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C. Douglas Kroll, **Commodore Ellsworth P. Bertholf: First Commandant of the Coast Guard**. Library of Naval Biography, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2002, Pp. 160.

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C. Douglas Kroll's biography of Ellsworth P. Bertholf arrives at a conspicuous time in the history of the U.S. Coast Guard. Of course, as Kroll points out, *any* biography of a Coast Guard figure is welcome, given the fact that for the first 200-plus years of its heroic service to the nation the only personality who received such examination was a dog named Sinbad, mascot of the Second World War Coast Guard cutter *Campbell*. What Kroll's work has done, without making it quite so explicit, is to show that in those more than 200 years leading up to and including the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the United States has never really decided what it wants out of its Coast Guard, not how it should be organized, nor funded, nor crewed. As Kroll shows, such ambivalence seems to come as much from the personalities who have run the Service as much from the environment in which it operates.

The many American ambivalences toward its Coast Guard (military or humanitarian service? deep or shallow water operations? life-savers or maritime police? Arctic science as integral or Arctic science as marginalia?) are embedded within the single person of Bertholf. Bertholf himself seems ultimately to have thrown up his hands over the matter, remarking late in the career that the Coast Guard's job was to do its duty. Pressed over exactly what that duty was, Bertholf says obliquely, "To do that which is given him to do well." Perhaps, but such a construction makes a lousy bumper

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sticker and does nothing for recruitment, to say nothing of leaving the Service's essential *esprit de corps* in operational and bureaucratic drift.

Ellsworth Bertholf was appointed as a cadet at the U.S. Naval Academy in the fall of 1882 at the age of 16. He lasted less than a year, dismissed from the Navy for involvement in a series of hazing incidents, as well as a record of disobedience and insubordination. Bertholf was not unique in this. Kroll blames a combination of slow promotion potential and a natural inclination to buck authority as reasons why entire classes of cadets standing in formation would express "their opinion of orders with groans, hisses, laughter, and impertinent cheers." Had Bertholf's expulsion for such quasi-mutinous behavior occurred a quarter century later, he would have been barred from seeking a commission in the Revenue-Cutter Service. At loose ends for two years, Bertholf entered the Revenue-Cutter Service School of Instruction in New Bedford, Mass., in 1887, seemingly only a bit chastened by the demerits he had amassed in Annapolis.

What Bertholf found in the Revenue-Cutter Service was not only a whetstone on which to sharpen his marginal attitude and evident reserves of physical energy, but a remarkably internationalist education for someone who had spent most of his life along the banks of the Hackensack River. At the age of twenty, he sailed on a cadet cruise on the *Chase* to Spain and the Azores, and a year later made the same crossing, this time to Portugal. Continued poor conduct and low marks on seamanship exams kept Bertholf in probationary status until the age of twenty-three, when he was finally commissioned as a third Lieutenant. In 1895, Bertholf became the first Revenue-Cutter officer sent through a course of instruction at the Nava War College in Newport, RI, where he studied global naval theory under Alfred Thayer Mahan, listened to Philo N. McGiffen's stories of his service with the Imperial Chinese Navy, and interacted with officers from the U.S. and Danish navies.

After Newport, Bertholf reported on board the USRC *Bear* in Seattle, Washington, barely a year after the departure of the *Bear's* most famous captain, Michael

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A. "Hell Roarin' Mike" Healy. It was on board *Bear* that Bertholf's natural strength and individuality were allowed to shine, when along with Executive Officer Lieutenant David H. Jarvis and ship's surgeon Dr. Samuel J. Call, he was ordered to drive supplies and a herd of reindeer to the relief of a group of whalers stranded by an early freeze-up at Point Barrow. This winter sledge expedition ranks as one of the bravest feats in the history of the Coast Guard, requiring the highest levels of adaptability, ingenuity, and physical stamina. It may well be that this single expedition solidified in Bertholf's imagination the requirement for flexibility in both assigning and carrying out varied missions that would mark both his career and his imprint on the Service itself. The gold medal awarded in 1902 to the trio from the *Bear* for the Overland Relief Expedition solidified Bertholf's position both within the Service and as a national hero. A further expedition, this time a most singular effort across Russia in 1901, he skillfully employed this status to gain the captaincy of the *Bear* in 1907 and commandancy of the Revenue-Cutter Service in 1911.

Bertholf would later use this notion of a flexible multi-mission maritime service as the cornerstone of his successful efforts to save the Revenue-Cutter Service from extermination by the Taft Administration in 1912, combine it with the U.S. Life-Saving Service to form the U.S. Coast Guard in 1915, and then save the Coast Guard from absorption by the U.S. Navy after the First World War. It was a remarkable bureaucratic trifecta for a man who couldn't last a year at the Naval Academy. And his basic notion of a multi-mission Service is used by Commandant's to this day to keep the Coast Guard spinning in the annual budgetary carousel in Washington.

Kroll has done a good job of outlining this remarkable career, which clearly establishes Bertholf amongst the top three commandants in the history of the Service (along with the titanic figures of Russell R. Waesche during the Second World War and James M. Loy during and after 9/11). Kroll recounts the prevailing atmosphere of 'masculinity' required of military leaders of the age, but for some reason does not relate it to jingoism, the other prevailing military and popular theme of Bertholf's day. The

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writing is moreover too simplistic for the complexity of the bureaucratic morass with which Bertholf had to contend, makes only a half-hearted attempt to gain entry into Bertholf psyche through a few paragraphs on the life of 19th century boys, and there is no exploration of the paramount relationship between Bertholf and Sumner Kimball of the Life-Saving Service in the critical period of 1912-1915 as both Service's contended with extinction and changing mission sets. One also longs for the definitive exploration of the Coast Guard's presence in the polar regions, to which Bertholf and the *Bear* were inextricably linked.

However, by these very omissions Kroll in this fine work has shown the way to the future for historians of the Coast Guard. It is in many respects a deep mine just opened. The Coast Guard wants to be taken seriously as a junior partner in war-fighting by the U.S. Navy, yet has always been opposed to the formation of an expeditionary surface warfare squadron that would train exclusively for warfare—or indeed to placing heavy armament on cutters. The Coast Guard wants to operate a fleet of icebreakers even as it shuns any direct research role in polar science. The Coast Guard flies the world's most advanced life-saving helicopters but it reluctant to arm or armor them for the drug combat in the Caribbean or the Global War on Terrorism here and abroad. In his examination of Bertholf, Kroll has very neatly delineated the foundations of many of these sometimes bizarre dichotomies. The Coast Guard is a Service that tries mightily to present a unified face to the American people even as it is torn from within by fundamental and historically-grounded mission sets that are very often at polar odds with each other. Kroll has neatly traced many of these tears back to the career of Ellsworth Bertholf, in a work that must rank as required reading for every cadet on his or her way to the Coast Guard Academy in New London, CT.