

Buoy drop starts the summer with a splash

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8 a.m. Vince Vaise adjusts the uniform that marks him as a ranking officer at Fort McHenry in 1812. He straightens his bicorne hat, shakes out the tails of his blue wool coat, and depresses the button of a remote to unlock the doors of a waiting minivan.

“Ready to go?” he asks the small group who have gathered in the fort’s parking lot on this sunny Friday morning. Some of those who are sipping coffee or squinting into the morning light are historically garbed; others are wearing khakis, jeans or business attire. All are eager to get underway.

Individuals in modern dress clamber into the van. Others have to pause to divest themselves of swords, muskets and the occasional blunderbuss. Finally loaded, the van departs the fort.

8:20 a.m. Vaise is giving a running commentary on the history of the event the occupants of this vehicle — and the one behind it — are here to see: the annual placement of the Francis Scott Key Memorial Buoy in the waters off Baltimore.



A Coast Guard deckhand positions the Francis Scott Key buoy for the drop. The buoy marks the approximate spot from which Key, aboard a truce ship, watched the bombardment of Fort McHenry during the Battle of Baltimore in September 1814.

The buoy, says Vaise, marks the spot in which Key was believed to have spent the night as a prisoner of the British while the bombardment of Fort McHenry was going on.

Oh, and that, he adds, brings up misconception number one. The British army was nowhere near the shores of the star fort during that battle. In fact, the British ships were bombarding the fort from a point beyond the range of the Baltimore cannons, and Francis Scott Key was on a truce

ship, that was anchored still further out, on the Patapsco River. But try telling that to the artists who painted the scene.

“The paintings show Key, and he’s right there, pointing to the fort and the flag, like ‘There it is,’” Vaise says.

In reality, British warships were unable to get that close, meaning that neither was Key. Which is just as well.

“Oh, he would have been toast if he’d been that close,” laughs Vaise.

8:30 a.m. The van pulls up to the Coast Guard yard in Curtis Bay. After discussion with the gate sentry, Vaise and the car behind him are waved through. Everyone scrambles out next to the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter James Rankin.

Vaise mills around, making conversation with those who have come to attend the event. He points out the buoy, a long, conical affair painted with stars and stripes. An 8,500-pound concrete anchor is attached by a chain. It is already on deck and waiting deployment by the ship’s crane.

“Every year, around November, they pull the buoy up and clean it off and repaint it,” he explains. “Then in May, it goes back into the water.”

9:30 a.m. Passengers are filing onto the cutter, some stopping to pose to have their photos taken with the buoy. Because this is Military Spouse Appreciation Day, many family members of the crew are also present for the journey.

10 a.m. The Rankin leaves the dock and heads out into open water. Vaise launches into a description of the Battle of Baltimore, which took place on September 13, 1812.

“We really tend to look at events like this battle, and think this is so ancient,” he says, turning up the volume of his voice to be heard over the sounds of the engines and the rushing wind. “But really, the times weren’t that different from the way they are now. We had an unpopular war going on — where have we seen that? We had an economic crisis — where have we seen that? We had ships unable to go through the waters because of being seized by other people — where have we seen that?”

10:25 a.m. As the cutter makes its way toward the spot where they buoy will drop, Vaise describes the conditions throughout the battle — a long, wet night, a group of young, inexperienced soldiers defending a fort that could be struck by the shells from the ships anchored offshore, but whose own cannons had become useless against an enemy that had moved out of range.

“So you’re 18, 19, 20,” says Vaise, “you’ve never been in a battle before, you’re here in this one, and you can’t fire back. You just have to sit there and take it. And this goes on all night.” In the morning, with their fort still intact, the soldiers in Baltimore decided to pull what Vaise

calls “the ultimate in-you-face move.” They pulled down the sodden flag that had flown throughout their battle, and in its place, hoisted the new oversized flag that could be seen by everyone out on the water.

Including, as it turned out, one Francis Scott Key, the young lawyer who had come along to help negotiate the release of Dr. William Beanes, a prisoner of war. (Key had wound up spending the night on a British ship because although he had been successful in his negotiation, Beanes was not to be released — and nor was Key — until the end of the battle).

It was Key’s relief and pride at the sight of his country’s flag being flown over the fort, notes Vaise, that inspired him to begin jotting down the words to what would later become the national anthem.

And these days, the location where it was all believed to taken place is marked by a red, white and blue buoy that floats not too far from the Francis Scott Key Bridge.

11 a.m. As Vaise finishes his discussion of the creation of the buoy and its eventual establishment as a piece of Baltimore history, the Rankin is maneuvered into place. The crane is used to move the buoy and anchor into the water. Everyone leans off the upper deck to watch it land in the water.

The cutter’s sound system plays “Taps.” After the final, haunting note dies away, there is a brief silence before the sounds of “The Star-Spangled Banner” fills the air.

Red flares soar off the ship and arc through the air at the appropriate moment in the song, leaving long traces of smoke. When the music ends, the Fort McHenry Guard, in its period uniforms, fires a musket salute on Vaise’s command. Aleksandras Radzius, Robert Stewart and Drew Barrett are those who have made the trip today, and they are enthusiastic about their jobs. By 11:15 a.m., the ship has turned and is making the return trip. Along the way, it passes Fort McHenry, where the large flag is being hoisted once again. Vaise and the guard call passengers’ attention to a flag and gun salute from the fort.

Vaise turns his face up to the sunshine and closes his eyes. “You know,” he says, “people have different ideas about what starts the summer. For some people, it’s Memorial Day or maybe baseball season. For me, it’s just not summer until the Francis Scott Key buoy floats in the channel.”

Note: The Francis Scott Key Memorial Buoy drop takes place each year at around the same time. For information on next year’s buoy drop, or on other events at Fort McHenry, call 410-962-4290, or go to <http://www.nps.gov/fomc>

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