

**Gold Ancient Mariner Change of Watch Ceremony
Remarks by the Commandant
Aboard Coast Guard Barque EAGLE
New London, Connecticut
2 May, 2014**

Good Morning, Shipmates!

You know, I've been saying "Good morning, Shipmates" at gatherings, and dinners, and all-hands for as long as I can remember. But I can't think of an audience where it resonates more, or means more, than here today.

It's hard to believe it's been seven years since I relieved CAPT Jett and first earned the *privilege* of putting on this hat...

And harder still to believe that it's been 34 years since I watched the first Gold Ancient Mariner ceremony.... I remember very vividly being a young Lieutenant at the ceremony where CAPT Axel Hagstrom became the first Gold Ancient Mariner.

"*Axel J. Hagstrom*" – isn't that a great name?

And even though he went by "Jack" – it still just *sounds* salty. CAPT Hagstrom actually spent a fair amount of time here in New London. He started his career here when he went to Radarman "A" school just down the river at what used to be Coast Guard Training Center Groton at Avery Point. He rose through the ranks to Chief Petty Officer before coming back here to Officer Candidate School at the Academy. And then a few years later he was back at the Academy as a Professional Studies instructor.

He served in six cutters and commanded three of them: BALSAM, CAMPBELL and JARVIS. He also served in Vietnam, where he received the Legion of Merit for rescuing the crew of a sunken Navy patrol boat while under fire from the Viet Cong, and he was the first CO of our Vessel Traffic System in Puget Sound. Not only did his name sound salty – *he was salty!*

So when I saw him I at that first Ancient Mariner ceremony, I remember thinking to myself "*Isn't that a really nice honor to give that old officer as he's getting ready to retire.*"

And here I am.

And I also remember when they placed this hat on his head I thought "Wow, and he gets to wear that hat!"

And now I say "Oh, no, I have to wear that hat"

Which is exactly what RADM Midgette is thinking now, *right Fred?!*

But I've got to come clean.... The hat we use today is not the same hat that CAPT Hagstrom wore in that first Ancient Mariner Ceremony. This is a replica that was purchased in a costume shop some years ago.... And believe it or not, I've actually taken some grief for that. I've read some of the blogs where people pointed out that this is not an authentic Revenue Cutter Service hat – and seemed really upset by that!

Well, it's true that it's not completely authentic. But being concerned about that misses the point. That original 1913 Revenue Cutter Service fore-and-aft hat is a hundred years old. It made of beaver skin, and you can't get them reproduced. And I decided that it really shouldn't be a prop used in a ceremony. It is an artifact – part of our past – that should be in a museum where others can see it and learn something of our service and its history.

Now. If only we had a museum....!

Well I'm very pleased that later today we will take a significant step in giving that original Revenue Cutter Service hat the home it deserves – a National Coast Guard Museum! This is so long overdue and I'm incredibly excited at the progress that is being made.

But when it comes to the Ancient Mariner, that criticism about the hat is misplaced for another reason. It focuses too much on the trappings and too little on the substance of why we have an Ancient Mariner in the first place. Because it means more than simply finding the person with the most sea time and recognizing their longevity with a costume that emphasizes the fact. Let me explain.

I mentioned earlier that I remember watching that first Ancient Mariner Ceremony. Well that period has meaning to me beyond that one ceremony, and highlights why we have this position – and the responsibility that comes with it....

CAPT Hagstrom became the first Ancient Mariner on January 16th, 1980....

Twelve days later, on January 28th, the Cutter BLACKTHORN sank in Tamp Bay, Florida, with the loss of 23 of our Shipmates.

You know, I can't help but wonder what our first Ancient mariner – a former Vessel Traffic Service CO, Professional Studies instructor, and ship captain – thought about that confluence of events....

I can tell you that the loss of the BLACKTHORN was a seminal event in my young career. I was a young Lieutenant and a Company Officer at the Coast Guard Academy. And I had just come off my tour as the Executive Officer aboard another buoy tender, the Coast Guard Cutter RED WOOD. It was even more powerful, because just 15 months earlier we had lost the CUYAHOGA, where 11 more of our Shipmates gave their lives.

And later, as I studied the reports of the casualty, and read of the causes that led to the loss of so many of our Shipmates - one of the first thoughts I had was *“there, but for the grace of God, go I”*. And I know I wasn't alone.

That was because the training we provided to our cuttermen then was inconsistent across the fleet. In fact, in many places, it was completely lacking. Our standards were not where they should have been, and as a Service we were not properly preparing our people to safely do their job. The shortcomings identified as a result of the BLACKTHORN casualty were not unique to BLACKTHORN. *They were systemic.*

In fact, several months before BLACKTHORN sank, Admiral Hayes, the Commandant when the Ancient Mariner position was established, warned of tired ships, inexperienced crews, and inadequate maintenance. He told our Service Secretary that “many of [our cutters] are not capable of carrying out the mission, and a majority of them, in my estimation, are not up to Coast Guard standards of readiness or professionalism.”

To be frank, it gave me pause. It caused me and many others to rethink the career we had chosen. I was a Cutterman at heart – but at that point I could have easily chosen another path.

But I chose instead to learn the lessons of BLACKTHORN and rededicate myself to professionalism. But more importantly, so *did our Service*. We made many changes and improvements to the way we trained our people and equipped and cared for our vessels.

We established our Command and Operations School here in New London. We renewed and increased our focus on Rules of the Road training; we established guidance on qualifications for navigation watch positions; we established criteria for the training and experience level of those assigned to cutters, and we began to develop and build what we now call bridge resource management.

In short, we focused on building and demanding ever greater professionalism and proficiency. And we finally gave our people the tools and the support they needed to do the job we asked of them.

I stand here today a product of many of those changes. I appeared before the first junior command afloat screening panel, and attended one of the very first courses designed specifically for those selected to command afloat units – each established as a the result of the lessons we learned.

And it is during this period I first thought seriously about how we train and how we prepare – our ships, our service, and ourselves. It began the development of my thought process as a senior officer, and – although I couldn’t have know it then – as the Ancient Mariner.

For the last four years, I have been passionate in talking about Proficiency. About Proficiency in Craft. About Proficiency in Leadership. And about Disciplined Initiative.

I’m sure many thought this was a new initiative, something created as a slogan when I became Commandant. After all, every Commandant has their own watchwords; the idea they want to communicate to the fleet which demonstrates their personal philosophy or encapsulates their message.

But it's not new. Far from it. It was born 34 years ago, not long after that first Ancient Mariner ceremony, when I first began to think about the lessons we learned with the loss of BLACKTHORN and CUYAHOGA and think about what it means to be a Cutterman.

The next generation of cuttermen benefited from the lessons we learned. We made sure that their ships were up to the task and that they worked together with a renewed emphasis on professionalism.

And fifteen years later, the officers and crews who learned those lessons were engaged in operations off of Haiti and Cuba. We were operating in a high-risk, fast-paced environment, 24-hours a day and seven days a week. I commanded a task force during Operation ABLE MANNER and UPHOLD DEMOCRACY. At the height of operations we had as many as 17 cutters and 5 Navy vessels operating in the same area. We interdicted over 25,000 migrants, including as many as 3,000 in a single day. And right after that, during Operation ABLE VIGIL, we interdicted over 30,000 Cuban migrants, and at the height of operations we had over 38 Coast Guard Cutters which operated in the area.

And we did so flawlessly, with no mishaps. We did so *because we had committed ourselves and our Service to professionalism*. That is what being the Ancient Mariner means to me. Since that January back in 1980, the Ancient Mariner and the BLACKTHORN – or more specifically the lessons from BLACKTHORN and our commitment to professionalism – have been inextricably linked in my mind. And that is the continuing legacy and responsibility of the Ancient Mariner – to serve as a reminder of that commitment to craft that all cuttermen must have.

That January back in 1980 there were 38,000 of us wearing the Coast Guard uniform. There are now only 46 of us left on active duty who were also on active duty then – including RADM Midgette, who I believe was a 3/c cadet. I am honored to be among you today as one of that number.

Of those 46, 12 of us are now flag officers. Fourteen more are in Command Cadre positions, and seven of *them* are currently serving as Commanding Officers or Executive Officers aboard Coast Guard cutters. And we all remember.

But most in our Service don't have that personal memory. That is why it is so important to have things like the Ancient Mariner – and all of "The Ancients". They remind us of the path we've traveled and the lessons we've learned, often at terrific cost.

And it's why today is so special. Not only do I get to pass the Ancient Mariner to my friend Fred Midgette – who I know shares my passion for ensuring the high standards of our profession – but we also get to move one step closer to a National Coast Guard museum where generations of future Coast Guardsmen will get to come learn these lessons as well, and the American people can come to learn all about the world's greatest Coast Guard.

When I started this morning, I welcomed you all here as shipmates. As most of you know, to me that is a greetings of respect; a recognition of shared experiences, of a love for the sea and seafaring, and of the unique bond that's formed between all of us who have served in ships.

I use that term much more expansively now than I used to, because I truly believe that all who serve, all who work to support the missions and the people of our Service are truly our shipmates – regardless of when or how they serve. Every member of our team is deserving of – and by the simple fact of their commitment and service has earned – that greeting of “Shipmate”.

But some of those bonds...those friendships that grow among sailors – among *Cuttermen* – they *are* somehow different. They are forged in the crucible of never ending watches with long work days in between; of the soreness and bruises that come with hanging on through days of storms and swells; of midrats and musters, boardings and drills, rescues and recalls, and sea showers and sea details. And of course the ever present longing for those left ashore.

They are forged by these and a thousand other challenges and inconveniences that come with a career spent at sea.

But they are also born of the wonder that comes with such service at sea. The nights on deck beneath perfect, star-filled skies. Brilliant sunrises and quiet sunsets over great expanses of open ocean. The deep and abiding camaraderie born of living with and depending on each other for months and years at a time. And the anticipation and excitement that comes with returning home to family and loved ones again...

And these bonds are also born of the pride that comes in always knowing you are directing your efforts towards a truly worthwhile purpose. This, too, is what the Ancient Mariner means to me. And it's something that all Coast Guardsmen share.

Thank you – and Semper Paratus.