



Photo by Diana Haecker

BREAKING THE ICE— US Coast Guard icebreaker *Polar Sea* last Sunday, April 27, left its home port Seattle on March 31 and arrived in Nome on Sunday, April 27. The *Polar Sea's* mission was to conduct a seal survey among other tasks in the Bering Sea.

Coast Guard icebreaker *Polar Sea* calls on Nome

By Diana Haecker

It is April 27 and the cold blue Bering Sea still remains hidden under a white cover of ice in various stages of breaking up. Far away, past a wide open lead barely visible from land, moves the faint silhouette of a ship surrounded by ice. No, it was not a mirage brought on by a combination of a long harsh winter, wishful thinking and bright sunlight last Sunday afternoon.

The U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker *Polar Sea* indeed is the first ship to make an appearance on the frozen horizon in front of Nome this season. The cutter, hailed as one of the most innovative and technologically advanced icebreakers ever built, lazily broke through ice cakes about nine miles out of Nome on Sunday and Monday to be resupplied via helicopter and to give a crew members solid ground under their sea legs to break up the two-month deployment.

The *Polar Sea's* Captain Carl Uchytel invited Nome's Mayor Denise Michels and this reporter out for a tour of the icebreaker.

After squeezing into the rubbery confines of an orange dry suit, outfitted with a helmet and strapped into the seats of the Dolphin helicopter, the 15-minute helicopter flight over sea ice resembling broken china

porcelain ended at the deck of the 399-foot long icebreaker.

The Seattle-based *Polar Sea* has been deployed to the Bering Sea to conduct a population survey of four species of ice seals in cooperation with NOAA's National Marine Mammal Laboratory. Also, it's mission is to enforce maritime laws and to train crew. The *Polar Sea* left Seattle on March 31 and is scheduled to return to its homeport on May 18.

With the thinning of arctic sea ice coverage, the amount of navigable water surrounding the arctic is increasing. According to the Coast Guard, the scientific demands of the International Polar Year, support for Native communities, protection of fishery stocks and marine mammals and the commercial demands of Alaska's vast mineral resources call for an increased presence in the arctic by the Coast Guard.

After a hiatus of deployment, the *Polar Sea* is back in the ice, more ice than its crew expected to find in the Bering Sea, and assisting NOAA scientists in their studies. A helicopter is dispatched daily to fly over the sea ice and conduct the seal survey.

Uchytel welcomed Michels on deck and led the way through a maze of narrow gangways and steep flights of stairs on the ensuing tour of what

seems like a floating city complete with gym equipment, souvenir shop and even a small coffee shop.

Below the deck are a host of engineers controlling a computerized propulsion control system to effectively manage six diesel-powered propulsion generators, three diesel-powered ship's service generators and three propulsion gas turbines. The *Polar Sea* carries 1.3 million gallons of diesel to power itself through the mission. The ship is also equipped with a desalination machine, taking sea water in and producing drinking water for all the needs of the floating city of 150 crewmen and women. "When out on our missions, we need to be self-sufficient for the most part," explained Uchytel.

On a different level, the smell of food lured the visitors into the galley,

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Photo by Diana Haecker

WELCOME ABOARD— *Polar Sea* captain Carl Uchytel welcomes Nome Mayor Denise Michels on board of the US Coast Guard icebreaker *Polar Sea*, nine miles offshore from Nome on Sunday, April 27.

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5/1 & 15

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