

A Legacy: The United States Life-Saving Service

by

Dr. Dennis L. Noble

The United States Coast Guard is noted for many accomplishments, but foremost in the public's mind is the Service's efforts in helping those "in peril upon the seas." Indeed, all of the various federal agencies that were brought together to form the modern day United States Coast Guard dealt in some manner with assisting those that were in distress or in helping the prevention of loss of life at sea.

The U.S. Lighthouse Service, for example, maintained lighthouses and sea markers to warn ships from danger. Lighthouse keepers also helped people who were in danger close to their stations. Each year the annual reports of the Service were filled with the accounts of keepers saving lives. The cutters of the U. S. Revenue Cutter Service assisted mariners in distress offshore. The Service began winter cruising, in 1831, to provide rescue craft when sailing ships were most likely to run afoul of bad weather. The Steamboat Inspection Service was established in 1838 in an effort to prevent disasters before they occurred. Despite the many accomplishments of these agencies, the organization that contributed the most to the U.S. Coast Guard's image as a lifesaver was the U.S. Life-Saving Service. It is important that the story of this Service be detailed, for many of the U.S. Coast Guard's procedures in search and rescue can be traced to this small service.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries large sections of the United States' eastern seaboard were sparsely populated. The crew of any ship running aground could expect very little, if any, help. As maritime trade increased, so did the demand for assistance for those wrecked near the shore. The chances of ships running aground is illustrated by examining the approaches to the nineteenth century port of New York, at the time the fastest growing city on the eastern seaboard. A sailing ship had to make a long funnel-like approach to the busy port, with the coast of New Jersey on the one side and the coast of Long Island, New York, on the other. During a strong noreaster, a sailing craft could be driven upon New Jersey's lee shore. Both coasts contained sandbars located between 300 to 800 yards offshore. In a storm, any ship stranded on the sandbars usually went to pieces within a few hours. Few people could survive a 300 yard swim in 40 degree storm-tossed surf. Even if a few sailors managed somehow to reach the beach in winter, they stood a good chance of perishing from exposure on the largely uninhabited shore. On January 2, 1837 for example, the American bark Mexico wrecked on the New Jersey coast and all 112 emigrant passengers on board were lost.

The concept of assistance to shipwrecked mariners from shore based stations began with volunteer lifesaving services, spearheaded by the Massachusetts Humane Society. It was recognized that only small boats stood a chance in assisting those close to the beach. A sailing ship trying to help near to the shore stood a good chance of also running aground, especially if

there were heavy onshore winds. The Massachusetts Humane Society founded the first lifeboat station at Cohasset, Massachusetts. The stations were small shed-like structures, holding rescue equipment that was to be used by volunteers in case of a wreck. The stations, however, were only near the approaches to busy ports and, thus, large gaps of coastline remained without lifesaving equipment.

In 1848 the federal government entered the shore based lifesaving business. William A. Newell, a Congress-man from New Jersey, made a "vigorous and victorious" appeal to Congress for \$10,000 to provide "surf boats, rockets, carronades and other necessary apparatus for the better preservation of life and property from ship- wrecks on the coasts of New Jersey....." The Massachusetts Humane Society also requested, and received, funds for stations on the coastline. The stations were to be administered by the U.S. Revenue Marine (later called the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service), within the Treasury Department. Actually, once the stations were built, they were run like a volunteer fire department, but without anyone in charge, nor any inspection system to insure that men and equipment were up to standards.

The lifesaving system managed to continue under this type of organization for the next six years. Then a strong storm swept the East Coast in 1854. Many sailors died because there were not enough lifesaving stations and equipment had not been properly cared for. One town, in fact, used its lifeboat "alternately as a trough for mixing mortar and a tub for scalding hogs." Again, Congress appropriated funds for more stations. This time, however, some of the money was used to employ a full-time keeper at each station. Also included was money to hire two superintendents to supervise the stations along the New Jersey and Long Island coasts. The problems, however, continued. As one old salt recalled, the 'only person on duty was a keeper who received \$200 a year, and if he discovered a vessel in distress he had to collect a volunteer crew.

Along the wilds of Barnegat Beach, New Jersey a keeper would have to tramp miles before he could get a crew together, and perhaps by the time they reached the station, the vessel would be broken up and all hands lost.

The American Civil War caused the neglect of the government's shore based lifesaving network. This neglect continued until 1870, when another vicious storm ripped into the East Coast and many lives were lost. Newspaper editors began to call for reform to "check the terrible fatalities off our dangerous coasts" and to revamp the lifesaving system so that sailors could depend upon help "in the future." The year 1871 marked a turning point in the history of shore based federal lifesaving efforts.

Sumner Increase Kimball, a young lawyer from Maine, was appointed, in 1871, the chief of the Treasury Department's Revenue Marine Division. One of his first acts was to send Captain John Faunce, of the U.S. Revenue Marine, on an inspection of the lifesaving network. Faunce noted that rescue "apparatus was rusty for want of care and some of it ruined," some keepers were too old, few were competent, and politics had more influence in the selection of keepers than qualifications for handling boats. In short, the report painted a dismal picture.

Kimball, using his own political know-how and reinforced with Faunce's report, proceeded to completely remake the lifesaving network. He succeeded in gaining an appropriation of \$200,000 and Congress authorized the Secretary of the Treasury to employ crews of surfmen wherever they were needed and for as long as they were needed. Kimball instituted six-man boat crews at all stations, built new stations, drew up regulations with standards of performance for crew members, set station routines, set physical standards, and, in short, set the organization on the road to professionalization.

The number of stations increased. In 1874, the stations were expanded to include the coast of Maine and ten locations south of Cape Henry, Virginia, including the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The next year, the network expanded to include the Delaware-Maryland-Virginia peninsula, the Great Lakes, and the coast of Florida. Eventually, the Gulf and West Coasts would be included, as well as one station at Nome, Alaska.

In 1878 the growing network of lifesaving stations was finally organized as a separate agency of the Treasury Department and named the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Sumner I. Kimball was chosen as the General Superintendent of the Service. Kimball held tight reign over the Service and, in fact, remained the only General Superintendent of the organization. The law which created the U.S. Coast Guard in 1915, also provided for the retirement of Kimball. The Service's reputation for honest, efficient, and non-partisan administration, plus performance of duty, can be largely attributed to the efforts of this one man.

The stations of the Service fell into three broad categories: lifesaving, lifeboat, and houses of refuge. Lifesaving stations were manned by full-time crews during the period when wrecks were most likely to occur. On the East Coast this was usually from November to April, and was called the "active season." By the turn of the century, the active season was year-round. Most stations were in isolated areas and crewmen had to be able to perform open beach launchings. That is, they were required to launch their boats from the beach into the surf.

Before the turn of the century, there were very few recreational boaters and most assistance cases came from ships engaged in commerce.

Lifeboat stations were located at or near port cities. Here, deep water, combined with piers and other waterfront structures, allowed the launching of heavy lifeboats directly into the water by marine railways on inclined ramps. In general, lifeboat stations were located on the Great Lakes, but some lifesaving stations were situated in the more isolated areas of the lakes. The active season on the Great Lakes stretched from April to December.

Houses of refuge made up the third, and last, class of Life Saving Service units. These stations were located on the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. A paid keeper and a small boat were assigned to each house, but the organization did not include active manning and rescue attempts. It was felt that along this stretch of coastline, shipwrecked sailors would not die of exposure to the cold in the winter as in the north. Therefore, only shelters would be needed. The first stations consisted of one building measuring 42 by 18 feet. As the Service grew, so did the size of the stations. The early buildings were strictly utilitarian, but by the 1880s, they were becoming more fashionable and usually were made up of two or three structures. The main

building contained the offices, boat house, and berthing area for the crew. It usually had a lookout tower on the roof. Some were built to resemble a Swiss chalet and one was even designed with a clock tower. By the 1890s, the architect A. B. Bibb designed stations that looked much like beach resort homes with lookout towers.

The Life-Saving Service operated under a dual chain of command. The Life-Saving District Superintendents reported directly to Kimball and were responsible for most of the administrative matters of the stations, including such matters as pay and supply. The other channel of command was the Inspector of Life Saving Stations, a Captain in the U.S. Revenue Marine Service. The inspector assigned assistant inspectors, usually lieutenants of the U.S. Revenue Marine Service, to each district and they were responsible for the operational matters concerning the Service. The assistant inspectors held drills, investigations, and so forth. The Inspector of the Life-Saving Service also reported to Kimball, thus creating a system of checks and balances.

The U.S. Life-Saving Service had two means of rescuing people on board ships stranded near shore: by boat and by a strong line stretched from the beach to the wrecked vessel. The Service's boats were either a 700 to 1,000 pound, self-bailing, self-righting surfboat pulled by six surfmen with twelve to eighteen foot oars, or a two to four ton lifeboat. The surfboat could be pulled on a cart by crewmen, or horses, to a site near a wreck and then launched into the surf. The lifeboat, following a design originated in England, could be fitted with sails for work further offshore and was used in very heavy weather. Some crews, at first, viewed the lifeboat with skepticism because of its great weight and bulk. The skepticism soon changed and crews began to regard it as "something almost supernatural," for it enabled them to provide assistance "when the most powerful tugs and steam-craft refused to go out of the harbor. ..."

When a ship wrecked close to shore and the seas were too rough for boats, then the Service could use another method to reach the stranded mariners by stringing a strong hawser (line) from the shore to the ship. To propel the line to the ship, a cannon-like gun, called the Lyle gun, was used. This shot a projectile up to 600 yards. The projectile carried a small messenger line by which the shipwrecked sailors were able to pull out the heavier hawser.

Once the line was secure, a life car could be pulled back and forth between the wreck and the safety of the shore. The life car looked like a tiny, primitive submarine. The life car could be hauled over, through, or even under the seas. After the hatch in the top of the car was sealed, there was enough air within the device to accommodate eleven people for three minutes. It is hard to envision eleven people crowding into the car's small compartment but, as one surfman put it, people "in that extremity are not apt to stand on the order of their going."

Typically, a life car carried four to six people. Life cars were heavy and difficult to handle. Also, as those in distress evolved from crowded immigrant packets with many on board to small commercial schooners with less than a dozen on board, the life car was widely replaced by the breeches buoy. A breeches buoy resembles a life preserver ring with canvas pants attached. It could be pulled out to the ship by pulleys, enabling the endangered sailor to step into the life ring and pants and then be pulled to safety much more easily than the heavier life car.

A beach apparatus cart carried all the equipment needed to rig the breeches buoy and could be pulled by the crew or horses to the wreck site. The boats, beach apparatus, and life cars were only as good as the surfmen who served in the U.S. Life-Saving Service. The man in charge of the station, officially known as the keeper, was called captain by his crew and was an expert in the handling of small boats and men.

Superintendents of the Life-Saving Districts were responsible for the selection of the keepers, who, in turn, were responsible for selecting the crews. Both keepers and crews were examined by a board of inspectors made up of an officer of the Revenue Marine Service, a surgeon of the Marine Hospital Service (later called the U.S. Public Health Service), and an expert surfman to determine their health, character, and skill. Keepers were required to be able bodied, of good character and habits, able to read and write and be under forty-five years of age and a master at handling boats, especially in rough weather.

Most keepers tended to have long experience at fishing, or other maritime occupations, or had worked their way steadily through the ranks of the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Although many of the keepers transferred from station to station, a great many of the men remained at one station, or within a small radius.

The long years of service in one area made the men experts on the weather and surf conditions. Furthermore, because the keepers tended to select men from the local community for their crews, the units of the Service, unlike many government agencies, remained principally a local affair. The men who made up the crews of the Service were known as surfmen, because those on the East Coast, where the Service began, launched their boats from open beaches into the surf. Surfmen could be no older than forty-five and had to be physically fit and adept at handling an oar. A glance at the muster rolls of the Service shows that most surfmen listed their occupations before entering the Life-Saving Service as "fisherman" or "mariner." The number of men composing a crew was determined by the number of oars needed to pull the largest boat at the station. This meant the crews ranged from six to eight, but by the turn of the century, some stations were staffed with at least ten men. Because keepers selected the crews, regulations were enacted to prevent nepotism. Many surfmen, like the keepers, remained at one station for long periods of time, but some moved on to other stations in order to be promoted. Surfmen were ranked by order of their experience, with Surfman Number 1 being the most experienced and second in command of a station.

In 1889, the Service became uniformed. The idea grew from stations on the Great Lakes which had adopted a naval uniform. Initially, this did not result in an esprit de corps but instead resulted in a shout of outrage. The surfmen were expected to pay for the uniforms out of their meager salaries.

The rescues performed by the men of the U.S. Life-Saving Service captured the attention of nineteenth century America. Indeed, the sight of a keeper standing erect in the stern of his small boat, grasping his sweep oar, urging on his men at their oars as the boat rose and fell in high surf, could cause a reporter to write exciting copy. Terms such as "soldiers of the surf" and "storm warriors" were used to describe the lifesavers. The men did perform amazing rescues, but by far

the largest amount of work for the crews revolved around drilling (practicing) with the rescue equipment, patrol and lookout duty, and general station upkeep.

Each day of the week, except Sunday, the surfmen were expected to drill or clean. On Mondays and Thursdays, for example, the crew practiced with the beach apparatus. The surfmen had to complete the entire procedure of rigging the equipment, including firing the Lyle gun at a practice pole shaped like a ship's mast. When the district inspectors arrived, the entire drill had to be completed within five minutes or the man slowing the operation could be dismissed from the Service.

On Tuesday, the men were expected to practice with their boats. The craft were to be launched and landed through the surf. In order to have the men react automatically in an emergency, the boats would be deliberately capsized and righted. This was a great crowd pleaser, one observer noting that "no sight is more impressive."

The remainder of the week was taken up with practice in signaling and first aid. Saturdays were devoted to cleaning the station. All of the drills, while not overly technical, were constantly hammered into the crew, which, in turn, insured that the men would react quickly and automatically during an emergency. This would pay large dividends when the surf was running and danger was high.

There remained one other important duty that took up a large portion of the surfmen's routine, lookout and patrol duties. During the daylight hours, a surfman was assigned to scan the nearby water areas from the lookout tower. No seats were kept in the tower in order to prevent inattention to duty.

At night, or when the weather grew foul, the surfmen performed beach patrols. Originally, the patrol distances were set up so that the beach patrol would meet the patrol from its neighboring station, thus providing a good coverage for isolated shorelines. As more and more of the coast came under the watchful eye of the Service, it became impossible to provide such coverage. In the areas where overlapping patrols could not be maintained, the surfmen patrolled for five miles or more. At the end of his patrol, there would be a stake with a patrol-clock key attached. The key was inserted into the patrol clock and the surfman would be able to prove that he had completed the patrol.

The beaches many times were "clad with ice" and, at best, were "pathless deserts in the night." Often times "the soft sand, bewildering snowfalls, overwhelming winds, and bitter cold," threatened to stop the men. Surfmen bundled up in oilskins and carried a patrol clock, if patrols did not overlap, and a pouch of coston signals. The coston signal was much like a flare and was used to warn ships that were approaching too close to the beach, or to let grounded ships know that they had been spotted and help was on the way. Mariners were fortunate that beach patrols were run in all weather. In 1899, for example, surfmen burning coston signals warned off 143 ships in danger of running aground. In October of the same year, Surfman Rasmus Midgett, of the Gull Shoals, North Carolina, Station, accomplished the amazing feat of rescuing ten people single-handedly from the wrecked Priscilla while on patrol.

The greatest days of the Service covered the ten years from 1871 to 1881. These were the years of its greatest growth and some of its greatest rescues were performed during this period. As the nineteenth century began to edge closer to the twentieth, however, two major problems began to develop for the Service. First, with the advent of steam powered ships, the age of sail was coming to an end. With improved navigational technology, ships were less at the mercy of the wind and were in less danger of being driven into the beach. Secondly, at the turn of the century, the U.S. Life-Saving Service noted the increase of gasoline powered small boats, especially those used for recreational purposes. For example, the amount of cases involving these boats increased fifty-eight percent from 1905 to 1914. The Service was not equipped for this type of work. To be sure, it had experimented with motor lifeboats as early as 1899. Keeper Henry Clare, of the Marquette, Michigan, Station tested a 34-foot lifeboat equipped with a two cylinder, twelve horsepower Superior engine. By 1905, twelve power boats were in operation. It was, however, too little too late. The Service was essentially set up to move boats, or beach apparatus, by cart to the site of a major shipwreck. The procedures required to do this were fast enough for sailing and steam ships, but not for large numbers of pleasure boats.

Other problems developed. There was no retirement system, nor any compensation for injured crewmen. Salaries became too low to attract new men and, with no retirement, it became difficult to gain promotion. By 1914 there "were instances of keepers in their seventies manning the customary sweep oar while the strokes were manned by men in their sixties." In 1914, after years of trying to obtain a retirement system, Kimball agreed that a merger of the U.S. Revenue Cutter System and the U.S. Life-Saving Service would be best for both services and the country. The law which created the U.S. Coast Guard, on 28 January 1915, by combining the two services, also provided for the retirement of Kimball and many of the older keepers and surfmen. The U.S. Life-Saving Service performed nobly over its forty-four years of existence. During this period, "28,121 vessels and 178,741 persons became involved with its services." Only "1,455 individuals lost their lives while exposed within the scope of Life-Saving Service operations. The legacy of the U.S. Life Saving Service is great. The organization Kimball formed provided the basis for the new U.S. Coast Guard's search and rescue organization for years to come. Indeed, one can find little fault with the drills and organization of Kimball's routine. As late as 1959, U.S. Coast Guard Lifeboat Stations on the Great Lakes were still following a modified version of the old Life-Saving Service's schedule for drills. For example, beach apparatus drills were still being held weekly to provide first aid and signaling practice. Further, lookout tower watches were also still in effect. The constant attention to practice with rescue equipment and inspections is still in use today. In short, the good practices of the Life-Saving Service remained in effect.

Kimball's organization also allowed a small crew to perform a large mission. The perception of a small service doing a big job is as true for today's Coast Guard as it was for yesterday's Life-Saving Service. For instance, the average size of many U.S. Coast Guard stations in 1959 was no more than fifteen. Technology, however, has helped the U.S. Coast Guard to perform its mission more efficiently. Better motor lifeboats have increased the range of rescue efforts. Helicopters have greatly increased the ability to help those in distress. In fact, the combination of better boats and helicopters eventually caused the closure of many stations. In 1915, for example, there were twenty-nine life-saving stations on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Today, because of the impact of technology, there are now eight stations in the same area.

The United States Coast Guard, building upon the strong foundation established by the U.S. Life-Saving Service, and adding its own efforts, has become the recognized expert in search and rescue over the water. The development of the 36 and 44 foot motor lifeboats, the establishment of a search and rescue school, and the use of the helicopters have increased the U.S. Coast Guard's reputation as the leading agency for those "in peril upon the seas."

Today, the men and women of the U.S. Coast Guard carry on the traditions of service to others established by the crews of the U.S. Life-Saving Service; but with more sophisticated equipment, they are able to surpass the records of their illustrious predecessor.