



The Cutter

The Newsletter of the Foundation for Coast Guard History
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TODAYS HISTORY—NEW ORLEANS SAINTS



New Orleans' Saints

The South Coast of The United States received a terrible battering, one, two, three times this fall, perhaps more by the time you read this. Our comrades on active duty became heroes many times over. Not only did the heroes come from those assigned along the Gulf Coast, members from all over the nation arrived on scene virtually within hours of the devastation. Much has been written about how our Coast Guard saved many lives, but the story is so powerful that we must record it in our archives.

The cartoon above was created by J. Sherffius and is reproduced with his permission. Simply and forcefully it makes the point. On the following pages is the text of a message sent on 12 September 2005 by the Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard Air Training Center, Mobile Alabama and the Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard Air Station, New Orleans, Louisiana. The message addresses the work of the many air crews involved. There were many surface based crews who performed under the same horrible conditions as their airborne comrades. Many heroes were made that week.

TODAYS HISTORY-KATRINA

Fellow Commanding Officers, We (Captain Callahan and Captain Jones) have struggled to find words which adequately express our admiration, respect and appreciation for the herculean efforts of the many, many Coast Guard men and women, Active, Reserve, Auxiliary, and civilian you sent to us and who made the recent Coast Guard air rescue operations over Louisiana and Mississippi possible. Words cannot adequately express what they accomplished, but please pass this message from both of us to them, and thank you all for your leadership and support in the Coast Guard's continuing Katrina response and recovery operations.

SUBJECT: COAST GUARD HURRICANE KATRINA AVIATION RESCUE OPERATIONS

On 28 August 2005 aircraft from Air Stations New Orleans and Houston and Air Training Center Mobile descended on the devastated city of New Orleans and Mississippi coastal communities only to find the utter horror of great expanses under water up to rooftops or completely flattened by winds with burning gas mains and buildings and thousands of survivors clinging to rooftops adding to the unimaginable scene. In tropical storm conditions, every available helicopter immediately began hoisting survivors, reacting intuitively to the difficult task of triaging the neediest from among the throngs of victims, and delivering those recovered to the nearest dry land or overpass.

As the scope of the disaster became known, Air Stations around the Coast Guard immediately began dispatching aircraft and aircrews to join the enormous rescue operation, staging out of both ATC Mobile and Airsta NOLA. Each and every Coast Guard Air Station, without exception, (continued on page 3)

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS- ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Library of Congress is conducting an ongoing project to record first-hand accounts of U.S. Veterans who have been involved in WW I, WW II, Korean War, Vietnam War, Persian Gulf War. We strongly urge you to record your story for posterity. Don't put this off. Do it today. Contact:

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If we do not honor our past

We loses our future

If we destroy our roots

We cannot grow.

Friederich Wundertwasser (1928-2000)
Austrian Architect

(KATRINA continued). contributed personnel and/or aircraft to this extraordinary effort. In addition, logistics and support personnel from units including PSU 308, ISC St. Louis and New Orleans, MSU Houma, SFOS Atlantic City and Grand Haven, CEU Miami, Atlantic Strike Team, MLC (K), ESUs NOLA and Portsmouth, and many others descended onto the severely degraded Airsta NOLA facility to help with watchstanding, aircraft dispatch, loading of equipment, aircraft maintenance, facility repairs and any other task required, making this operation the epitome of the "Team Coast Guard" concept.

All Airsta NOLA berthing and most shop spaces were rendered uninhabitable by flooding after Katrina's Category 4 winds peeled back the hangar roof. Consequently, during the intense first four days of the operation until temporary tent cities and other shelters began to arrive all aircrew and support personnel staging at CGAS NOLA bunked head to toe on floors or on cots in the Airsta's crowded admin building. For much of this time the admin building/operations center was without power, air conditioning, running water, and all but one working cellular phone making the concept of "adequate crew rest" an impossibility. ATC Mobile encountered challenges with their own hangar roof, losing all of their operations spaces, Operations Center, and many maintenance shops, along with a loss of base wide power and phone communications.

Despite these hardships, the extraordinary Coast Guard men and women who gathered from all over the Coast Guard to join the fight worked ceaselessly and cheerfully, allowing around the clock SAR and maintenance operations to continue unabated and at an unprecedented level. The dogged determination, enthusiasm and eagerness to serve in any capacity exhibited by all members was awesome to

behold. Many members of the embedded media commented frequently and with wonder at the superb quality, dedication and camaraderie of the entire crew.

In around the clock flight operations over a period of seven days, Coast Guard helicopters operating over New Orleans saved an astonishing 6,470 lives (4,731 by hoist) during 723 sorties and 1,507 flight hours. They also saved or assisted thousands of others by delivering tons of food and water to those who could not be moved immediately. These figures include all Coast Guard helicopter operations over the New Orleans metro area regardless of whether the flights originated at CGAS NOLA, CGAS Houston or ATC Mobile, and are almost certainly underreported as some sorties returned to their bases before overtaxed flight operations personnel could collect their data. The numbers from coastal Mississippi are still being scrubbed, and will increase the total considerably.

--aircrew and support personnel bunked head to toe on floors or on cots.

Challenging each pilot and flight mechanic to his or her limits, most hoists were completed in obstacle-strewn environments, often on night vision goggles, over power lines and downed trees with daytime temperatures near 100 degrees, often in power-limited aircraft. The conditions encountered by rescue swimmers included flooded houses and buildings, steep, slippery roofs, foul and contaminated water, and the need to hack through attics with axes or break out windows to free survivors. Add to this the urgency felt by all crew to continue rescuing a seemingly endless supply of increasingly desperate survivors as the hot days wore on. Aircrew returned from missions with dozens of rescues on a single sortie. One ATC HH-60J crew completed its day's work with 150 lives saved. One CGAS Houston HH-65B crew saved 110. Another crew returned to base almost dejected, having saved "only" 15 lives. (continued on page 4)

(KATRINA continued) The stories of heroism and initiative these courageous professionals from all over the Coast Guard have to tell are remarkable.

That these extraordinary operational accomplishments, often achieved by mixed crews and aircraft from across the nation flying together for the first time, were accompanied by no significant personnel injury or major aircraft mishap is simply remarkable. The operation's superb safety record is a testament to the leadership, professionalism and skills of each individual participant, and also to the Coast Guard's aviation training, safety and standardization programs we have relied upon for years.

The Coast Guard's superb aircraft mechanics and aircraft maintenance program were a key enabler of the operation's success. Aircrews from every unit commented on the quality and speed of aircraft turnarounds and maintenance. Again, Coast Guard aviation's outstanding training, safety and standardization programs in place at CGHQ, ATTC and AR&SC, and at each individual Air Station enabled maintainers from across the country to instantly form effective teams at ATC Mobile and at CGAS NOLA and keep aircraft flying to save lives.

ATC Mobile served as the major staging area, force provider and maintenance depot for aircraft and crews cycling continuously to and from New Orleans, while simultaneously conducting major SAR and post-hurricane operations in its own AOR. At times ATC had no less than 37 USCG aircraft on its ramp and in its hangar. As helicopters operating out of New Orleans approached major maintenance cycles, both ATC and Airsta Houston accepted these aircraft and provided fresh mission capable aircraft and crews in return.

The support and logistics chain worked around the clock to return the hurricane-scarred CGAS NOLA and ATC facilities to life. Logisticians here and up the chain determined how best to meet our vital needs, and where they could not be met quickly using existing administrative procedures and requirements, steps were taken to procure needed equipment and supplies by whatever means possible. There are many "Radar O'Reilly's" in the Coast Guard and God bless them. Not a single life was lost due to Coast Guard red tape.

One crew completed its days work with 150 lives saved. Another crew returned almost dejected, having saved "only" 15 lives.

The generous and unwavering support of our fixed-wing shipmates in ferrying vital equipment, supplies and many generous care packages, often paid for with personal funds donated by unit civilian and military personnel, was essential to the continued operation at CGAS NOLA and greatly appreciated. It is hard to describe the gratitude felt by those working for days without air conditioning or showers upon the arrival of crates of new underwear, deodorant, toothpaste and other amenities. Staggered rotation of all personnel out of theater for rest was an essential component of the success of this operation and we are grateful to the Falcon and Hercules communities for their continued support.

The dedicated volunteers of the Coast Guard Air Auxiliary, as always, stepped up to the plate and provided outstanding support to the operation. Their commitment allowed SAR aircraft to stay focused on SAR while still accomplishing necessary logistics missions.

To each and every Commanding Officer who sent personnel to serve in theater, your men and women were without exception superb and your leadership is apparent. Thank you. We ask that your returning personnel have the opportunity to meet with counselors.

That this complex operation could be so overwhelmingly successful despite a nearly complete loss of connectivity between Airsta NOLA and the outside world and chain of command for extended periods of time is a testament to the value of our Principles of Operations. Particularly, the principles of Clear Objective; Unity of Effort; Effective Presence; On-scene Initiative; and Flexibility. If you turn highly trained and properly equipped Coasties loose on an objective, they will tackle it, and let you know when it is done.

The New Orleans and Mississippi air rescue operation is but one part of a much larger story of the Coast Guard's response to Katrina. For example, 300 Coast Guard men and women from 20 different units quickly coalesced at Station New Orleans and rescued or assisted in the rescue of an estimated 22,000 people over ten days with surface assets, in horrendous conditions and with amazing displays of bravery and perseverance. Many of these shipmates lost everything in the flooding. Their stories remain to be told.

To those hundreds of devoted Coast Guard men and women who toiled to and beyond the point of exhaustion to keep helicopters flying, CGAS NOLA's and ATC's facilities functional and to save lives, you have more than upheld the traditions of your predecessors. You embodied our core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty. You have earned your place in history. Be proud of your extraordinary accomplishments.

After several days of cover from various other H65 units staging out of ATC Mobile, CGAS NOLA resumes its own B-0 and B-1 SAR response requirement today and continues to find its "new normalcy". ATC Mobile will return to its business of Coast Guard aviation training next week. We will continue to rely on the generosity of the operational and logistics communities in providing personnel and services, so that our own personnel can take care of the many issues to be dealt with in the aftermath of family dislocations and hurricane damage. CGAS NOLA will be both home and workplace for almost all of its crew while they wait for the city to be reopened for occupancy, children's schooling and spousal employment. The expressions of concern and offers for assistance from outside the command are overwhelming, and we are deeply grateful.

God bless our incomparable Coast Guard men and women. Semper Paratus!

Signed, CAPT B. C. JONES and
CAPT D. R. CALLAHAN

Editors note:

Some people may be a bit confused by the abundance of initials and acronyms included above. Ignore the alphabet soup. The story is quite evident and very real.

Accomplishment

We try to tell you what projects we are pursuing with your money. Those are frequently ongoing projects that take some time to demonstrate results. However some projects are completed and we are especially proud to tell you of them. This past summer, for the second time, your Foundation paid for an intern to work in the office of the Coast Guard Historian, to accomplish tasks that could not otherwise be done. A few of the tasks completed this summer are: *Organized the Cutter collection and created an inventory of the files; Performed conservation of documents, photographs, negatives and slides in the collection; Performed research and compiled information to answer public inquiries; Researched C.G. topics to add text and data to the C.G. web site.* Your contributions were well spent.

He Saw the Face of God J.C. Carney, Esq

The following unsolicited story appeared one day on the desk of your editor. Only after reading a part of it did I realize that I was a player in the story. The events are recorded in the ensuing official investigation and are a matter of public record in the National Archives.

On the bitter cold morning of 23 December 1958, the crew of the 311-foot cutter, *McCulloch* (WAVP-386)—a converted Navy seaplane tender, wished a fond farewell to their families and friends left standing on the pier at Base Boston. For one sailor, it would indeed be a farewell, as he would never return with his ship.

The crew took to their mooring stations in preparation for getting underway. The electric power from the pier had already been disconnected, as power was now supplied from the ship itself. All lines were ordered singled-up and the gangway was hauled aboard and lashed down. The deck force could hardly await the anticipated order to take-in and stow all lines so they could finally lay below out of the bone-chilling wind blowing across the bay. Once the special sea detail was set, the ship backed cautiously away from the Atlantic Street pier. Driven by her twin Fairbanks-Morse Diesel-electric power plant, the cutter slowly turned her bow, targeting the Boston harbor entrance. Then, when all the lines were stowed and the regular sea watch set, she worked her way out to sea. First objective: Argentina, Newfoundland.

The two-day trip to Argentina was, in reality, uneventful. The seas were moderate with only light swells. The winds were temperate, and the cutter received no “SOS” calls.

There was no indication as to what crisis would transpire in a few days: None whatsoever.

Even the weathermen onboard, employees of the National Weather Bureau, who always sailed with the cutters on every weather patrol to send radiosondes aloft, raised by large helium balloons, to take air temperature, barometric pressure, plus wind velocity and direction readings—in effect, causing the ship to become a floating weather observation platform—even they harbored no idea whatsoever, of the tempest that lay in the vessel’s path. And, after taking on fuel in Argentina, thereby topping-off the ships fuel tanks, she again proceeded to get underway. Her fuel capacity when loaded was 166,430 gallons, which she needed to cruise on station for 23 days and return safely to Argentina to refuel for the trip home.

Upon departing Argentina, CDR. Anthony F. Wayne, the *McCulloch*’s Commanding Officer, ordered the course set for Ocean Station *Bravo*. When on station, a

It was a storm unlike any other. A tempest that raged with such fury that it tossed one man overboard and caused another to almost join him. The rampant seas bent the jack staff, ripped cables from stanchions and tore a weighty “hedgehog” ammunition box from the O-1 deck, tossing it around like a paper bag in a heavy breeze.

cutter not only became a weather station, but more importantly, a checkpoint for aircraft and ships wishing to obtain the latest weather and information necessary to determine a fixed position. Moreover, the ship was situated where it could aid in any emergency that arose—especially if a plane had to ditch in the frigid waters surrounding this northern-most

station. It was for these specific purposes that there was a cutter positioned On Weather Station (OWS) at all times and in all kinds of weather. *Bravo* was located approximately 150 miles south of Cape Farwell, Greenland, and 1,000 miles from either the United States and/or Europe, midway between both. The weather, while enroute, remained moderate. The only noticeable difference was that the wind had, ever so slightly, started to intensify.

The “*Mighty Mac*” maintained full speed across steel-gray waters. And, on 28 December, *McCulloch* arrived on station, whereupon she relieved her port-mate, the 327-foot cutter *Bibb*. The *Bibb*, after being relieved, sailed happily home, not knowing what she left behind.

The “*Mac’s*” radio beacon was then keyed to YBOS, meaning *McCulloch* was now Ocean Station Bravo. All aircraft passing overhead and homing-in on said beacon could rest assured that they were on course and location. The crew were somewhat cheered by the fact that Bob Hope had radioed *Bravo* during his return to the states (after having spent Christmas entertaining the troops stationed in Iceland), wishing the “*Mac’s*” crew a very Merry Holiday Season. The greeting was recorded over the sound scribe and later played over the ship’s PA system for the crew to hear. Meanwhile, as the *Bibb* sailed home, she soon sailed right into the clutches of a vicious two-front storm!

The officers and crew of *McCulloch* settled into their shipboard routine. Watches were set, a range of drills practiced, and the various departments initiated maintenance schedules. All water tight doors (WTD) and hatches—not commonly and continuously employed—were dogged shut, while all department heads made sure that all was secure about the ship and decks. Small boats were cradled, their belly-gripes and turnbuckles seized up tight, leaving only the ready boat—albeit in belly-gripe, tightened against the strongback—swung out for instant use. Lifelines were also rigged in case of really inclement weather. (*Bravo*, because of its legendary foul weather [this author once caught pneumonia there], was noted for its heavy seas, coldness, and icing). Last, but not least, all loose gear—be it inside or out—was lashed down to prevent it from becoming a missile hazard. The ship was supposedly ready for anything Mother Nature could throw at it. Little did they know what was heading towards them...!

Early on New Years Day 1959, the seas and swells began to slowly build. The radio room gang started receiving messages predicting abominable weather. The bridge was informed that a major storm was brewing—and heading straight for the *McCulloch*! Commander Wayne, after perusing the weather reports, ordered the ready boat swung in, as the seas—if as vile as (or worse than) forecasted—could very easily damage or destroy a small boat hanging over the side, turning it into matchsticks, when the ship rolled. Also, the engine room gang routinely checked all tanks for proper ballast loading to make sure she would ride the seas on an even keel. Yet, according to Captain Wayne’s premise, another problem was evident: “*Early in the patrol [enroute Bravo] it was discovered that the increased height of the recently-enlarged balloon shelter encumbered the maneuverability in winds above 30 knots.*” Adding: “*The additional ‘mainsail’ area gives pressure abaft the pivot point and delays turning the stern across the wind.*” This would, indeed, become a prelude to a dominant problem when the ship later attempted to turn in high winds. The captain’s reasoning would prove a “prophecy-come-true” before the ship’s voyage was ended.

Seas soon began rolling the ship like someone violently rocking a cradle. The skies became darker, leaden, taking on a hue of gun-metal gray. The wind increased dramatically over the nighttime hours leading into the 2nd of January. By the daylight hours, the ship was engulfed in a full-blown gale, with winds increasing steadily to 45 knots—the ocean changing from a gentle chop to combers to the height of 30 feet exhibiting mare’s tails that whipped off the top of each wave. A low-pressure area, remained off the east coast of Canada, intensifying steadily. All hell was starting to break loose!

The barometer had started downward on 1 January and would (continued on page 8)

(Face of God continued) keep dropping for the next four days. As the storm center was *supposed* to move northward and thereupon stay to the west of *McCulloch*, the vessel was originally hove-to on an easterly heading. As the storm intensified, the ship would catapult off the top of a wave and free fall into the trough between waves. When she hit the bottom of the trough, the entire 311-foot ship shuddered from the concussion. The resulting vibration reverberated through the hull, up the mast and back down. And, by the time that stopped the vessel straight away catapulted off another wave. Seas soon began rolling the ship more intensely, pounding her sides like sledgehammer blows—making work (and sleep) difficult, if not impossible!

Moreover, by the morning of the 2nd, the seas were so rough that the order came down from the bridge that *no one* was to venture out onto the main deck. Seasickness having at least half the crew prone, reigned supreme. Furthermore, the entire crew, especially those standing watch, found difficulty in standing in one spot. First Class Radarman, Dick Wilkens, had trouble just keeping his seat while watching the surface search radar screen, as the ship pitched and rolled excessively. The weather mass indicated on the radar screen was showing a great concentration: A formation appeared to hover directly overhead, with more coming to meet it from the east. By midnight

The ship would catapult off the top of a wave and free fall into the trough.

the storm had intensified, causing the ship to moan and groan like an animal struggling to survive in a very hostile and uncomfortable environment.

Still the wind and seas kept building, the now shrieking winds tormenting the bouncing cutter. Luckily, and most importantly, the constant battering kept the vessel from icing. Had she started taking on ice, she would eventually become top-heavy, Which would—if the ice

were not removed—cause *McCulloch* to capsize. It is easy to believe that anyone cast into those freezing waters would not last very long.

In the early morning hours of 3 January, the wind had heightened to 70 knots, the sea rising to 40 plus feet wherein the top of each swell was whipped off by the wind. Commander Wayne made several attempts on Friday and Saturday to turn the ship around to stay “in grid” on ocean station (OWS). The cutter, meanwhile, had been heading straight for the Greenland ice pack with only one officer on board who had ever sailed in ice before and that was young LTJG Fred Herzberg, who took over as acting Executive Officer, while the regular “Exec” was on leave.

Herzberg, with only 4 years experience at sea, most of that in ice, proved to be a godsend.

Anyone cast into those freezing waters would not last very long.

He had reported aboard only 4 days before departing Boston: everyone else (less a few “ice-hardened” enlisted) was thinking in terms of *Titanic* when anyone mentioned ice. In reality, entering the near edge of the loose ice pack (with great caution) would have been a blessing, because it would have dramatically reduced the wave impact on the vessel. However, getting away from the ice pack was by far the most preferable option.

At around 12:15 on that Saturday noon, while the crew was at chow, a humongous wave crashed over the entire bow, sending the forecandle, the five inch gun, and the O-1 deck under green water, slamming into the air castle doors damaging same, loosening gear including a life raft, while shaking the entire ship, causing the “*Mac*” to shudder—like she was wiggling to shake off the freezing water—from bow to stern.

Moreover, even though all the ventilator openings had been securely dogged down, the water pressure was so great that water was flowing through the ventilator system throughout the ship. Suddenly, a crashing noise was heard just outside the wardroom area. The loud banging was immediately reported to the bridge, as the racket was apparently coming from the O-1 Hedgehog deck, located just forward and above the wardroom. Forcing his way out to the bridge wing, the Officer of the Deck—hanging on for dear life—discovered that the port Hedgehog ready ammo box had torn loose from its deck welds and was skidding back and forth across the O-1 deck, making a hideous “fingernails scratching a blackboard” noise. The worst part of the *missile hazard* effect, as the box had truly become, was the fact that the ready box contained 50 rounds of live ammunition. Here was a potential bomb, as it contained approximately one-ton of TNT and propellant charges: It would definitely have to be secured—*post haste!*

Quickly the call was made over the PA system that the Bos’n Mate of the Watch and duty Gunner’s Mate, “Lay to the bridge on the double . . .” Second Class Boatswain Mate Edward Widberg, First Class Boatswain Mate Donald Bash, plus the duty Gunners mate, rushed to the bridge, only to hear that the ready box had broken loose and was playing havoc with the O-1 deck railings and deckhouse. There was a real and present danger of bashing in the forward bulkhead of the deckhouse, after which, every in-coming wave would have unrestricted access to the ship’s interior. According to Widberg, the OD and three enlisted personnel assessed this overriding predicament. Widberg later remembered: “*The duty Gunner’s Mate, along with myself, were first to the bridge (with Bash right behind us), to determine how to corral the errant box. The Gunner’s Mate, upon serious reflection, stated that if that munitions box were to explode, we would not be returning home from patrol.*”

The Hedgehogs were not armed so there was no immediate explosive danger, but considering these conditions, there was no guarantee that this would continue. All three agreed that the paramount thing to do was to lash the box down, before it wrecked the Hedgehog mount, deckhouse, and/or the rest of the railing itself. (There was already a gap in the rails, wherein the sliding ready box, coupled with breaking bow waves—each now between 40 and 55 feet high—had broken stanchions and ripped-off rails).

The Executive Officer (LTJG Herzberg), Widberg, Bash, Ensign O’Brien, and Ensign Kolls, fought their way out on deck to salvage what they could. They captured the wayward life raft and moved it back to the balloon shelter. They corralled the Hedgehog control pedestal and secured it to the remaining parts of the rail stanchions. By getting the other “roaming” pieces out of the way, the danger of getting caught between them was somewhat reduced, thus clearing a path for the really challenging part of the emergency operation. The bitter cold, coupled with the heavy salt spray, and high winds, made the job extremely difficult. Without parkas, the 5 men were totally exhausted, albeit the job had only taken a few minutes. Herzberg ordered them back inside the deckhouse for parkas and more line. He then asked for five volunteers to finish securing the box. Widberg remembered that he went below to summon Seaman Bosun Jack Lewis, and explain the situation. Lewis then volunteered to help. Bash ordered Lewis to obtain a 50 foot length of heavy ½” manila rope and bring it to the bridge. Upon the arrival of the line Lewis, Widberg, Carter, and Ensigns Kolls and O’Brien volunteered to secure the wayward ready box. Whereupon, after the ship’s propeller-revolutions were brought to dead slow, with just about enough way to maintain a heading, the five exited the bridge (none were wearing life jackets as they would prove to be restrictive and could catch on the sharp edges

of the ready box; thereafter dragging the person snagged, into a very bad situation). Forcing their way to the starboard boat deck—via a quick-acting watertight door located just outside the Captain’s Cabin—they then worked their way slowly forward to the Hedgehog deck.

Ed Widberg recalls the struggle and aftermath thusly, *“We pushed and pulled the half-ton box to the back of the Hedgehog mount where a turn of line could be taken around the box; then around the mount, in an attempt to secure it to the weapons mount itself. We two men struggled to slide the heavy box to the rear of the blast shield, where it could be secured. Thereafter, while I tried to tie one end to a deck cleat, Lewis fought to tie off the line that would have secured the ammo box. Then, with the box in place, Jack started to encircle the sprockets and the outside of the still loose box. Suddenly, without any warning whatsoever, the ship’s bow thrust under water; taking a heavy veering wave on the starboard bow rolling the ship in an extreme snap roll to port. Footing was lost. Widberg recalls that: “Lewis, losing his grip on the unsecured line, slid; then was catapulted, over the port side into a deep trough formed between two swells many feet below.”* At the same time, Ed Widberg had been washed under the broken railing, landing on the main deck just forward of the also-damaged air-castle door and a safety ladder. The vertical ladder became a sort of “lifeline” for a very shaky Widberg. As he managed to grab the ladder rung—while never losing sight of Jack Lewis, who was floating with arms outstretched—Ed swears, even to this very day that, at that exact moment, he *“Looked up and actually saw the face of God,”* and clearly heard the words, *“It is not yet your time....”*

Fortunately, by grabbing that ladder, Widberg had saved himself from being swept overboard; thereupon joining Lewis in the bitterly cold sea. He then managed, while being

constantly slammed and buffeted by seawater, to work his way up two decks to the bridge. During the entire time, the OOD was standing on the port bridge wing looking down on the salvage operations occurring only 20 feet away. He was probably the very first to know of the Man Overboard. He saw it happen.

At the same time, as Don Bash attempted to emerge onto the deck via a water-tight door, the wind and seas ripped the heavy blast-shield from the hedgehog mount—sending it careening into the door that Bash was trying to exit to aid the stricken men—knocking him back inside, uninjured but shaken. Had he been outside, the missile might have cut him in two. By this time the *“Man Overboard Astern”* was piped and all hands managed to muster at their appointed stations. The CO attempted to bring the ship about, but there was no way the ship could have safely come about in those mountainous seas. As predicted earlier by the captain, the winds were using the over-sized balloon shack as a sail. It was also later reported that the anemometer cups—used to indicate wind speed—blew off at 130 knots. The wind force was *that* great. Also, Dick Wilkens, and the radar gang were watching the ship’s struggle to turn. Dick states that, *“She couldn’t get her bow to come about. The wind force was too great.”* The *McCulloch*—acting like a cork in a bathtub being agitated by the bather—was at the mercy of the relentless perturbation.

Meanwhile, one fluorescent life ring, a floating Stokes Litter, and anything else that could float, was thrown over the side in hopes that Lewis would see it and swim for it. Furthermore, a large five-man rubber life raft was also heaved overboard in a vain attempt to save the drifting seaman. Yet the last that Ed Widberg remembers seeing of Jack Lewis was a vision of him—right after he went over—arms outstretched, floating apparently unconscious, in the frigid water.

“It is not yet your time”

The “Exec” had one leg over the taffrail, ready to jump in, (as was Widberg), when fortunately or not—depending on your point of view—another wave came along, marking an end to that endeavor. The scene on the fantail was shrouded in salt sea spray and mountainous swells, the decks awash, likewise the fantail, all in all a dangerous location, as the subdued rescuers realized that Jack Lewis was gone ... he couldn’t have lasted for very long in those cold waters ... Shortly after, the order was given to secure rescue stations. Silence permeated the ship. The old adage: “*You have to go out...*” had, indeed, proven very true.

The crew was soon brought out of their state of quiet grief by the orders from the Executive Officer to clear the weather decks. According to CDR Wayne’s report, seconded by LTJG Fred Herzberg, when the first damage assessment was gathered, it was noted with trepidation that the ship was in worse shape than initially anticipated. The Jack Staff was snapped-off in the middle and had lost the top half; all forward steel cable lifelines were loosened and dangling; the five inch gun mount itself—due to continual pounding—had loosened at the base and water was leaking into the five-inch ammunition handling room below; the chain lockers were flooded; the paint locker half flooded; deck plates near the smoke-stack buckled, and (the report further reads), “*the expansion joint [frame 70] was opening and closing like an accordion.*” And, to top it all off, the wayward ready box was still not secure. The errant ammunition box—having worked itself free—slid down the port boat deck, heavily damaging the ladder leading to the bridge, wrecked a large rubber lifeboat rack located under the bridge wing—and with the continuous rising of the bow with each new 45-plus-foot wave—wandered on its merry way, knocking down ladders and life rails, while rolling astern. It bounced and banged along, nearly shearing off the galley ventilator.

The box finally came to rest against the forward boat davit, where it was hastily secured. It was a miracle that, during all this action, the ammo inside the box didn’t arm and explode!

The towering seas were also taking a toll of the human element aboard. A cook was knocked unconscious as he ran from the berthing area to the Mess Deck. His forehead struck the low combing of the watertight door, an all-too-common occurrence during heavy seas. He was immediately carried to sickbay. Despite the fact that about half the crew was seasick, they continued their assigned tasks; some with bucket in hand. The overpowering sickness smell permeated every working space aboard ship.

The storm was, by the afternoon 3 January, at its peak. The winds were howling like coyotes, and the waves had increased to a 50-foot height. The distance between white-capped crests was shorter—perhaps two ship’s lengths—causing the seas to break heavily. The Captain states “*From the bridge we could look up at solid water bearing down on the vessel, and often coming aboard.*” Adding: “*It reminded me of the worst storm conditions I had ever seen on the Columbia River Bar, except that the vessel took a beating for hours, instead of minutes, as when crossing the bar.*” During the worst 36 hours, the bow kept rising over wave crests, pounding mightily into the following trough—frequently getting smashed from above by the breakers of the next crest. All this hammering continued wrecking the ship. The captain later recorded that “*with engines running dead slow (100 rpm’s) the ship [barely] maintained steerage, making about two knots.*” Occasionally, the ship’s head would slew about 20 degrees and be brought back by extra engine power. He added that, “*I questioned how any vessel could endure such punishment without at least opening a seam.*” By the 4th, even that awful prediction came true.

In the early hours of 4 January, Captain Wayne had been informed that the O-1 deck; the main deck as well, had suffered cracks along the seams, and was taking on small amounts of water. The pounding and twisting of the hull apparently stressed the plating and caused a buckle on the port bow near the waterline. This was discovered inside a magazine where frames 46-49 were dished inward. The frames were under heavy compression, equal to a hammer on nail effect ... every time the seas pounded on the main deck, like a giant fist hammering the ship with every wave, more damage was done. It was also discovered that there appeared to be a crack in a deck seam, running on a line of welds clear across the superstructure deck just abaft the wheelhouse; chartroom area.

Commander Wayne sent a message to Commander Eastern Area within minutes of the loss of Jack Lewis to apprise him of the situation. Many messages followed during the next few days discussing the critical situation. The "*Mac*" was assessed as being in really sad shape. Still, she endeavored to maintain station. Finally, for possibly the first time in Coast Guard history, the operational commander ordered a vessel to abandon station without a relieving cutter in sight: To exit Bravo; to sail home...

Moreover, the wind had abated, making it less than 45-plus knots, the seas about 35 feet, but still breaking. A 180 degree turn was attempted, with the bridge crew hoping the attempt to turn in the still heavy seas would not accentuate the damages; thereby causing the seams to widen. Nevertheless, the rocking turn was accomplished on Sunday morning without rolling beyond 45 degrees. The ship ran at one-third speed before the wind for 48 hours and reached the safety of Hamilton Inlet in Labrador on 6 January. That afternoon the storm center moved northward. The barometer *finally* started rising—*from a minimum reading of 28.35 inches!* Yet, according to Ed

Widberg's testimony, "*After a two day sail [the ship], was met by high crashing waves, against the shore [and cliffs of Hamilton Inlet].* It was also reported from Goose Bay that Hamilton Inlet was frozen over. (Goose Bay is the furthest point from the open ocean). However, the entrance to the Inlet was not frozen. The damaged ship limped slowly into the harbor. Fred Herzberg recalls: "*I had been in Hamilton Inlet many times on the icebreaker, Westwind. This time, however, it was different. The water was milky, not foam; not froth, but pure white as in a glass of milk.*" He adds: "*My thought was, all this needs is one ice crystal and it would instantly become a solid field.*" Luckily, that didn't happen. And, in the protection of the bay, they had time to assess damages, make minor repairs and prepare to go to sea—destination, Argentina, Newfoundland!

Furthermore, during this period (4-7 January), the situation was discussed in messages between Commander, Eastern Area and *McCulloch*. According to Widberg, on the 8th, while still fighting heavy seas and erratic winds, the greatly damaged *McCulloch* reached Argentina. The island was a wonderfully welcome sight to all aboard the "*Mac*." Ed remembers that: "*From the ship, huge trucks with tall snow blowers were seen trying to clear roads to the piers.*" There were times when none of the crew of the "*Mac*" ever thought they would make it back. And, after hearing reports that other cutters had been very busy during the storm, with reports of the merciless pounding other shipping had sustained during the catastrophe, they felt very lucky, indeed! The Coast Guard reported that the Boston-based fishing trawler, *Winchester*, trying to battle its way home through perilous icing conditions, had reported that she had to stop every few minutes to de-ice, as she was in immediate danger of capsizing—and was doing so with a critically injured man aboard. About 200 miles south-

East of Fall River, Massachusetts, the CGC *Half Moon* rendezvoused with the American Freighter, *African Dawn*, as the latter [*Boston Globe* quote], “ran before a 50-knot wind in an effort to ease the strain on a 12-foot crack in its main deck.” Furthermore, a Gloucester dragger, the *St. Nicholas*, skippered by a father of six, Captain Thomas Parsisi, 43, steamed into a roaring northwester coupled with a blinding snowstorm off Canso, Nova Scotia, to rescue four men from the wreck of a Canadian fishing boat, *Robert E. Brien*. Such were the adventures of the period.

The *McCulloch* topped off her fuel tanks, and in the teeth of the second storm, sailed for Boston for the major repairs. The now-tired vessel—a mangled warrior of old who could hardly hold his shield up, nor swing his sword arm after a hard-fought battle—slowly staggered home. Meanwhile, the cutter, *Cook Inlet*, out of Portland, Maine, had sailed to take over Bravo station.

The “*Mighty Mac*” had truly earned her nickname and three days later she arrived in homeport. Ironically, Boston was fogged in to add to the adventure. “*Mac*” inched her way from pierhead to pierhead, like an old weary horse she headed for the barn. She was greeted by the media, friends, and well-wishers as she tied-up. The media were invited aboard to record and photograph the damage, as were friends and family to show them the battered Lady and tell the tales of what they had been through. After several weeks spent in Boston repairing the major damage (saving the non-critical damage for the CG Yard in Baltimore a few months later), the “*Mac*” sailed for a more agreeable, *Echo* ocean station, as it was decided that the ship must continue her schedule. *Semper Paratus* (Always Ready) did indeed apply....

Commander Wayne summed it up rather dramatically when he later said, after thinking about the trip for a while: “*I have been through five hurricanes, or near hurricanes on various Coast Guard Cutters, but this was the worst storm I had ever experienced. It was the only time I ever worried about a ship’s ability to survive.*” Yet survive she surely did!

CURRENT PROJECTS

During a recent visit to the Coast Guard Academy, Foundation volunteers became involved in several projects of immediate interest.

Tour Guide: The academy has had a visitors tour guide for many years. On close inspection we discovered that there were significant errors in fact and in leaving an impression that was not altogether true. The guide is being revised and your Foundation will make the final review to insure accuracy.

Cadet Indoctrination: Soon after arriving at the Academy, the new Fourthclassmen, (freshmen), are conducted around the grounds by Second Classmen (juniors) and given a briefing on the history represented by the names on the buildings and streets. A college junior trying to relate the actions of old sea dogs to teenagers does not impart much immediacy. We suggested and arranged for some genuine old sea dogs, retired Academy graduates in the surrounding area to take on the program.

Cadet Involvement in Coast Guard History: In meeting with the Superintendent of the Academy and his wife Rear Admiral Jim and Clarke Van Sice, she suggested greater involvement by cadets in learning about and preserving recent and current history. This project is just getting underway.

EDITORIAL

'TIS THE SEASON

At this time of year many of our thoughts turn to those we love and to those we appreciate. Some of us even turn to thoughts of income taxes due in April. Those two concepts may seem incompatible, but are they really? You can satisfy both concepts by purchasing memberships in The Foundation For Coast Guard History for friends and for family. The membership cost is deductible on your income taxes as a contribution to a non-profit organization (501.c.3 in IRS jargon). Outright contributions are deductible as well. You will have reduced your income tax bite and will have given a thoughtful meaningful gift to someone who shares your appreciation for the heritage of the United States Coast Guard.

History is not just about stuffy old stuff that happened in the last century. It is about events that happened as recently as last week. New heroes are being created every day and we need to honor them while they are still with us, while their deeds are still fresh, while they can tell not only what happened, but how they felt while it was happening and why they did what they did.

Piecing together the events of a century or two ago is like trying to put together a giant jigsaw puzzle where many of the pieces are missing. What was the picture then? What really happened and why? Our historians have to make educated guesses when working in the past.

Today's history is like putting together a giant jigsaw puzzle where there may be too many pieces. People's emotions may confuse the scene. But rather have too many pieces than too few. That is part of why the Foundation exists. Help us collect the litany of events and record all that is available. Future historians will at least have sufficient information to make reasoned judgments. Your contributions do make a difference.-Memoria Semper.- Fred

MORE CURRENT PROJECTS

Civilian Academy Instructor: In addition to the grants described in the last issue of *The Cutter*, your membership fees area funding research on the life and times of the first and, for a considerable period, the only civilian faculty member of the then Revenue Cutter School of Instruction. His life covers experiences in the Civil War and Academy time from 1877 to 1890. When completed this will be a valuable addition to our history. Your contributions area making this possible.

Early Helicopters: Several years ago we prepared a filmed oral history of RADM Peter V. Colmar. Part of that history involved RADM Colmars involvement with the development of the helicopter. A producer for the History Channel may be using some of that sequence in a documentary being prepared about early helicopters. Your contributions make this possible.

Arts Program: The Foundation sponsors a series of awards programs as described in the last issue of *The Cutter*. The programs have focused on the written word. Yet there is a great need to encourage work in the visual arts as well. We are trying to start an award program to encourage work in painting (oil, watercolor or whatever) and another program in photography. We need someone to chair a committee, prepare criteria and act as judges in each of these areas. Your suggestions are urgently requested.

Essay Contest: Although we grant awards to those who write books, not everyone has the time and energy to devote to such an endeavor. However there are many people who do have experiences that they might like to share. An essay contest could be the outlet for authors on a different level. We need someone to volunteer to operate such a program. Essays could be published in *The Cutter*. (see next page)

**This page deliberately left blank,
awaiting essays by members and
friends of:**

**The Foundation For Coast Guard
History.**

**You can fill this page with essays, art
or photographs. The time is now.**