine* (PG-54) was a converted yacht. (U.S. Navy photo)

Winslow demonstrated his skill and ship handling ability a second time at the end of the 1944 hurricane season. A powerful storm whirled up from the Equator in October and churned off the Georgia coast by October 19. It caught the Mexican tanker *Juan Casiano* ninety miles due east of Savannah, severing the vessel into two parts and sending them both to the bottom. Only twenty-one of the ship's fifty crewmembers found their way to a battered lifeboat. They did their best to cling to the boat as physical exhaustion and the storm's fury peeled the men away one-by-one.

*Argo* arrived on scene a day after the sinking and, at approximately 8:00pm that evening, the cutter's crew sighted flares illuminating the darkness over the swamped lifeboat. While the cutter was located some distance from the lifeboat, LTJG Winslow skillfully maneuvered the 165-foot cutter through the heavy seas to the lifeboat. *Argo* took on board eleven men suffering from shock and exposure. The rest of the original twenty-one survivors had perished in the hurricane over the course of the previous day. Winslow commenced a box search in the heavy seas to check for the others but had no luck. In the commendation for the *Juan Casiano* rescue, Commandant Waesche cited Winslow for his "outstanding ability and devotion to duty."

Between the *St. Augustine* and *Juan Casiano* rescues, Winslow, his crew and *Argo* had saved thirty-four desperate mariners and given them a second chance at life.

LTJG Winslow had found within himself a natural, almost instinctive, pre-disposition for command at sea. In June 1944, the senior member of a navy inspection team reported on



**Argo anchored in Love's Cove, near Boothbay, Maine, at the Atlantic war's end in May of 1945. The 165-foot steel cutter was built by John H. Mathis Company at Camden, New Jersey, in 1933. Argo could attain speeds of sixteen knots and was powered by two Winton Model 158 six-cylinder diesel engines, which delivered 1,340 horsepower. (Courtesy of the Winslow Family)**

Winslow's skills: "The [*Argo's*] Commanding Officer is an able and competent officer, forceful, decisive, military in conduct and bearing, maintaining discipline with a firm yet tactful hand, with the result that the vessel under his command is a smart, taut ship. He handles ship exceptionally well and is in every respect qualified for his command and administrative responsibilities." Yet, after the war ended, Winslow was ready to go home. In a letter to his command, he wrote, "If the *Argo* . . . is scheduled to fight the wintry blasts alone all winter, my answer is 'Get me off.' One winter upside down was enough for me. It took me three weeks to regain the full use of my feet!"

Winslow and *Argo* went their separate ways. The Coast Guard experienced a dramatic decrease in personnel levels, forcing the service to retire cutters such as *Argo*. At first, the service mothballed the cutter at the Cape May Coast Guard station; however, by 1948, the service had decommissioned the cutter and sold her in 1955. By 1959, New York City's Circle Line Sightseeing Tours purchased *Argo* and she began a second fruitful career as *M/V Sightseer XII*.

During wartime, many are called to serve in harm's way. Many fail to meet the challenge while others rise to the occasion. Some of those called to naval duty discover an affinity for the sea that they would never have known if not for the demands of war. Charles Eliot Winslow had just such an experience. Having served the entire war on the high seas, Winslow left Boston for good and moved near the family home in Southport, Maine. There he established a successful tugboat business and summer cruise line in the Boothbay area of Maine.