

Sea (Dog) History

by John Odin Jensen

Would your dog bark in the face of a gale? Do seasick cats meow (or me-urp)? Such silly-sounding questions are a real part of sea history. Since people began building boats, they have created special places aboard for animals. Sometimes these animals provided food such as eggs, milk, and fresh meat. Yet ancient and modern seafarers also brought animals aboard as friends and helpers.

What use is a dog at sea? Certainly they provide companionship. Over two thousand years ago, fishers in the Mediterranean Sea also bred dogs to help them fish. These ancient dogs probably looked like poodles and Portuguese water dogs, powerful swimming, curly-haired canines that also went to sea. Some Portuguese water dogs are very clever. They can dive and swim several feet underwater. This skill came in handy in retrieving fish that fell off hooks and out of nets. In the days before radios and cell phones, some sailors and fishers also used these dogs to carry messages between boats and to the shore. For hundreds of years, Portuguese water dogs and poodles have sported fancy haircuts called “clips.” While the hairdos might look a little prissy today, these clips helped hardworking sea dogs to swim better and stay warm.

The largest sea dog is the Newfoundland. This hardy breed developed along the Atlantic Coast of Newfoundland in Canada. Fishers used them to pull nets on the beach and to tow heavy carts. Newfoundlands are famous for their loyalty and lifesaving ability. During the early 1800s, a Newfoundland dog may have saved Napoleon Bonaparte, the former emperor of France, from death in the cold Atlantic. Known as Bob, the dog pulled over 20 people from the Thames River in the 1830s. The Royal Humane Society gave Bob a gold medal. In the 1850s, a big Newfoundland named Wallace used his great paws to help stop a mutiny on the clipper ship *Dreadnought*. Today Newfoundland dogs are often used in search and rescue missions. Newfoundlands also sometimes serve as lifeguards, though they rarely blow a whistle or yell at people for running!



Photo Credit: U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Sinbad, the Coast Guard's Chief Dog

Once America's most famous sea dog, salty Sinbad (shown above) served on the Coast Guard Cutter Campbell from 1937 to 1948. He participated in a famous fight against a German submarine. The star of a movie, biography, and comic book, Sinbad was much loved by his shipmates. Sinbad often got into trouble and made news around the world.

Web Link

To Learn More about Coast Guard mascots and their stories, go to www.uscg.mil/hq/g-cp/history/mascots.html

The dogs shown here were among hundreds of dogs and cats—along a few bears, penguins, and goats—that served as mascots in the U.S. Coast Guard.