

## **Captain Henry G. Hemingway: Guardian, Cutterman and Leader of Men**

By William H. Thiesen, Ph.D.

Atlantic Area Historian, United States Coast Guard

Henry George Hemingway served one of the most interesting and distinguished careers of any officer of his era. In January of 1911, this native son of Washington, D.C., graduated from the old U.S. Revenue Cutter School located at Fort Trumbull in New London. Hemingway saw service as a line officer on several revenue cutters, including the RUSH of Bering Sea Patrol fame; and the MCCULLOUGH, which distinguished itself in the Battle of Manila Bay in 1898.

Hemingway witnessed some of the service's earliest organizational changes, including the 1915 consolidation of his own U.S. Revenue Cutter Service with the U.S. Life Saving Service to form the modern U.S. Coast Guard. He was serving on board the cutter MORRILL on April 6, 1917, when the U.S. Navy broadcast, "Plan One, acknowledge," thereby transferring all Coast Guard units and personnel to a war footing under the navy.

On that same day that Hemingway began serving under the navy, Canada suffered the worst disaster in its history, when the fully-loaded munitions ship MONT BLANC exploded in Halifax, killing 1,600 people and wounding many more. Third Lieutenant Hemingway led the MORRILL's rescue party on shore to render emergency assistance. His party proved to be one of the first responders to the disaster and for his efforts he received a commendation for meritorious service from then Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels.



**Hemingway in his dress whites.**  
(Courtesy of the Hemingway Grandchildren)



**Cadet Henry G. Hemingway at the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service Academy.** (Courtesy of the Hemingway Grandchildren)

Not long after his rescue work in Nova Scotia, Hemingway served in the New York Division under Captain Godfrey Carden, the famous captain of the port for New York during World War I. Despite their difference in rank, it was not long before these two strong-minded officers clashed over Hemingway's work habits and behavior. Their dispute required the intercession of Captain Commandant Ellsworth Bertholf and likely resulted in Hemingway's early transfer to a new assignment.

In May 1918, Hemingway received orders to serve as a gunnery officer on board the armored cruiser U.S.S. SAN DIEGO, then escorting convoys up the East Coast. On July 19, 1918, the German submarine U-156 sank the SAN DIEGO off of Long Island resulting in the loss of

the largest U.S. warship during World War I. Hemingway survived the sinking and served the rest of the war as executive officer of the cutter TUSCARORA, homeported in Key West. He was awarded the World War I Victory Medal for his war service, but a medal he received years later would distinguish him from his peers.

In early 1922, after a tour of three years on board TUSCARORA, Lieutenant Hemingway packed his belongings and headed west for a new assignment in Port Angeles, Washington. Hemingway took command of the cutter SNOHOMISH and quickly developed a reputation as a skilled captain and leader. Hemingway would see only a year's service on board the cutter, but he experienced more action than many officers do in an entire career. During his brief tenure commanding SNOHOMISH, the cutter rescued the crew and passengers of five shipwrecks in the Strait of San Juan de Fuca without the loss of a single life.

His greatest challenge came on the evening of February 14, 1923, during a fierce storm including fog, rain, snow, heavy seas and hurricane force winds. At about 6:00 pm, Hemingway steered the SNOHOMISH out of Port Angeles to assist the steamer COOLCHA, which had stranded near Vancouver Island. Meanwhile, the lumber steamer NIKA transmitted an SOS after its rudder broke and disabled the freighter. While another

vessel went to the aid of COOLCHA, Hemingway altered course for the NIKA and steamed through the storm to reach the 2,500-ton vessel early in the morning of February 15. After arriving on scene, he found NIKA out of control in the gale force winds. To make matters worse, the vessel caught fire not long after the



A painting showing Cutter SNOHOMISH rescuing the crew of the steamer NIKA. (Courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard)

cutter's arrival and desperate crewmembers launched a lifeboat to save themselves. Hemingway assessed the situation, maneuvered the SNOHOMISH close enough to pass a three-inch line to the vessel and evacuated the remaining fourteen crewmen by way of a ring buoy passed along the line stretched between the vessels. After saving the crew on board NIKA, SNOHOMISH located the drifting lifeboat and rescued the rest of the vessel's thirty-three-man crew.

The NIKA case demonstrated Hemingway's skill as a mariner, captain and leader of men. After assessing NIKA's chaotic rescue environment, Hemingway prioritized his operational goals and set his shipmates to carrying them out. The engineering crew responded immediately to all signals from the bridge and the deck gang improvised the

effective ring buoy system under very dangerous conditions. After returning safely to Port Angeles, NIKA's captain told reporters that he had never seen a ship handled as well as SNOHOMISH, nor had he seen a crew work as a team as efficiently as the cutter's. After the NIKA rescue, Hemingway received a great deal of praise from the local community and in 1928 he received the Gold Lifesaving Medal, a distinction rarely enjoyed by cutter captains.

Hemingway served twenty more years after his time in Port Angeles and retired as a captain in 1944. During his thirty-three-year career, Hemingway had served in both World War I and World War II, overseeing the Potomac River Naval Command in the latter; and he had commanded ships in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Through it all, he distinguished himself as a great leader and skilled cutter captain.



**Captain Henry G. Hemingway later in his career (Courtesy of the Hemingway Grandchildren)**