# BARQUE OF AVIORS

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Passage from

the Nazi Navy

to the

U.S. Coast Guard

RUSSELL DRUMM

# The Barque of Saviors

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THE NAZI NAVY TO

THE U.S. COAST GUARD

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### The Barque of Saviors

#### BOOKS BY RUSSELL DRUMM

In the Slick of the Cricket

The Barque of Saviors

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## For Russell Malcolm Drumm and Reta Hitchings Drumm, who taught me to love life

He rises by lifting others.

- Robert Green Ingersoll

#### Acknowledgments -

I WOULD first like to express my gratitude to the greater Coast Guard family for giving me the opportunity to experience the esprit that allows a perennially underfunded and often underappreciated organization to perform its many duties so well.

My thanks to Coast Guard historians Dr. Robert Browning and Scott Price. As for *Eagle* herself, let's have three cheers for the cadets, enlisted complement, and officers of the barque. There is much that she taught me. I offer my heartfelt thanks to former *Eagle* captains Paul Welling, David V. V. Wood, Patrick Stillman, Don Grosse, and Robert Papp and to current captain Ivan Luke; to lieutenant commanders Keith Curran and Cathy Tobias; to bosuns Keith Raisch, Doug Cooper, Rick Ramos, and Rick Birch; to petty officers Tracy Allen, Kelly Nixon, and Matt Welch; and to BM3 Greg Giggi. Thank you, Robert LaFond; I know our discussions were not easy.

There are two individuals without whom I could not have written this book. Karl Dillmann, *Eagle*'s square-rigger sailor, raconteur, and teacher extraordinaire, showed me a thousand reasons that this story should be told. The nation owes a great debt to Petty Officer Dillmann for helping to shape a few thousand Coast Guard officers over the past decade. And I extend my heartfelt thanks to Tido Holtkamp, a proud American who served on the barque as a German naval cadet in 1944 under the flag of the Third Reich. Mr. Holtkamp's honest recollections of Germany's darkest hours and his invaluable translation skills have thrown light into long-forgotten corners of *Eagle*'s history.

Detlev Zimmerman, who now serves with the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, was a cadet on *Horst Wessel* in 1943 before joining Germany's

U-boat fleet. Mr. Zimmerman's translations and vivid recollections of World War II were extremely helpful to me. Thanks to my neighbor, Lynette Widder, a German scholar, who helped translate.

I have tried not to overstate *Eagle*'s German past, but it would have been wrong to ignore it. She is the product of a great German shipbuilding tradition, though she sailed under the German flag for just ten of her sixty-five years. Of course the decade from 1936 to 1946 was a hellish time, and the barque was lucky to survive it. I must thank the people of Blohm & Voss, the shipyard that built her, for their help.

And for their enlightening correspondence from across the Atlantic, I am sincerely grateful to Peter Jepsen, Otto Schlenzka, Ludwig Brenner, Gunther Tiegs, Otto Piepenhagen, Herman Adamowicz, Brigitte Jacobs, Siegfried Stiller, Karl Tadey, Hans-Joachim Meinke, Fritz Hugo, Karl Lederer, Marion Niemann, Willie Starck, Werner Fistler, Ludwig Brenner, Jürgen Gumprich, Karl Bethke, Heinrich Gutbier, Herbert Jander, and Paul Zock. Herbert Böhm, a fine journalist from Hamburg, deserves my special thanks for the research he so generously shared.

The only thing a writer with an idea really needs is a believer other than himself. I have been blessed with three. My very able agent, Emma Sweeney of Harold Ober Associates, recognized where I was going and deftly parted the seas. Elaine Pfefferblit, Houghton Mifflin's editor extraordinaire, led the way with a firm, guiding hand. Peg Anderson, manuscript editor, fine-tuned the prose and saw the manuscript through production. And thank you, Bill Henderson of Pushcart Press, for encouraging me to write books way back when.

#### Prologue ~

IT WAS on the deck of Coast Guard Patrol Boat 41934 on the night of July 17, 1996, that I realized the necessity of writing this book. Three of the boat's crew members were struggling to lift aboard the body of a young woman, one of the 230 victims of TWA Flight 800. Much more lifting would be required before the sun rose again off Moriches, Long Island.

As a reporter for a local newspaper, I watched my job shrink to insignificance as our boat and others like it moved through the wreckage. I did not have to be there, but the young Coast Guard men and women retrieving bodies and hoping against all reason for survivors did. The manner in which they went about their work was a story that needed telling.

I was no stranger to the Coast Guard, having had a working relationship with my hometown station and having written a number of stories over the years about scary Coast Guard rescues of yachtsmen and fishermen in the northwest Atlantic. They were stories of heroism plain and simple, but they seemed to blurt from the page, incongruous among the routine drug arrests, meeting announcements, and posturing letters to the editor. Except within the shrinking fishing community, drowning in giant seas appears to have gone out of fashion, to be a primal throwback, something like being eaten alive. The flares in the night sky, the ropes and floats of rescue, seem primitive, like leeches applied to the sick. The general public translates such stories into fiction, our repository for acts too selfless to fathom. The professionalism I was witnessing on the Montauk station's 41-footer, though familiar to me, was of another age—it had roots. That quality is old but strong,

spawned long ago on vulnerable, wind-driven ships, but it continues to breathe today.

Two weeks earlier I had been aboard the barque *Eagle*, the Coast Guard Academy's training ship, as she moved down the Elbe River from the city of Hamburg. The cadet training cruise that summer had included a visit to the old Hanseatic port on the occasion of the barque's sixtieth birthday. In June of 1936 she had been christened *Horst Wessel* in honor of a Nazi martyr and put into service as a training ship for naval officers of the Third Reich. Adolf Hitler had attended the christening. Now, having been claimed and renamed by the Coast Guard after the war, *Eagle* trains rescuers.

There is good in the world and evil, heroes and villains, and a whole lot in between. There are ways to fall and ways to rise, to sink and to remain afloat. *The Barque of Saviors* is about falling and rising and staying afloat.

A few apologies. First, to those who are expecting a chanty-filled, "blow-ye-winds-hi-ho" profile of a sailing ship: *Eagle* is, indeed, a noble square-rigger, heir to one of the great shipbuilding traditions, but this book is more about her people and their worlds—Germans during one of the darkest periods in history and Americans ever since—and about the world of one man in particular. I apologize to the thousands of Coast Guard folks, active, retired, and passed over the bar, whose stories I was unable to tell. Finally, to readers who will confront nautical jargon for the first time: although I'm proud to have been called shipmate, I cannot claim to be part of the Coast Guard's extended family. I have, however, made an attempt to record its ancient language, and I include a glossary of nautical terms in the book's after section.

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#### MAY 2, 1999

Eagle shoulders large seas, her sails white against a bruise of clouds. Her masts sketch giant arcs as she rolls. Small, yellow shapes — the crew in rain gear high in the rigging — streak across a blackening sky. Eagle's bowsprit, holding the feet of four triangular jibs, points skyward, then down into a trough. Her sharp cutwater slices the large, cold swells lifting her 1,800 tons smoothly and deliberately, as only a 300-foot sailing ship can slice them. The t'gallants, the topgallant sails just set, have encouraged a stiff northeast breeze to heel us to 12 degrees, according to the brass clinometer mounted on the pilothouse. The deck is a hillside.

Eagle's beam is just 39 feet. She is yachty, with a sexy, rounded tumblehome, the type of stern called a champagne counter, which invites the waves of a following sea to lift it rather than crash down upon it. The teak fo'c'sle deck is 12 feet above the water, although today the bow watchman standing next to the ship's bell is riding 20 feet heavenward toward a lingering morning moon as the crests of waves pass under him. Then he drops into the troughs within easy reach of the geyser slices that peel with a roar from beneath the eagle eye of the barque's golden figurehead. Whistling low, the steel cable stays and shrouds supporting the masts withstand tremendous forces of wind and swell. Mainmast and foremast each rise nearly 150 feet above the sea. Their entire suit of ten square sails, plus the headsails and staysails and the mizzenmast's split spanker, total 21,350 square feet. When the sails are filled by a 30-knot wind such as this, they generate the power of 10,000 horses.

We left New London, Connecticut, yesterday, May 1, slipping past the black whalebacks of nuclear submarines at Groton en route to

the Pacific Ocean via the Panama Canal. Officer candidate trainees, many from the Coast Guard's enlisted ranks, will depart at the former Rodman Naval Station on the west side of the Panama Canal and be replaced by the first-phase cadets of the United States Coast Guard Academy's class of 2001. The training ship will then head up the West Coast to Oregon. The cadets will spend five weeks on board learning basic seamanship, navigation, quartermastering, engine-room protocol, and watch-standing. The other half of their class will replace them in August. All are third-class cadets, sophomores, and have been aboard before only for a few days during the summer preceding their first year. But in that brief time most cadets begin their transformation. I've witnessed this process twice, once in 1994 under Captain Patrick Stillman and again in 1996, when Captain Robert Papp took command. Papp is to be relieved on July 3 in San Francisco by Captain Ivan Luke, who will join us at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and observe until we reach Panama. These three men, like 60 percent of all Coast Guard officers since 1946 and hundreds of German naval officers and sailors for ten years before that, began their careers as will the class of 2001 - with a mental rearrangement.

The change begins when an eighteen-year-old steps onto the deck of this sailing ship, onto what before had been distant horizon dressing: pretty and perhaps vaguely evocative of a lost era. With the ship still tied to the dock, the new cadet steps aboard and confronts the overwhelming power predicted by the masts and rigging. Large constructs are brought out of storage like antique furniture from the collective attic. They are muscled across slippery decks, down to where the stomach turns, and arranged among long shadows. Then, all at once, the teenager grasps that the towering steel masts with their crucifix yards, the taut cable shrouds, and the miles of coiled rope are meant to receive and harness an awesome force. These young men and (since 1976) women, who may never have given much thought to the wind, now sense the truth behind its invisibility. They begin to understand that they've come aboard with insufficient fears. Some realize faster than others that this is the point; that wild fear can and must be harnessed like the wind. It follows that humor, however nervous, is the first yoke to be applied. "Herculean," an adjective that fits the ship, is cut down and proudly shrugged off as "herky." The word is an active part of *Eagle* vocabulary, as is "pucker factor," the ship's standard measure of fear, based on the relative constriction of the anal sphincter. Today the pucker factor is low, despite the bad weather conditions. Only the more experienced hands are aloft. For them, climbing about the labyrinth of cable and line and handling a few acres of sail in a 30-knot blow is just another day at work. Yet there is fear nearby, or the ghost of it.

Here, off the Rhode Island coast, *Eagle* passes — all sails set, sleek, like the slipper of a goddess, with her golden eagle figurehead and a bone in her teeth — almost directly over the rusting bones of U-Boat 853. On this cold May 2, it has been fifty-five years and four days since Moby Dick, the name given U-853 by her pursuers, died right here on the ocean floor with all hands. It was Nazi Germany's final military defeat. The histories of this sailing ship and of the fallen submarine are tightly interwoven, like the lay of the long ropes coiled and hanging from *Eagle*'s brass belaying pins.

At the end of World War II, Germany had three nearly identical steel sailing ships, which had trained naval officers and petty officers, many of whom were bound for the U-boat service. One of the trainers was scuttled by her crew in the Baltic a few days before Admiral Karl Dönitz, Hitler's successor as head of state, surrendered. The other two were seized by the Royal Marines soon after. In bomb-gutted Bremerhaven, on May 15, 1946, after three months of repair and refitting, Horst Wessel was recommissioned as the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Eagle. (A cutter is any Coast Guard vessel 65 feet or more in length and with accommodations for the crew to live on board.)

Though older than the cadets, I too came aboard innocent, a newspaper reporter who liked the idea of sailing ships but had only a basic knowledge of them. From time to time I'd seen the barque under sail on the horizon and seen it closer when she anchored in Montauk's Fort Pond Bay, a magnificent visitor whose people and purpose were unknown to me. A vow to one day go aboard took twenty years to realize. The academy's public affairs office suffered the likes of me on occasion and granted my request to join the ship for a leg of the cadet summer cruise in 1904.

Because of the perception that Coasties practice a lost art out

somewhere at sea — and because they are also the cursed fish police to some of the very people who depend on their skills, I found the Montauk Coast Guard Station to be an outpost, cheerful enough within, but nevertheless a place apart. At the time I was unaware of any connection between the station's people and the barque that graced the horizon from time to time. And I was assured by the station's commanding senior chief, Ed Michels, that there was no connection. An excellent leader, well liked by his people and the community, he admitted that the last pangs of romance with the sea had been beaten out of him years before within the cramped bulkheads of dozens of "afloat assignments." He knew of my fascination with the barque and seemed to delight in telling me how Eagle squandered the Coast Guard's perennially limited resources. She was the officers' yacht and had nothing to do with "real" operations. Worst of all, she was a sailboat, bigger perhaps, but of the same species that was the bane of the SAR (Search and Rescue) stations' summers because of the sailboat crews' frequent lack of judgment. But then came the day when Chief Ed Michels approached me to say that his father, a man who had captained a charter fishing boat most of his life, was dying, and if I was going to New London, could I get this one particular poster of Eagle under sail, heeled, with a bone in her teeth. He wanted to put it by his father's bed. I complied.

I'm sure that although he'd never been aboard *Eagle*, Chief Michels knew far better than I that the immediate mesmerizing grace of her lines camouflages an immense strength that takes time to appreciate. It means learning enough to see the invisible tissue that grows among people, between the past and the present, the quick and the dead, the animate and its opposite. I've learned that the wind driving her is invisible just to prove that such tissue exists today. In '94 I watched a man who was about to be transferred from his *Eagle* billet sitting alone on a bench in the middle of the night looking up at the ship, moved to tears at the mating of form and function as she lay dockside in Baltimore's Inner Harbor. His fellow petty officers had taken him out, and he was drunk, crying, blubbering, and repeating over and over to the ship: "You beautiful girl, you beautiful fucking girl."

Michels liked to praise the superiority of engines, but in the process he protested wind too much. Motisola Howard, the meteorologist

on this trip, can tell you that wind results from variations in temperature and barometric pressure, but after twenty-five years in the Coast Guard the chief knew that it all boiled down to the earth's turning, the spinning of todays into tomorrows. Wind is time passing. *Eagle* was built herky because some of it passes very hard. Like the Cape Horners she was designed after, she was made to withstand extreme weather but also to avoid another tragedy of the kind Germany suffered in 1933, when the trainer *Niobe* sank with the loss of sixty-four young men.

Even on sunny days, the northwest Atlantic in early May still holds the gunmetal of winter. The green color and the creatures of the Gulf Stream have not yet arrived. Cod and other bottom dwellers dominate the waters. On the bottom, the early spring lobsters are hard and black, their molting not begun. Traps baited with bunker and skate are set on the sea bottom all along the coasts of eastern Long Island and southern New England.

Below us, among the lobster traps, Moby Dick settles into the sand, sloughing metal. If ocean swells could reach down 17 fathoms, they would rinse the olive Thames and Connecticut river silt from the sandy bed to reveal white quartz, pink granite, and purple garnet grains. The same glacial sands drape the shoulders of Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard, Block Island, Narragansett, and Montauk, the islands and points of land that are the head and footstones of Moby's grave. The U-boat's last victim, the collier Black Point, rests nearby. Fourteen miles to the west, within the same cemetery, the skeleton of HMS Culloden lies where she ran aground when her pursuit of French ships during the American Revolution was interrupted by a violent winter storm. In Gardiner's Bay, near where we anchored last night, the wooden submarine Turtle was blown apart by Royal Navy guns during the War of 1812. Turtle's captain, Joshua Penny, and the nine men who turned the sub's screw oar" by hand, failed in their attempt to attach explosives to the frigate Superb and paid the price. Two victims of Kaiser Wilhelm's U-boats are on the bottom near the Race, which connects Block Island and Long Island sounds. Fishing boats, too numerous to count, molder on this bottom. U-853 sits upright, with ragged depth-charge holes above the forward crew quarters and on the starboard side of the engine room. Over the years sport divers have taken souvenirs, including