

# AT THE HELM

**SEAN KEARNS,** Commander of the *USS Constitution*, takes the wheel leading the nation's oldest commissioned warship into a much-needed rest.



**COMMANDER SEAN KEARNS IS ON A** mission. After working his way up through the ranks of the U.S. Navy, he was assigned last year to the command of the *USS Constitution*, one of the Navy's most unique jobs. Being a native Mainer certainly didn't hurt, either—it's an unofficial Navy tradition for the leader of "Old Ironsides" to be from New England so they have a connection to the area and the historic frigate.

Daily duty includes educating the public about this revered national landmark, as the vessel welcomes half a million visitors each year. The crew interprets the ship's engaging history and helps visitors understand the significance of the role the *USS Constitution* played 200 years ago, as well as the role it plays today. The crew is also responsible for day-to-day maintenance, and will be contributing to the ship's upcoming restoration project.

The *USS Constitution* will be going into dry dock in late 2014 for almost three years for necessary repairs. "Wear and tear from the wind and seas and weather takes its toll," Kearns says. "Largely this is just regular upkeep primarily below the water line." As Kearns points out, "This would be a great summer for people thinking about visiting the ship to do so. The next opportunity to see the ship in her normal fully rigged configuration will be in 2018."

The ship is still a commissioned naval warship, so after a brief security screening,

you're free to explore at will. Three main decks—the weather deck, the gun deck (the main battery of the ship) and the berthing deck—are open to the public. This time next year, visitors can expect to see the *USS Constitution* from a viewing platform near the dry dock, allowing for an elevated view of the ship and a sense of the work in progress.

Compared to the efforts of previous makeovers, the size of the workforce for this restoration is doubled. "When the ship used to go in for overhaul 200 years ago, it wouldn't be unusual for several hundred craftsmen to be working on her at once." At the nearby *USS Constitution* Museum, pre-filmed video and live web-cam video of the ongoing repairs will be on view. "We're creating a history and a library of knowledge and documentation of what has been done, what techniques have

## USS CONSTITUTION

Charlestown Navy Yard, Charlestown, 617-242-5670, [history.navy.mil/ussconstitution](http://history.navy.mil/ussconstitution)

worked and what hasn't," Kearns explains. "As you can imagine, with modern ship building being at the forefront, a lot of the techniques and tools and methods that were used to build these ships 200 years ago have really been lost to history. It is largely more of an art than a science in how the ship is maintained." —*Samantha DiMauro*