

# We Need More Icebreakers!

By Rear Admiral Norm Venzke, U.S. Coast Guard (Retired)

**T**he United States icebreaker fleet is absolutely inadequate. That opinion is supported by the fact that the fleet is incapable of meeting mission requirements without a chartered foreign icebreaker.

Why is the United States in this position? Polar icebreakers are very expensive to build and support and, therefore, are neither popular nor of high priority within the appropriate federal agencies.

One of the three Coast Guard icebreakers, the *Healy* (WAGB-20) is new, very capable, and well equipped for research but not the most powerful. The *Polar Star* (WAGB-10) and *Polar Sea* (WAGB-11) are quite powerful, but are more than 30 years old. Furthermore, the *Polar Star* has been placed in commission-special status and would require almost a year to be restored to operational status even on an emergency upgrade schedule. Thus, the United States effectively has only two polar icebreakers, the *Healy* and the *Polar Sea*.

All polar icebreaking is hazardous even with the stoutest and most powerful ships manned by experienced professionals. The only remedy for crippling ice damage and delays due to long shipyard availabilities are back-up icebreakers. Also, ship scheduling is complicated by less-than-precise ice forecasts—is it a light or heavy ice year or, in other words, will one or two icebreakers be required? Further, those considerations are complicated by the vast distances between homeport, the Arctic, Antarctica, and repair facilities.

Operations in the western Arctic involve the fulfilling of statutory requirements and the need for both research and a national presence in an area of increased international interest. Apparently, the *Healy* is deemed adequate for the current level of operations. But she is only one ship, not immune from damage and delays and can

only operate in one place at a given time. Given that diminishing ice will result in increased foreign shipping in the United States' area of interest, it's obvious that an additional icebreaker will be needed. Now is the time to plan for that vessel with recognition that even more might be required to support our future requirements. Presumably, the Canadian Coast Guard will continue providing icebreaker support for the annual Thule (Greenland) Air Base resupply as long as it is needed.



U.S. COAST GUARD (KEVIN J. NEFF)

**A DYING BREED?** The United States does not have enough icebreakers to fulfill its national needs according to the author. The *Polar Sea*, seen here clearing a channel to McMurdo Station in 2007, is one of only two U.S. vessels, along with the *Healy*, available to support Arctic and Antarctic operations.

If not, additional icebreaker support would be necessary for that mission.

Operations in Antarctica include the annual McMurdo base resupply that is vital and must be accomplished by sea during a narrow window of time. Without it, the U.S. Antarctic Research Program of the National Science Foundation would grind to a halt except for the virtually ice-free Palmer Station. Whether one or two icebreakers are required at McMurdo depends on the ice year, heavy or light. In 2006, ice conditions were forecast

to be relatively light. Otherwise, a Russian icebreaker, the *Krasin*, would not have been chartered and scheduled for a solo break-in. Ultimately, she aborted that mission due to ice damage (a broken propeller blade). That necessitated an emergency deployment of the *Polar Star* on an estimated 7,000-mile transit to complete resupply at McMurdo. At that time, the *Polar Sea* was in the yard. The insufficiency of U.S. icebreakers is again exemplified by the necessity to charter a Swedish icebreaker to support the 2008-09 McMurdo resupply.

Absent knowledge of future plans and prioritizing of missions, one can only conclude that two operational Coast Guard icebreakers (even if a foreign charter were guaranteed) are grossly inadequate for supporting both Arctic and Antarctic operations. *Polar*-class replacements might not be available for at least eight years. Therefore, it would appear prudent to repair the *Polar Star* and return her to service as an interim measure. Although that increase to three would improve the situation, it would not solve the problem. Therefore, planning should provide for the expedited replacement of the two *Polar*-class icebreakers as well as a backup for the *Healy*. Finally, the Coast Guard's cadre of icebreaker-qualified operating and design personnel has been diminished because of the small fleet.

The United States simply does not possess an icebreaker fleet commensurate with its national needs. Corrective action must commence as soon as possible. Otherwise, the aging fleet will continue its decline and actually become a dying breed and the success of vital national missions will suffer accordingly. ❄️

Rear Admiral Venzke is an experienced icebreaker Sailor, having served in four polar icebreakers including command of both the *Northwind* and the *Polar Star*, and as ship operations officer on the staff of Commander, U.S. Naval Support Force Antarctica. *Venzke Glacier* in Antarctica is named for him.