

Great Ships of The U. S. Navy

U.S.S. Bear

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The Bear was a three-masted steam, barkentine-rigged ship built for ice service to be used in seal fishing. The keel was laid in 1874 and was built by Alexander Stephen and Sons, of Dundee, Scotland. She was about 190' long, with a beam of 30'. She was used in the Newfoundland seal fishing service for some ten years, and then in February, 1884, she was purchased by the U.S. Consul for use in the rescue of Greely's Arctic Expedition. She was to have been sold, but was taken over by the U.S. Revenue Service for the Arctic Patrol. She became famous for her many rescues and other exploits during her many trips to the Arctic. In 1925, she was retired from that service, and four years later she was given to the city of Oakland, California, for use as a museum. She became known as "The Bear of Oakland" and was featured in the movie *Sea Wolf*.

In 1932, Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd was looking for a ship suitable for ice service for his second Antarctic expedition. He bought the Bear for \$1,050, outbidding a junk dealer by \$50. She was refurbished, her steam plant was converted to diesel-electric, and then she took Admiral Byrd south in 1933 and 1935. In 1939, she was again commissioned in the Navy as Bear, and again took Admiral Byrd to Antarctica. In 1941, after refitting and having her rig drastically reduced, the Bear became a member of the Greenland Patrol. In 1942, her rig was further reduced by removing the mizzen mast, to make easier handling of her amphibian plane (Gruman Duck). Everything possible was being done to reduce weight topside, while installing shipboard radar gear. A small corner of the captain's cabin was partitioned to house radar and one operator.



This is where I entered the picture, straight from radar school. I was half of the radar operating crew. The alterations were finally completed, with the last thing being a stability test. We headed north, with a stop in Newfoundland where our mail reached us. Two items in the mail were (1) Results of stability test: "Unfit for sea duty, 20 tons top heavy," and (2) "Radar operating and maintenance manual [stamped across the face in big letters] - OBSOLETE." We headed on toward our mission, which was to sound and map inlets at the southern tip of Greenland. We eventually got stuck in float ice in Hudson Bay, but we finally reached Greenland and accomplished our assignment with many happenings which later provided for a lot of grand sea stories upon our return.

Returning to Boston, we headed south. However, we had waited almost a month too long and had to call for an icebreaker to take us out of Hudson Bay, as we were frozen in.

The Bear was purchased by a commercial firm in 1948, to be used in the seal service again, and it was moved to Nova Scotia. The bottom then dropped out of the market, and she was left to rot on the beach. Alfred Johnson came to the rescue, bought the Bear, and it was then refurbished to return it to its original appearance as much as possible. He planned to use it as a museum/restaurant in Philadelphia, but while being towed in high seas, she was lost and sank on March 21, 1963...a fitting last stop for a valiant ship with such a colorful history.