

KEEPING NEW YORK HARBOR: USCGC KATHERINE WALKER

By Richard H. Wagner (originally published in *The Porthole, The World Ship Society, Port of New York Branch, October 2006*)

Inscribed on USCGC KATHERINE WALKER (WLM 552) is the phrase “Keeper of New York”. Originally, this was a reference to the fact that KATHERINE WALKER is a Keeper-class Coastal Buoy Tender named after a New York lighthouse keeper. However, in the 8 years since the ship went into service, she has taken on more and more responsibilities and the phrase has taken on a broader meaning. “If it’s New York Harbor’s business, it’s KATHERINE WALKER’s business. KATHERINE WALKER is THE most multi-mission capable ship the Coast Guard has in New York,” says Lieutenant Brian Donahue, Commanding Officer of the KATHERINE WALKER.

The KATHERINE WALKER has a proud heritage. The ship’s namesake inherited the job of Robbins Reef Lighthouse keeper in 1886 when her husband, who had held the post for three years, died of pneumonia. His last words were: “Tend the light Katie,” and she took that mandate to heart, staying on for another 33 years. This was no easy task, and, indeed, she had to overcome the widely-held Victorian view that it was too much for a woman, especially one less than 5 feet tall and under 100 pounds. At first, the government was only willing to allow her to be temporary keeper. But, after several men turned the job down and Walker demonstrated that she could do the work, she was made the official keeper in 1895.

Each night, she had to climb to the top of the tower several times in order to tend the kerosene lamp. When the mechanical system was not working, she had to sound the fog horn by hand. In addition, she had to keep on lookout during storms for ships in distress. She is credited

with saving 50 sailors from shipwrecks, mostly fishermen whose ships struck the reef. In one incident, she rowed her dingy out and saved five sailors and a small, nearly-frozen dog, which she nursed back to life with hot coffee. At the same time, Walker was raising two children, which entailed, *inter alia*, rowing them from the isolated lighthouse, located between Manhattan and Staten Island, to the shore each day so that they could go to school. While a row in New York harbor on a fine Spring day might sound like a pleasant diversion, such a voyage, year-in and year-out, through rain, snow, and bitter cold that can grip the harbor, could only have been done by someone with a tremendous sense of duty. It is a trait shared by the men and women who crew today’s ship.



KATHERINE WALKER leading the Parade of Ships at Fleet Week 2006. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).

Like the original, the KATHERINE WALKER, packs a great deal of capability into a relatively small package. Built by Marinette Marine Corporation in Wisconsin, the ship is 174 feet long with a beam of 36 feet and a displacement of 842.8 long tons. Her two Caterpillar 3508 DITA main engines give her a maximum cruising speed

of 12.6 knots and sufficient power for her to act as an icebreaker in the harbor and further up the Hudson River. Her maximum cruising range is 3,100 miles. She was launched in September 1996 and commissioned in November 1997.

Because she is relatively new, KATHERINE WALKER incorporates some of the latest technology in the Coast Guard fleet (which, unfortunately, still suffers from years of under-funding). This technology enables her crew (27 enlisted men and women, one officer, and a sea dog called "Lib") "to work as smart as they do hard." Input from the Differential Global Positioning System is constantly updated on color monitors on the ship's high tech, glass-enclosed bridge. Instead of conventional propellers and rudders, KATHERINE WALKER has Z-Drive Propulsion units that can rotate 360 degrees. With her bow thrusters, the pods give the ship unsurpassed maneuverability and station keeping. These systems allow the KATHERINE WALKER to "hover" over a designated point even in strong currents and high winds or to move precisely along planned routes for prolonged periods of time with minimal human intervention.

This ability facilitates accomplishing the mission for which KATHERINE WALKER was originally built - - tending aids to navigation. There are over 3,000 buoys and other aids to navigation in and around New York harbor and surrounding waters. If the lights on a buoy fail, if one is run over by a ship, or when a storm changes the position of a channel or the location of an obstruction, the cruise ships and other ships that use the harbor are placed in jeopardy. Consequently, KATHERINE WALKER is continually placing, repairing, moving, and otherwise maintaining aids to navigation. Because precision is vital, the ship's ability to hold a designated position or course facilitates this work as well as its search and rescue and marine environmental protection work.

The KATHERINE WALKER is also well-suited to perform a mission that

has loomed larger since the attacks of September 11, 2001 - - port security. "KATHERINE WALKER is the premier 'Command and Control Platform' available to the Coast Guard in the New York, Connecticut and New Jersey area," notes Donahue. The ship's open and secure communications systems allow the ship to talk to boats, airplanes, and helicopters as well as to communicate with the NYPD, NYFD, Secret Service, and Port Authority, when the circumstances dictate. The large open buoy deck can be used for many purposes. "We very often support NYPD, NYFD, NY/NJ Port Authority, and other Coast Guard assets while underway by providing them with a place to rest, refuel, provision with food, conduct intelligence briefings etc." Indeed, because she was designed so as to allow her to conduct lengthy periods of buoy tending, the ship has living facilities that enable her to remain on station for a week or more without returning to base, which could be extremely valuable in an emergency situation. A sign of the times, last August, the KATHERINE WALKER was the first ship of her class on the East Coast to be fitted out for M-240 machine guns.

KATHERINE WALKER's role in port security is more than theoretical. During the 2004 Republican Convention in New York, the ship was one of the key Coast Guard assets on duty. More recently, during the 50th anniversary opening of the United Nations General Assembly, the KATHERINE WALKER, working with the State Department Protective Service, stood by at Pier 88 to act as an evacuation platform for foreign heads of state. On a more routine basis, the KATHERINE WALKER can be seen patrolling the harbor, keeping an unobtrusive eye on what is happening. Indeed, during the World Ship Society luncheon on NORWEGIAN SPIRIT last November, you may have noticed the KATHERINE WALKER quietly slipping in to the Passenger Ship Terminal and using her remarkable maneuverability to patrol along the side of the towering cruise ship

and then to quickly return to the North River.

“The law enforcement community as well as a very vocal civilian sector has repeatedly stated that seeing the CG in New York harbor breeds the same sense of security as having the police car patrol your street. . . [Moreover,] information obtained by some local authorities from people who have been questioned concerning their activities in the area indicate that these ‘suspects’ have or have not gone places in and around the New York harbor because of a Coast Guard boat’s presence. . . and that presence VERY OFTEN includes KATHERINE WALKER.”