

SEMPER PARATUS: The Meaning.

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Semper Paratus is the well known motto of the U. S. Coast Guard. Although its origin, as a motto, for the Coast Guard has been elusive, its use has become the focal point of the service character. Elusive or not, recent research provided a hint from an indirect origin and this discovery came, in a manner so typical of the Service's history, while investigating other topics.

On face value, the motto is another Latin laden nineteenth century Victorian era phrase. Nineteenth century officers familiar with classical literature and language gave Latin terms automatic elevation above common station conveyed to the phrase a spiritual sincerity with the perception of inspiration, integrity, and creditability. This was pretty heady stuff. Alternatively, to the enlisted men of the era, being largely uneducated, the motto meant what the officer corps told them it did; not unlike the Core Values of the present era. In other words, it made them feel better, but to the officer corps, at least to those in service during the first half of the next century, it became to mean responsibility.

Latter day Coastguardsmen have carried *Semper Paratus* into other forms from "Simply Forgot Us," where they perpetuated spirit of the motto by creating a *noir* pride in their own self resolve to continue without external support, to the selfless epitome "*You have to go out, but you don't have to come back.*"

The latter transfiguration is not popular with the Coast Guard's senior leadership; nevertheless most Coast Guardsmen view this variation with pride because it implies an acceptance for whatever may transpire during an operation.

The nineteenth century implementer of *Semper Paratus* – Always Ready—as a service motto intended it to be *the* underlying nature of the service just as *Remis Velisque* was for the U. S. Lifesaving Service. Individual Coastguardsmen are Always Ready regardless of hazard or risk in peace, in war, natural or unnatural disasters and whether on duty or not.

During the nineteenth century the Revenue-Cutter Service (RCS) enjoyed an exceptional reputation in the public perception because of its adaptability. The era's popular press routinely favored the service with commendations and exploits of some cutter officers. However, it was a service of autonomous individuals and few held any concept of a unified service based on a common ideal. They knew their individual duties and had little practice for cooperative operations. Without communications, these officers acted on their personal training and skill without towering oversight. They understood that risk and boldness was a double edged sword. It was the singular outlook of these men to which the motto, SEMPER PARATUS, was applied in 1836.

The New Orleans *Bee* of 1836 publicly congratulated Captain Ezekiel Jones on his transfer from the Revenue Schooner *Ingham*. In the previous June, Jones "unofficially" involved *Ingham* in the first overt naval conflict with the Mexican Navy and its war schooner, *Montezuma*. This brief one-day action made *Ingham* the only United State naval vessel to fire a shot in support of the Anglo-Texans against the Mexican government.

The *Bee* praised Jones for supporting the commercial interests of New Orleans and his "prompt and efficient action" over *Montezuma*, while teaching "a neighboring state a valuable lesson of respect for our flag, and raised the confidence of our citizens abroad in the protection of the government to their lawful enterprise."¹ Whether the smuggling into Texas by Americans was a "lawful enterprise" remains a complicated issue and debate. However, in June 1835, Jones'

actions gave the Anglo-Texans the perception that the United States government supported the revolutionary sentiments and gained the accolades of the people of New Orleans.

The *Bee* declared of *Ingham*, thereby Jones, “a vessel entitled to bear the best motto for a military public servant--SEMPER PARATUS”.²

The *Army and Navy Chronicle*, the favored military publication of all officers, reprinted the article where other RCS officers undoubtedly read Jones' accolades. The RCS officers probably agreed it was a perfect sentiment for a respected captain and one that could be perhaps applied to their own careers at some time in the future.³

Did others perpetuate the motto? There is no way of knowing. However, it does seem likely the idea, or at least the perception, of *Semper Paratus* lived in the minds of the officers into the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The motto had not yet reached the Service as a unifying element.

In 1999, Admiral James M. Loy, USCG, spoke of mottos. Beginning with, “*Semper Fidelis* is most often applied to individuals. *Semper Paratus* is most often applied to the service as a whole, or at least to units,”⁴ continuing, “It has pretty much always been that way,” and retold the 1836 Jones-*Ingham* story. He added, “Accordingly, the *New Orleans Bee* bestowed the sobriquet *Semper Paratus* not on Captain Jones—but on his ship [schooner]. So it is that from the very beginning, *Semper Paratus* has been a description of the organization and organizational elements, not of individuals.” Loy, or his speechwriter, not having access to the full details, misinterpreted the context.

The *New Orleans Bee* praised *Ingham* because of Jones' individual actions and leadership. This is clear from Jones' comments in *Ingham's* logs during the incident. Nineteenth century vessels were their captains. Vessels succeeded or failed on the will and skill

of their individual commanders. Nevertheless, the phrase, *Semper Paratus*, did not resurface until 1896 when Captain Charles F. Shoemaker became the Chief of the Revenue Cutter Service.

Although no documentation has been uncovered to confirm his direct contribution, historical evidence points directly to him. He was, except for Chief Engineer Collins, a lieutenant and sixteen civilian clerks, the entire Revenue Cutter Service Staff in Washington, D. C. Shoemaker did consult with a friend, Professor of Military Science John (Jack) James Brereton of Rutgers College and Scientific School at New Brunswick, N. J.⁵ Interestingly, Brereton was a 1st Lieutenant with the U. S. 24th (Negro) Infantry Regiment in 1882.⁶ This regiment carried the motto *Semper Paratus* until it was deactivated in 1951. In addition, the RCS logo with motto began appearing on Revenue Cutter Service letter head in 1896.

Shoemaker's reshaping of the RCS began well before his selection as chief of the bureau. He was the first to attempt to garner RCS officer corps support for transfer to the Navy and when this failed, he became the first to fight continued assimilation attempts by the Navy. He was the first officer to lobby on Capital Hill for a retirement system for RCS officers. Deep-selected as First Lieutenant to head the service, he was well aware of the disarray in the Service from the age of its vessels to the state of ability and morale of his officer corps.



Shoemaker, who attended but did not graduate from the Naval Academy, keenly

observed the problems. He corresponded with his many army and navy contacts regularly predominately with his son Will, a navy lieutenant, about how to improve the RCS and move it toward more naval lines.⁷ A major problem was the Congress did not view the RCS as a naval service and budgeted it accordingly. Shoemaker knew to impress Congress the RCS was a serious naval asset, it would have to change itself in many ways. The most immediate change needed was in the character of its officer corps. The officer corps was as individualistic as it had been in 1836, but some individuals were bringing negative attention to the Service. The autonomy of these officers caused some to become as Will Shoemaker wrote of in a letter “sea tyrants” especially those in Alaska well away from direct oversight.

The press was favorable but it also seized on scandals in the service. Among the negative attention was Captain John Mitchell. In 1893 the RCS charged him with drunkenness and having women of dubious “reputation” on board his vessel and the case became a regular feature in the *New York Times*. Mitchell received a year’s suspension and dropped to foot of the promotion list.⁸ Two years later, an RCS Court of Inquiry tried and found guilty Captain Michael Healy and suspended him from duty for four years. Internally, discontent raged with charges and counter-charges among the officer corps.

Shoemaker knew these two cases fueled the anti-RCS fires of his opponents in the Congress. They provided proof that the RCS was not a naval service—naval officers would not, supposedly, act in this manner. Both Mitchell and Healy claimed they were not on duty at the time of their offenses and therefore, were not guilty of any breach of discipline. Mitchell was especially adamant on this point. Healy had less standing.

Shoemaker became infuriated with this conduct as well as the near constant letters and charges of one officer against another or complaints about transfers. He voiced his anger and frustration in a May 26, 1895, letter to his wife,

“I never dreamed that so many grown men could be got together to plead the baby act as there are in the R. C. S. It seems to me that every time a man is ordered, he lugs his family in to excuse him. I may look upon this sort of thing differently now from what I used to, but I don’t think I do.”

Two weeks earlier he described the lengths the corps of officers would go,

“My “changelings” are a damned nuisance, and have almost at the point where I will have to turn a deaf ear to all appeals, such gall! Such monumental cluck, I never read or heard of – I might paraphrase Breton Hart[e]’s⁹ –

For ways that are dark and tricks that are vain
Give me an officer of the Revenue Marine,”

He complained his officers used every political influence to get out of orders or gain promotions. However, he had the unqualified support of Treasury Secretary Charles Hamlin in all decisions and later issued a regulation against using political influence.

However, he knew he had to change the service’s century-long culture of intra-service disunity and aberrant personal conduct. His promise of a new service included the young officers he took into the RCS from the Naval Academy. He used them as the examples of a brighter future and it was to these men whom he targeted the ideal of something greater than themselves. These make the core of the new RCS.

Shoemaker was a long time writer to the *New York Times* both as head of the service and in previous years under the pseudonym of “Observer.” Under the latter, he criticized the Treasury Department and his superior officers for lack of forethought and leadership and as the former he broadcast public warnings to his officer corps.

On April 10, 1896, Shoemaker made his values known in the *New York Times*. The article title is unequivocal, “OFFICERS ARE ALWAYS ON DUTY,” with the explanation,

“Revenue marine officers have been warned that, on duty or off, they will be amenable to discipline. Captain Shoemaker, the chief of that service, is determined that the fact that an officer is not on actual duty

shall not be a defense for misconduct.

Every officer of whatever grade will be considered on duty, and an officer can never, under any circumstances sever his official relations and responsibilities from the trusts imposed on him by virtue of his commission. The only time or occasion when an officer can be considered "off duty" would be when under arrest, sick on board, or on shore, or on leave granted by the department and even then he must be regarded as amenable for violations of the regulations."

Making his point crystal clear, pointing to the infamous cases of Captains Mitchell and Healy,

"No officer can be permitted to disgrace himself by drunkenness or immoral conduct, or otherwise violate the regulations on the plea that he was "off duty."

Shoemaker's standards did not differ from those of the Army and Navy, but the strength in which he directed the terms of conduct left no doubt in the minds of the readers. Shortly after this article, the motto, *Semper Paratus*, appeared on his official stationary as a reminder to all every time they received a letter. His ire extended to the cadets of the recently reopened RCS School of Instruction. They were reprimanded and admonished for drunkenness and, at least, one was dismissed from the service for unofficer like and immoral conduct. The 2006 case of Cadet William Smith would have resulted in the dismissal or forced resignations of all the cadets involved during Shoemaker's tenure.

In 1790 Alexander Hamilton set officer standards and in a July 13, 1819 circular to cutter captains, Treasury Secretary William C. Crawford set the same standards and qualities

Shoemaker would demand eighty years later,

"While I recommend in the strongest terms to the respective officers, activity, vigilance, and firmness, I feel no less solicitude that their deportment may be marked with prudence, moderation and good temper. Upon these last qualities, not less than the former, must depend the success, usefulness, and consequently the continuance of the establishment, in which they are included."

Shoemaker probably did not expect an immediate result and it is doubtful the new motto had an initial effect on the officer corps. However, the long-term effect was to ingrain the

mottoes spirit in the service culture. In 1927, Captain Francis S. Van Boskerck, USCG, wrote in the service anthem illustrating the individual nature of the motto,

"Semper Paratus" is our guide,
Our fame, our glory too.

Despite nearly a century of use its meaning and intent had become lost on the Coast Guard. In 1987 a former Coastguardsman convicted by a Coast Guard Courts-Martial of sexual abuse of children filed a petition challenging the on-duty issue.¹⁰ Richard Solorio claimed the U. S. Coast Guard lacked jurisdiction to try him because the offenses were not on a "base," but in a private home. Solorio repeated his crimes with other children while stationed at Governor's Island, New York.

The Military Court of Appeals had already ruled that the 1969 case, *O'Callahan v. Parker*, did not apply and that "service connection" had been made because "sex offenses against young children," have a long lasting impact on the victims, their families and the morale of the unit or organization where the family is assigned. The court upheld the standard created by Shoemaker with the opinion,

"the accused's military status as a person subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, not on a "service-connection" . . . Any violation of the Code is now within the military's jurisdiction, regardless of whether the offense was committed at home or abroad, on or off the military installation, or while the member was on or off duty."¹¹

Shoemaker's concept of an individual based *Semper Paratus* can be read in the court's opinions. A service member is always on duty. However, it is viewed in a different application than envisioned by Captain Shoemaker. Shoemaker appealed to the individual officers' moral conscience and personal responsibility because he knew the heart of the motto was based in the in the behavior and conduct of the individual.

The Coast Guard has made its motto one of its seven basic missions, SAR, Aids to Navigation, Ice Breaking and Ocean Science, Marine Inspection, Law Enforcement, Military Readiness, and the seventh, *Semper Paratus*-Always Ready for the next mission. As Captain Shoemaker intended the motto entails that the individual Coastguardsman is responsible, regardless of rank, rate, or occupation, to be always ready for service without excuse or hesitation whether as an individual or an organization.

¹ For a more detailed description see: William R. Wells, II, "Every Protection That Was Asked for. . ." The United States Revenue Cutter Ingham, Texas Independence and New Orleans, 1835." *Louisiana History* XXXIX , No. 4 (Fall 1998): 457-479.

² "Officers Are Always on Duty." *New York Times*, April 11, 1896, p. 9.

³ Despite Jones' good record, he was dismissed from the RCS in 1853 during a reduction in force.

⁴ Admiral James M. Loy. "The Curse of *Semper Paratus*," The Military Order of the Carabao Luncheon, January 19, 1999.

⁵ Shoemaker Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress. LOC mm82039867, March 27, 1895.

⁶ John James Brereton, USMA 1877, a 1st Lt., in the 24th Infantry in 1882. Lieutenant-Colonel with the 33rd U. S. Volunteer Infantry in 1898. Professor of Military Science and Tactics, Rutgers, 1891-95. He led his company at San Juan Hill and died in Luzon, Philippines Islands in 1899. A classmate of Brereton was Henry O. Flipper, the first black graduate of the USMA.

⁷ William Rawle Shoemaker graduated from the U. S. Naval Academy and retired a U. S. Navy Vice Admiral. Will served in the Pacific and was well acquainted with the RCS in Hawaii and Alaska.

⁸ Since captain was the highest position the placement on the list only mattered in future assignments.

⁹ Bret Harte, "PLAIN LANGUAGE FROM TRUTHFUL JAMES" *The Overland Monthly Magazine* (September 1870).

[The Heathen Chinees]

"Which I wish to remark
And my language is plain,
That for ways that are dark
And tricks that are vain,
The heathen Chinees is peculiar
Which the same I would rise to explain."

¹⁰ U. S. Supreme Court. *Solorio v. United States*, 483 U. S. 435, Certiorari to the United States Supreme Court of Military Appeals. No. 85-1581, Argued Feb. 24, 1987. Decided June 25, 1987.

¹¹ Military Justice Fact Sheets. Military Jurisdiction. <http://sja.hqmc.usmc.mil/JAM/MJFACTSHTS.htm>
Coast Guard attorney LCDR Robert W. Bruce, Jr., USCG, argued the case before the court.