Coast Guard Celebrates 223 Years

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The crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Polar Star prepares to moor to the AJ Pier in Juneau, Alaska, Aug. 2, 2013. The crew invited residents of Juneau to tour the icebreaker during the Coast Guard's birthday weekend. (U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Grant DeVuyst)

Rosemarie Alexander/KTOO

The U.S. Coast Guard is 223 years old. The maritime service was created on August 4, 1790, as the Revenue Cutter Service under the U.S. Department of Treasury.

Cutter Polar Star Executive Officer Kenneth Boda explained the history of the Coast Guard at a stop of the ice breaker in Juneau over the weekend.

“We were built to basically collect customs and taxes, collect tariffs of vessels coming into port. Over the years, we absorbed the Lighthouse service and the Life Saving Service, the Bureau of Steamboat Inspections as well. Also all the way along we were part of the armed forces. In 1915, the modern Coast Guard was created, as the fifth military uniformed service. Our vessels are fully compatible with all the Navy standards so we can operate in conjunction with the Navy, but we also have the law enforcement side, the Homeland Security side, as well.”

Boda calls the Coast Guard a unique entity of the federal government. Its presence is local, regional, national and international, from the North Pole to the South Pole.

He sums up the Coast Guard missions as safety, security and stewardship. Safety is a role with which most coastal Alaskans are familiar.

“Saving people's lives, one of the big responsibilities of the Coast Guard. Making sure that the ships that leave port are safe, we do vessel inspections. Making sure that foreign ships that arrive have been inspected and have cleared all the U.S. regulations before they come into U.S. ports.”

In 2012, according to the Coast Guard website, more than 436-thousand vessels and their 29 and a half-million crewmembers and passengers were screened prior to arrival in U.S. ports.

The Coast Guard is the only military organization within the

Department of Homeland Security. Boda says that means it has the responsibility of making sure U.S. harbors and ports are secure from any kind of threat.

“When I say threats, people think terrorist threats, but it's not always terrorism that's a threat, sometimes just a hazard to navigation. For instance, a vessel that might wander out of the shipping lane and lose situational awareness. In some other ports like Valdez, for instance, we have a vessel traffic service, you know that basically monitors ships as they come in and out and make sure everyone's safe.”

While enforcing U.S. fisheries laws is one of the most visible roles of the Coast Guard in Alaska, stewardship is protecting the oceans.

Stewardship is environmental pollution response, so that the Coast Guard is called out to an Exxon Valdez or a Deep Water Horizon as well.”

For example, the Coast Guard is still investigating Royal Dutch Shell's Alaska drilling operations after some vessels failed inspections, the oil rig Kulluk ran aground, and the company had other safety and environmental violations.