Home is the sailor, home from the sea
--- Robert Louis Stevenson

PHILADELPHIA -- IBF cruiserweight champion and Navy veteran Steve “USS” Cunningham was reflecting upon the multiple ironies of his particular situation.

Here he was, a Philadelphia-born fighter who had twice journeyed to Poland to fight a Polish opponent (Krzysztof Wlodarczyk), at a Philly press conference to announce his upcoming defense against a Polish national (Tomasz Adamek) in what would be Cunningham’s first bout on American soil in nearly two years. A former petty officer second class whose out-of-the-ring attire runs to pea coats and other garb reflective of the pride he takes in his military service, Cunningham (21-1, 11 KOs) squares off with Adamek (34-1, 23 KOs), the onetime WBC light heavyweight titlist, on Dec. 11 in the Prudential Center in Newark, N.J. The scheduled 12-round bout, to be televised by Versus, very much feels like a homecoming.

“It’s amazing this fight is so close to home. Less than $20 (on the New Jersey Transit train line) can get you from here to there and back again,” marveled Cunningham, 32, who joined the Navy to see the world and continued to have his passport stamped upon becoming a globetrotting professional boxer.

“You know, fighting a Polish guy in this country seems kind of strange. I’m used to traveling. This time, I’m not going to Poland, Poland is coming to me. Pretty ironic, huh?”

Yeah, you could say that. You also could say it’s pretty ironic that a sailor has appointed himself the unofficial spokesperson of the cruisers. Anchors aweigh, indeed.

“I guess it is sort of strange, now that you mention it,” Cunningham said. “But who could be better to be the face of the cruiserweight division than a Navy man?

“I want to be that person, God willing. You got guys that jump right over the division. Why? Because of money. I could do that. I could put on 20 or 30 pounds very easily and fight at heavyweight, but this is my niche. I walk around at my natural weight, I’m strong at that weight, I feel good. If it’s not broken, why fix it?”

The 6-3 Cunningham is a familiar presence in Philadelphia, frequently showing up at local cards to take a bow or just to watch other fighters at their trade. A physical-conditioning addict who has patterned his work habits after fellow Philadelphian Bernard “The Executioner” Hopkins, he trains nearly every day at the James Shuler Gym in West Philly. Yet Cunningham is the fighter no one in his hometown really knows. Perhaps that’s because he’s fought only once here, an eight-round decision over Demetrius Jenkins in 2003, or because he came to the sport late, without the sort of long amateur background that can make local kids quasi-celebrities before they ever fight a single round as pros.

Or maybe it's just that Philadelphia is the town that routinely produces great fighters, but doesn't always embrace them as well as it should. Everyone here remembers the tale of Joe Frazier, who won an Olympic gold medal at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and returned home to an empty airport. Well, it wasn't exactly empty, but there was no contingent of cheering fans in the terminal to give Smokin' Joe a hero's welcome. No wonder he temporarily considered going back to work at his old job in a meat-packing plant until a group of businessmen formed Cloverlay, Inc., and set him on the path to his true destiny.

"I started boxing in the Navy," Cunningham recalled. "That's why a lot of people don't know me in Philly. I started as an amateur, 19 years old, when I was away from home, in the service.

"I became a national amateur champion in under 20 fights. That's how I knew God created me to do this. I totally believe I was created to do what I'm doing now, for God's glory.

"Fame? I don't care. Money? There's a lot of different ways to make money. Of course, I want to make money. But if I was getting paid the same that I was getting in the Navy or working in the airport in Atlanta where I worked before, I'd still be doing this."

(There is no truth to the rumor that, upon hearing Cunningham's claims that he would fight cheap because of his love of the sport, his promoter, Don King, began preparing a set of blank contracts for him to sign.)

With no built-in hometown following, Cunningham entered the pro portion of his boxing odyssey with a willingness to go to where the big fights were, even if those engagements were in the other guy's country. For that, he credit his experiences in the Navy.

"Joining the Navy was one of the best decisions I ever made," said Cunningham, a father of two who is managed by his wife, Livvy. "It showed me there was a bigger world out there than just Philadelphia, just the ghetto.

"I lived with all kinds of races – white, black, Latino. We worked together, traveled the world together. It made me more comfortable in whatever setting I found myself. I can walk up to anybody and say, `Hey, what's up?' Forget stereotypes."

Cunningham's easygoing manner won over crowds in Carnival City, South Africa (where he outpointed Sebastian Rothman), in Warsaw and Katowice, Poland (where he split a pair of decisions with Wlodarczyk, the second earning him bout bringing him the IBF belt). In his most recent ring appearance, on Dec. 29 in Bielefeld, Germany, he retained the title on a 12th-round stoppage of a German, Marco Huck.

If all Americans conducted himself with such class and dignity, maybe this country would have a better image with the rest of the world community.

"Over in Europe, boxing has a mega-fan base," Cunningham explained. "After the fight in Germany, we were mobbed at the airport. We could hardly get to our plane. I mean, they *love* boxing over there. And when an American comes in to fight one of their guys, they go crazy. It's

awesome.

"I never felt any hostility in Poland or Germany. When you beat their fighter, they respect you. They show you love. At least that's the way it was for me. Maybe that's because of who I am. I'm not a disrespectful guy. I'm not into talking trash or trying to fight anybody at a press conference.

"I mean, take this fight. Tomasz is a husband, a father, just like I am. He loves his family. This is our business, our job. No need to take it into the gutter, you know?

"Now, Marco Huck, he was very disrespectful toward me, but the people saw how I handled that. I wasn't going to go down to his level."

What Cunningham wants – other than to become the greatest cruiserweight of all time, a designation probably held by the pre-heavyweight Evander Holyfield – is to win fans for the cruiserweight division and for himself, particularly in the hometown he cherishes.

"This is my first fight in 11 months," he noted. "For those people who have been blaming Don behind the scenes, it's not him. It's been these scaredy fighters who don't want to step up to the plate. You'd think that when you get a belt, guys would want to fight for the championship. They don't. They want to get paid (well) to get beat, you know what I mean?

"Jean-Marc Mormeck, we told him we'd go to France and fight him there. He wanted to get paid more than I'd get paid, and I'm the champion! So that kind of killed that.

"We told Enzo Maccarinelli we'd go to England. They wanted to pay us less than we got as a contender. So that made two fights that flew out the window. And when David Haye unified the division, he went up to heavyweight for bigger paydays. I really can't say I blame him, but you see how it is?"

Not that it has to be that way. Cunningham said there are still enough attractive matchups among the cruisers that the division should be getting more attention that it traditionally has.

"The cruisers don't get a lot of light, which is a problem," Cunningham said. "We have some awesome fighters, man. There's me, there's Adamek, Enzo, Mormeck, (Wayne) Braithwaite. It's a beautiful division. We just need more eyes on it.

"The major networks, Showtime and HBO, keep showing a handful of the same guys. That's not right. If they were really for the spot of boxing, they'd put on interesting fights, not just familiar names. They should do their homework."

So should Philadelphians who somehow have managed to miss Cunningham when singling out the city's sports heroes. True, Philly still has Hopkins, who is coming off that spectacular rout of the formerly undefeated Kelly Pavlik, but that was a 170-pound catchweight bout in which Pavlik's middleweight titles were not on the line. Until further notice, "USS" is the only Philly fighter to hold a recognized world championship.

“I want to make Philadelphia proud, just like Bernard Hopkins has made us proud,” Cunningham said. “I want to continue the tradition. Philadelphia’s in my heart. I take Philadelphia with me every time I went to Poland. I went to Poland twice. I went to Germany, to South Africa. Wherever I went, in boxing or in the Navy, Philly was in me.

“I don’t know, there must be something in the air here that makes great fighters. I’m breathing that air, and deep.”