

Classroom in the Sky

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CARIBBEAN SEA -- The sunset on the Caribbean lights up the sky brighter than the most amazing fireworks display on Fourth of July. A cascade of pinks, oranges and reds fall into the clear-blue horizon.



Like a scene from a pirate movie, a large sailing vessel slices through wave after wave. The sailing vessel has three large masts extending from its decks reaching for the heavens with large white sails capturing and radiating all the colors and hues from the sky.

Silhouettes of dozens of human beings can be seen scurrying up the rigging that runs to the top of the mast like spider web. These are not pirates, but they are cadets at the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Conn., getting their first taste of sea life in the Coast Guard's classroom in the sky.

CARIBBEAN SEA -- Seaman Loren Pearlman, a deck seaman aboard the Coast Guard Cutter Barque Eagle, works approximately 146-feet above the ship's deck.

The Coast Guard Cutter Barque Eagle is a 295-foot square-rigged sailing vessel from New London where cadets and officer candidates are taught the basics of seamanship. The most popular, and intimidating, classroom on the ship is the ship's rigging where cadets are asked to

free-climb sometimes up to 150 feet above the deck of the ship.



Just like the sailors who sailed around the Cape Horn of Africa in the 1930s in the twilight era of sailing, the crew of the Eagle is as experienced in working above the deck as some of the saltiest mariners.

CARIBBEAN SEA -- Cadets from the Coast Guard Academy overhaul the Coast Guard Cutter Barque Eagle's sails.

BM2 Leland Currier can shimmy up the 150 feet of shrouds, netting that is used to climb up the mast, in just under a minute. Currier usually finds himself on the deck of the ship leading his mast through complex sail stations. Each mast on the ship has a designated number of people assigned to work on its rigging and sails. A boatswain's mate is in charge of each of the mast, or a mast captain, with the help of a senior class cadet.

With over six miles of running rigging, just about every maneuver and turn the Eagle makes for an all hands evolution that takes all 200 people aboard the ship to complete. "Much of the shipboard training revolves around the setting, dosing and overhauling the ship's sails. Sailing the Eagle builds valuable seamanship, teamwork and leadership skills and is sometimes a cadet or candidates first exposure to shipboard life," said Capt. Chris Sinnott, commanding officer of the Coast Guard Cutter Barque Eagle.

It's during these evolutions that the cadets and the crew have to be at their best because nothing less is acceptable. Seaman who have less than a year of service aboard the Eagle and junior petty officers are charged with walking the cadets through the complex tap dance that occurs high above the deck of the ship.



CARIBBEAN SEA --
Cadets from the Coast
Guard Academy prepare to
unfurl a sail

Approximately 90 percent of Eagle's crew are certified Coast Guard instructors, including the least experienced deck seaman making these instructors as unconventional as their training environment.

The skills that are passed along to these future Coast Guard officers high above the Eagle are invaluable. Building seamanship and line handling skills is only part of the equation to this class room in the sky. The true benefit for the cadets comes from the personal development that occurs at 100-plus feet.

"We truly believe we are making leaders. We try to instill the Coast Guard's core values in the cadets through sailing by building them up as a team, making them rely on one another, and instilling confidence themselves and their shipmates," said

Currier.

Since 1946, the rigging of Eagle has been a proving ground for Coast Guard cadets and officer candidates. The tradition of sending young men and women to the sea to make them grow both personally and professionally as future Coast Guard leaders is one that will continue for years to come.

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