

“It looks great
from any angle”

Bathing Beauty



By Sharice Walker

The October 2012 christening and launch of the Research Vessel Sikuliaq in Wisconsin were dramatic milestones in the ship's construction process.

The R/V *Sikuliaq* perches high above the crowd's heads, secured in launch cradles along the riverbank. Bathed in afternoon sunshine, the ship's freshly painted colors — black, white and arctic blue — are striking against the sky. A slight breeze ruffles the bunting decorating the bridge.

After nearly 40 years of planning, designing and redesigning, the christening and launch of the vessel are less than 24 hours away.

UAF Dean Emeritus Vera Alexander, '65, and Professor Emeritus Bob Elsner, the ship's co-sponsors, submitted the first proposal for an arctic region research vessel in 1973. For decades they continued to push for a ship designed for polar fieldwork.

Now, Alexander and Elsner are visiting the Marinette Marine Corp. shipyard, on the banks of the Menominee River, to review their assignments in a dry run of the next day's ceremony. Elsner lingers near the ship after the rehearsal, gazing intently at the product of so many years of work.

"It looks great from any angle," he concludes, smiling.

There is nothing dry about the actual ceremony the next morning. A relentless rain had moved in during the night, and gusts of wind buffet the crowd throughout the program. The first bottle of champagne falls victim to the wet conditions, slipping out of Alexander's hands and shattering on the ground without touching the ship. But Alexander is sprayed generously with champagne when the spare bottle smashes properly against the ship's bow. Then, moments after Elsner pushes the button initiating the launch, he is soaked in a jet of water that surges over the dock after *Sikuliaq* drops into the river.

Onlookers whoop and holler as the ship slides down the lowered beams and hits the water. Then they suck in a nervous breath as the ship lurches away from shore and angles precariously onto its side, toward the water. The cheering erupts even louder as the ship rights itself, the mast swinging back up into the air.

There's still work to be done on the ship's interior, and then it's off on its first voyage, through the Great Lakes, down the Eastern seaboard and through the Panama Canal before it arrives in Seward in January 2014.

When science operations begin in early 2014, the 40-year-old dream of a vessel designed for arctic research will finally be a reality. ■

Watch the launch of the *Sikuliaq* at www.uaf.edu/aurora/.

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