

As delivered

Admiral Thomas H. Collins  
Escanaba Memorial Service  
Grand Haven, Michigan  
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Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for joining us here today to honor the men of the Coast Guard Cutter ESCANABA, their families, and the Coast Guard as a whole.

Many people are surprised to learn that the Coast Guard sails ships and flies aircraft far from the U.S. coasts. The fact is, we have left U.S. shores far behind since the early days of the Revenue Cutter Service, defending our nation's maritime interests in the wars that followed the Revolution.

As an example of that, just this year, we sent 2 High Endurance Cutters, 8 Patrol Boats, a Buoy Tender, 4 Port Security Units and over 1200 Coast Guard men and women to Operation Iraqi Freedom. Our Coast Guard ships ensured safe transit of the armament and supplies needed to prosecute the war. We ensured safe shipping lanes were marked, then maintained. We guarded aircraft carriers and minesweepers. We boarded suspected smugglers. We located and secured a large Iraqi military equipment and weapons cache hidden in caves in southern Iraq. We intercepted fugitives attempting to flee Iraq by sea. We captured Iraqi POWs. And today, 350 of our Coast Guard men and women remain far from home, continuing to support the U.S. mission there. Please keep them in your thoughts and your prayers, that they and all U.S. service members will return home safely.

ESCANABA also served her country far from U.S. shores. She was commissioned in 1932. Ten years later, ESCANABA was called on to leave her homeport of Grand Haven to help fight the Second World War. She escorted Allied convoys in the North Atlantic, between ports in the United States, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and Greenland. In one evening, ESCANABA attacked two German submarines, dropping depth charges to protect her convoys. From debris fields that appeared, ESCANABA in all likelihood sank both submarines, although there is no official documentation of these German losses. Later that same day, when enemy torpedoes sank the S.S. CHEROKEE, ESCANABA performed heroically, rescuing 22 survivors, using innovative techniques to bring the survivors on board, since the bitter cold caused hypothermia so severe that the men in the water could not hang onto life rings tied to the rescue boat. That was quite a day's work!

In February of 1943, ESCANABA was one of three ships escorting a small convoy from Newfoundland to Greenland. One of the ships being escorted was the DORCHESTER, which was hit by two torpedoes from a German submarine. Some of you military buffs may remember DORCHESTER is famous for its Four Chaplains, who gave up their lifejackets to other crewmen, so the crewmen would have a chance to be saved. The Chaplains died when DORCHESTER sank.

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Since their heroics in rescuing survivors from CHEROKEE, ESCANABA had been experimenting with better ways to rescue men in the water when they were too hypothermic to grab onto life rings. ESCANABA developed what they called a “retriever plan”. Men wearing rubber suits and with a line tied to them, jumped into the water off ESCANABA, swam to a helpless victim, grabbed him, then men on board ESCANABA “retrieved” the pair by hauling in the lines, pulling them back to ESCANABA where the victim was safely hoisted aboard and the rescue swimmer swam to the next victim.

As I said, this was a new program ESCANABA had only experimented with. It would be put to the test for the first time rescuing DORCHESTER survivors in the middle of the night. The first retriever to go in the water was an Ensign -- as a four-star Admiral, it's been a few years since I was an Ensign, but I remember well the jobs Ensigns were assigned . . . and an Ensign as ESCANABA's first “retriever” doesn't surprise me one bit.

Another Coast Guard Cutter, COMANCHE also helped with rescue operations and between COMANCHE and ESCANABA, approximately 1/3 of the 900 people on board DORCHESTER were rescued. ESCANABA's “retriever plan” worked tremendously -- and was instrumental in the hundreds of survivors rescued. Four men from ESCANABA risked their lives that night working as retrievers, so that as many people as possible from DORCHESTER could be saved.

ESCANABA's “retriever plan” worked so well, it laid the groundwork for the Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer Program we use today.

Four months after rescuing survivors off DORCHESTER, on June 13, 1943, while again sailing as part of an escort convoy, ESCANABA experienced an explosion on board, probably from a mine or torpedo, and sank within three minutes. Of the 103 men on board, only two men survived. I'm honored that one of those survivors, Mr. Ray O'Malley, is here with us today.

These men on board ESCANABA were far from their home of Grand Haven, answering their nation's call to duty. They were heroes then and they are heroes today.

Besides honoring our shipmates on board ESCANABA today, we also take this opportunity annually to honor the Coast Guard men and women who have died in the line of duty over this past year. I'm extremely grateful to report that we have not lost anyone in the Coast Guard this past year in the line of duty.

Finally, we take this opportunity to honor the families of the men on board ESCANABA on June 13, 1943. Mr. O'Malley, will you and all family members of ESCANABA's 103 brave Coast Guardsmen please rise? (applause) Thank you.

A pretty smart guy, Albert Einstein, said “Our death is not an end if we can live on in our children and the younger generation. For they are us, our bodies are only wilted leaves on the tree of life.” I know those men from ESCANABA are looking down on us

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today, pride in their hearts, and specifically at you, their children and grandchildren, the “younger generation”, who allow them to live on.

I thank all of you for attending this ceremony to honor the officers and crew of ESCANABA and for welcoming and accepting the Coast Guard’s “younger generations” of men and women who have the privilege to call Grand Haven home for a tour – or for a lifetime. We in the Coast Guard are blessed to have such unwavering support from such a fine community. Thank you again.