

NUMBER 303 • FALL 2017

PowerShips

THE MAGAZINE OF ENGINE-POWERED VESSELS FROM THE STEAMSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA

MIGHT, STYLE & SPLENDOR:
**EMPRESS
of BRITAIN** 10

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

Sagafjord to Alaska 20

*There's Something
About Mary* 28

*Kate McCue's Journey
to the Bridge* 40

*Ship Research:
The Basics* 46



KENNETH D SHOESMITH



THE PEOPLES' CAPTAIN: Kate McCue's Journey to the Bridge

by Lorraine Coons

IN SEPTEMBER 2015, CELEBRITY CRUISES MADE HISTORY when Kate McCue stepped onto the bridge as captain of the *Summit*. Celebrity joined a growing number of steamship companies that have recently promoted women to the rank of master. Captain Kate's first announcement from the bridge that afternoon no doubt took passengers by surprise. "We're getting ready to get underway," she said. "As soon as I remember which purse the keys are in!"

AT AGE 39, CAPTAIN MCCUE is the first American woman, and the youngest woman ever, to rise to the level of master. She joins a handful of female captains of passenger liners to be hired within the last decade, a fact that clearly demonstrates that the once impenetrable glass ceiling has finally been broken (on the high seas at least!).

INTERESTINGLY ENOUGH, Captain Kate doesn't see herself as breaking through any gender barriers. Perhaps that's because of the encouragement that she received from her parents, who taught her from a very young age that she could do whatever she set her mind to. When she was 12 years old, the family took a four-day Thanksgiving cruise on the *Big Red Boat*. As they were driving away from the ship, she told her parents that she had had "such a blast" that she wanted to be a cruise director "to plan all these fun things" when she grew up. Her father turned to her and said, "You can do anything you want in this world including driving this thing."

"You can do anything you want"

THAT CONVERSATION RESONATED WITH HER, AND WHEN IT CAME time to choose a college, her father once again provided valuable advice. He had always wanted to go to the California Maritime Academy when he got out of the Peace Corps. His father and brothers served in the U.S. Navy, but in the end her dad took the civil engineering route. He suggested that she go for it and apply to the CMA. She was later accepted into the Academy, where the male-to-female ratio was 15 to 1. Her father was happy for his 19-year-old daughter, but he also made her take up kickboxing.

IN HER FIRST YEAR at the Academy, Kate served as an apprentice on a school/passenger ship sailing to the South Pacific, an experience that she described as "pretty special for a 19-year-old." In her second year, she spent three months on a banana boat traveling from Ecuador to Long Beach, California, which convinced her that her future at sea would be on cruise ships. There were eight women in her graduating class of 160. One became a captain for Maersk but stopped sailing when she had a baby. Most of the other women took jobs in shipping shoreside. She's one of the few from her graduating class who is still at sea.

IN SPENDING AN HOUR with Captain Kate, it became abundantly clear to me why she has risen to the rank of master at such a young age. She exudes a positive energy that she passes on to her officers and crew. She's confident, amiable and clearly in charge of her ship. She sees the role of captain as similar to that of a CEO of a corporation. Perhaps her business background (she holds a

■ *Captain McCue is the first American woman, and the youngest woman ever, to rise to the level of master.*



bachelor's degree in business administration) has given her this perspective. When asked if she ever had to confront the traditional old boys club in her experience at sea, she said that from the start people had always treated her with respect and were incredibly encouraging, and that her job has been "such a pleasure and such a joy that the last 20 years have gone by in a blink."

THAT CONTINUED SUPPORT and encouragement begins with her parents. "Every day my mom sends me an email of affirmation, usually from Oprah," she says. Thanks to modern technology, she stays in touch with her family by Skype. "The last thing my mom always says to me when we end our conversations is 'Keep those people safe.'" Hers is a close-knit family. Despite the physical distance between them while she's at sea, she has chosen to make her home ashore 300 steps around the corner from them in Las Vegas. While we chatted on the bridge, she was looking forward to them joining her on the *Summit* for that week's cruise.

Bartender to Third Mate

HER JOURNEY TO THE BRIDGE WAS SOMEWHAT CIRCUITOUS.

Having graduated from CMA, and not landing the dream job she had hoped for, she decided to get her foot in the door by applying to Disney Cruise Line to be a bartender. She confesses that she didn't know anything about bartending but was determined to work at sea in whatever capacity. Having reviewed her resume, DCL realized that she was better suited to standing watch on the bridge rather than behind a bar and offered her a contract as a third mate. After one-and-a-half years at DCL, she was offered a promotion to second officer by Royal Caribbean Cruise Line.

ON BOARD AT RCCL she worked under the first officer, a Canadian woman, so she had female mentors from her very early days at sea. "I always felt that I was treated like

Celebrity Summit®

SPECIFICATIONS:

Double Occupancy: 2,158

Guest Decks: 11

Tonnage: 90,940

Draft: 26 feet

Cruising Speed: 24 knots

Ship's Registry: Malta

Maiden Voyage: October 1, 2001

Crew: 1,027

Staterooms: 1,079

Length: 965 feet

Beam: 105 feet

Electric Current: 110/220 AC

Builder: Chantiers de l'Atlantique

Godmother: Paulina Rider Wilhemsen



the sister or the mother. Sister big-time when I came over to Celebrity,” she says. “When I was doing ship visits last July, the entire executive team was at the gangway, and the captain was there with open arms.” She advanced in the ranks at RCCL, and after being rated “top performing staff captain” for three consecutive years, Officer McCue was ready for her next promotion – the ultimate position of ship’s master – on Celebrity Cruises’ *Summit*.

TO ITS CREDIT, Celebrity has made a deliberate effort to cultivate and promote women officers. In fact, 20 percent of Celebrity’s deck officers are women. Sailing with Captain Kate on this particular cruise were four women navigation officers. She credits Lisa Lutoff-Perlo, the first female president and CEO of Celebrity Cruises, who has been with the company since December 2014, for actively encouraging the recruitment of young women navigation officers.

■ Celebrity Summit at Royal Dockyard in Bermuda. – Celebrity Cruise Line Photo.



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■ *Kate McCue is one of a growing group of younger officers, in their mid-to-late 30s, who are referred to as the “next generation captains.”*
 — Lorraine Coons photo.

A Next Generation Captain

CAPTAIN KATE IS A “PEOPLE’S CAPTAIN.” Her informal, relaxed manner immediately puts guests at ease. She’s part of a growing group of younger officers, in their mid-to-late 30s, who are referred to as the “next generation captains.”

“**WE’RE NOT THE CAPTAINS** who sit in their office all the time,” she says. “We’re the captains who want to be out with the guests. I don’t host captain’s tables. I can sit at a table hosting eight people

for 2 1/2 hours, or I can stand in a place where I can meet 200 people in an hour. I choose to meet more people ... When I sit in my office, I get tired, I get lethargic ... The guests energize you. They give you important feedback. It’s such a good feeling if you can solve some issues that guests have. You feel like a million bucks. So I tend not to sit in my office very much.”

VERY MUCH a visible presence on board, Captain Kate, who insists on being addressed by her given name, is often to be found after the evening’s floorshow in the shops or in the Café al Bacio, where she

helps to serve guests cookies. “I can’t make cappuccino to save my life, but I can get a pastry off the shelf and in that way I can have a conversation with people.” In the absence of a formal welcome-aboard party, in which passengers meet the captain, a practice that was a cruise-ship tradition for many years, Captain Kate schedules time twice during each cruise to take pictures with passengers. “There are so many passengers who want to take their picture with the captain. Why I don’t know!”

HAVING ALWAYS experienced encouragement and validation from her fellow officers, Captain Kate perhaps doesn’t realize the magnitude of her achievement. That is, until she meets passengers or even some male crewmembers who request a photo op with her. “Can we take a picture with you because we want to show our granddaughters?” At times like that she understands the significance of her accomplishment.

THE RELAXED, informal, laid-back approach that she adopts with passengers carries over to her relationship with the officers, staff and crew. Her

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■ *Lisa Lutoff-Perlo, president and CEO of Celebrity Cruises, has actively encouraged the recruitment of young women navigation officers. – Celebrity Cruise Line Photo.*

managerial style can best be described as collaborative. “I’m not a micro-manager. I trust people; I have to because my job is hard enough ... so I put a lot of faith in my staff. I’m big on recognition. People need affirmation in order to continue to do a good job. I don’t think negativity works at all.” Not having children of her own, she feels that “the crew are like my kids, more like my family, and you know how it is when you have to deal with your family. There are bound to be challenges ... I think that the company is really good at providing leadership training on board so that we all realize that we need to get along to make this work. You don’t have to like each other or love each other, but you do have to respect each other.”

CAPTAIN KATE did find love at sea. While with RCCL she met her future husband, who was also a four-stripe officer, but his domain lay in the engine room rather than up on the bridge. While he still sails as Chief Engineer with RCCL, she sees a silver lining in their not working together on the same ship. “We actually have more quality time now,” she says, crediting Skype with keeping them together. “We have extended conversations every morning

and evening. There’s more substance to them compared to when we worked together.”

Uncle Bob’s Marbles

HER BEST FRIEND’S UNCLE PASSED AWAY in 2014 from cancer while she was still sailing with RCCL. “Uncle Bob collected marbles when he was a kid, so he had coffee cans full of marbles. And whenever the family did something they thought that Uncle Bob would like, they would leave a marble behind.” Since she was going to be traveling a lot, she asked if she could have marbles to distribute in the ports the ship visited. Her friend gave her a jam jar with 14 marbles inside. While on the *Quantum of the Seas*, she put her first marble on the 122nd floor of the Burj Khalifa Tower in Dubai, the tallest structure in the world. She also takes something away with her from every place where she leaves one of Uncle Bob’s marbles, usually a magnet, and records where it comes from and why that location is an important site. She then puts the magnet and the description in an envelope and organizes them by places visited. She has left 35 so far – “in a Cochinchinese fishing net, an Oman souk, in the lighthouse in Bermuda, on top of the medieval wall in Dubrovnik ... People from the cruise go searching for my marbles and take pictures. On the last cruise I left one on the North Bridge in Lexington.”

WHAT LIES IN HER FUTURE? She and her daily companion on the bridge, her cat Bug, are quite happy where they are. “There’s nothing else right now, she said. “There’s nothing that would be better except taking a ship from the keel being laid until it’s brought into service. That’s like having a baby – so that would be the next step.” That honor usually goes to the more senior captains “but I would like to find myself in that position farther down the road.” In the meantime, Celebrity passengers will continue to have the good fortune to sail with Captain Kate. “This seat that I’m sitting in is so comfortable and so fabulous – once you sit in this seat, you’re not going anywhere. I don’t plan on retiring for another 30 years!” ↓

About the Author

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