

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

A HISTORY OF CHICAGO

By

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Although the modern Coast Guard was not organized until January 28, 1915 its predecessor, the U.S. Life-Saving Service was well established in the area, but they were predated by several volunteer students from Northwestern University.

The annals of lifesaving began on a wind swept Lake Michigan in the middle of the 19th century. It was on the morning of September 8, 1860 when the passenger steamer LADY ELGIN, in route to Milwaukee, collided with the cargo schooner AUGUSTA, in the dark off Highland Park, Illinois.

At first light, cries for help were heard below the bluffs at Winnetka and Glencoe, as survivors struggled in the surf amidst the wreckage of the ill-fated ship. Some of the first to respond to their cries were several students from the Garrett Biblical Institute (Northwestern University) and among them Edward Spencer and Charles Fowler, who were able to save 17 lives. Laying on the beach in exhaustion that afternoon Spencer said, "did we do our best". The AUGUSTA, sailing on in the dark was not aware of the sinking until she arrived in the Chicago River that morning.

The students never forgot the LADY ELGIN, and on subsequent lifesaving missions rescued the entire crews from the schooner STORM, in 1864, and the SEA BIRD and ARROW, in 1869 off Northwestern University. Yet, it was not until 1870, when Commodore Murray, USN gave the University a 26' lifeboat to assist the students in their rescue operations..

With the industrial development of the Great Lakes after the Civil War, and its natural highway for commerce, the Federal Government, under the Revenue Marine Bureau of the Treasury Department, began an energetic program of building Surf Stations throughout the country to be manned by local volunteers. Knowing that the students at Northwestern were all ready operating a boat, the Bureau built a boathouse on the University's Campus in 1875. With the passage of the Organic Act, on June 18, 1878, Congress created the U.S. Life-Saving Service, completely separated from the Revenue Marine Bureau, which marked the end of the all volunteer status these Surf Stations enjoyed.

The Surf Station, on the South bank of the Chicago River, which had opened on May 25, 1877, was also taken over by the Life-Saving Service. It would now be known as the Chicago Life-Saving Station, and the University Station, as the Evanston Life-Saving Station.

With the industrialization of the greater Chicago area in the last quarter of the 19th century it became apparent that the two existing stations were inadequate to handle the increase of water born commerce as Chicago had become the gateway to the Midwest. Two new stations were planned South of the Old Chicago Station, and on May 3, 1890 the South Chicago Station became operational at the mouth of the Calumet River. With the increase of pleasure boating, the second station became operational on July 1, 1892 at Jackson Park. All the area stations were manned by 8 to 10 surfmen including the Captain, during the open water season.

The records show that most of these stations were operating 26' Whitehall Dinghy or a Higgins & Gifford pulling surfboat of six oars prior to 1884. In that year, they received a Long Branch, and in 1890, a 25' Monomoy surfboat. All of the above could also be rigged for sail, which was used as often as possible. It would not be until the turn of the century that the ultimate improvement was made when Lieutenant C. H. Mc Lellan, of the Revenue Cutter Service and Henry Cleary, of the Life-Saving Service by installing an internal combustion engine, creating the first motorized surfboat.

For almost four decades the Life-Saving Service, kept vigilant watch along Chicago's lake front from Waukegan to Gary, with most of their search and rescues being routine with a minimum loss of life considering the volume of vessel traffic. However, there were some exceptions. Note worthy of these was the loss of the steamer CALUMET, off Highland Park, on November 28, 1889 for which Captain Lawrence O. Lawson, and his crew of volunteer students were awarded the Gold Life Saving Medal, for saving the entire crew of 18.

History was to repeat itself in the lingering glow of past glory, for almost six years to the day of the daring rescue of the Calumet; Lawson and his crew were called upon to perform a feat of equal daring. The steamer J. EMORY OWEN, with two consorts in tow, the schooner MICHIGAN and ELIZABETH A. OWEN, ran aground off Glencoe, on November 29, 1895. Twelve times Captain Lawson and his crew crossed the angry surf line until all 36 crewmembers were safe on shore. Today Lawrence O. Lawson, Surfman Extraordinary is regarded as the Father of Lifesaving in the Chicago area.

In 1912, the Taft Administration began to investigate how they might reorganize government in an effort to eliminate duplication and waste in the various bureaus. A commission was appointed to make recommendations on how best this could be achieved. It was the Secretary of the Treasury Franklin McVeigh whose recommendation was accepted. It would unite the Life-Saving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service into one as they had worked together for many years. On January 28, 1915 President Wilson, signed bill 28 Stat. 800 into law creating the United States Coast Guard.

The term Coast Guard, was not new. It had been used during the War with Mexico in 1846, and again during the Civil War, when referring to the Revenue Cutter Service. The motto of the Life-Saving Service had been Remis Velisqui; "by means of oar and sail" no longer seemed appropriate in the 20th century. The new service would adopt the Revenue Cutters motto Sampar Paratus; "always prepared".

The transition was not immediate, particularly in personnel. The Coast Guard could not maintain a volunteer membership and retain its credibility as a military organization. Although the Life-Saving Service had been a quasi-military establishment, it was not an armed force capable of repelling or containing an aggressor and enforcing federal law. The Coast Guard had to transfer qualified surfmen and cuttermen from other units or enlist and train new men to fill the billets that would be left by the volunteers.

On all shore units signs were put up that read U. S. Coast Guard, and the term Lifesaving Station was changed to Lifeboat Station. It was an indication of the influence that the Revenue Cutter Service had on the U.S. Coast Guard.

Soon after the formation of the U.S. Coast Guard, tragedy struck on the morning of July 24, 1915 when the excursion vessel SS EASTLAND, capsized in the Chicago River, between La Salle and

Clark Street. Over 800 men, women and children lost their lives and it was the grim task for the crew of the Old Chicago Lifeboat Station, and many others to recover the bodies from the river. It was the largest maritime disaster Chicago has ever witnessed.

Although the Coast Guard had been taken over by the Navy during World War I, it had virtually no impact in the Chicago area with the exception of an occasional parade to sell victory bonds. However, from the Great War came wireless communications and by the 1920's, the first Coast Guard radio station was installed at the Evanston Station.

With the mustering out of servicemen after the war, the various branches became depressed of manpower and so it was with the Coast Guard. On May 14, 1920 it was reported that the Evanston Station was down to two men. The South Chicago and Jackson Park Stations had only their Officers in Charge on board and the Old Chicago Station was down to five men. A shortage of personnel seemed to plague the Coast Guard from its conception and the 1920's and 1930's were no exception.

In the late teens and early 1920's the Coast Guard began replacing their traditional pulling boats with a 25'-10" motor surfboat with a 4-cylinder Buda diesel engine that traveled at 7.6 knots. At the same time the 36' motor lifeboat for heavy weather was introduced and it was powered by a 6-cylinder Buda diesel engine that traveled at 9 knots. Over the years General Motor's diesel engines replaced the Buda engine and many of these boats were in service well into the late 1960's.

In July 1927, the excursion vessel SS FAVORITE capsized about a half mile off of North Avenue during a sudden squall. Over 50 men, women and children were rescued through the efforts of the Coast Guard, local yachtsmen and lifeguards from North Avenue Beach. The Chicago City Council presented the Chicago Lifeboat Station with a citation for their efficiency and professionalism in saving so many lives.

In the mid 1920's the South Chicago Station that was built at the mouth of the Calumet River was moved to Calumet Park, when the sea wall was extended. After which it was referred to as the Calumet Harbor Lifeboat Station. In March 1929, the Evanston Station suffered severe damage during a storm and eroding beach that caused the Coast Guard to abandon the facility. A new station was built at Washington Park, in Wilmette and became operational on June 1, 1931.

Prohibition had no direct effect on any of the Chicago's Lifeboat Stations but its repeal in 1934, was to enhance their operational capabilities. The Coast Guard began distributing their 38' single screw motorboats to all the Stations on the Great Lakes, and Chicago was no exception. It was fast for its day with a 6-cylinder gasoline engine turning out 14 knots. They were dubbed "Picket Boat" because of its duties in running down Rum Runners during prohibition. It became the standard crash boat for search and rescue missions well into the late 1940's.

The year 1939 was a very active for the Coast Guard, in the Chicago area. With rumors of war spreading across Europe, the U.S. military was expanding to meet the inevitable challenge of another world war. On June 23rd the Reserve and Auxiliary Act was passed in anticipation of creating these organizations and on July 1st President Roosevelt signed his Reorganization Order #11 which transferred the U.S. Lighthouse Service, to the Coast Guard. On November 5, 1940 Chicago, was designated for a Captain of the Port, and the Coast Guard opened an office a short time later in the U.S. Custom House, at 610 South Canal Street.

The Motorboat Act of 1940, intensified the Coast Guard's position of not only assisting vessels in distress after the fact, but ensured safety of life, limb and property at sea. Private and commercial vessels would now be inspected to insure that proper equipment was available and used correctly through the creation of Marine Safety Office. At the same time the structure of the Coast Guard was consolidated into clusters called Groups. The Chicago Group, under the Captain of the Port ranged from Waukegan to Gary and to Peoria. It consisted of Stations Wilmette Harbor, Chicago, Jackson Park and Calumet Harbor; the Chicago Light and the Indiana Harbor light.

With World War II raging in Europe in 1941, Congress created the Coast Guard Reserve and Auxiliary on February 19th and these two groups would play a very important roll in Chicago over the next four years. The world situation became critical by October, and on November 1st the President signed Executive Order #8929, which transferred the Coast Guard to the Navy. For all practical purposes the 9th, 10th and 11th Coast Guard Districts ceased to exist and were replaced by the 9th Naval District that was headquartered at Great Lakes, Illinois. The Coast Guard subdivided this vast region into two parts for administrative purposes with offices in Chicago and Cleveland.

The nation was stunned by the attack on Pearl Harbor, yet the military anticipated an attack by Japan, but the unknown factor was when and where. With the formal declaration of war on December 8, 1941 the Chicago Group swung into action. The Captain of the Port issued orders for the security of all waterfront facilities under his authority. The responsibility to implement these orders fell upon the Group Commander, whose standing orders were to maintain complete port security of the Greater Chicago lakefront and inland waterways.

There was much to be done. All boats were painted Navy Gray, small arms were issued, billets were changed and personnel transferred. A numerous number of enlisted never unpacked their sea bags in anticipation of being transferred to sea. In mid 1942, the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation was temporarily transferred to the Coast Guard for the duration, and it would become a permanent part of the Coast Guard in 1946. The Group was now responsible for their traditional duties of search and rescue and her war time duties of guarding docks, bridges, locks, vessels, promoting fire prevention, warehousing and lakefront and inland water patrols they would now maintain all aids to navigation.

In late 1942, it became apparent that complete security could not be accomplished with the manpower and equipment available. To alleviate the situation, 18 privately owned yachts were commandeered for the duration, and the ranks were swelled with civilians, auxiliary, reserve and additional regular personnel. The Chicago area had become the arsenal for LCI's, LCM's, minesweepers, submarines and auxiliary type vessels from the shipyards in Michigan, Wisconsin and Illinois, all passing through the Chicago River and the inland waterway to the Gulf. Lake Carriers and barges from Lake Superior came with the raw materials for the blast furnaces and ships of every size and shape arrived with the essential elements for total war.

At this time, the Navy acquired two coal burning side wheel excursion ships and converted them into aircraft carriers at Detroit and Buffalo. They would be used to train future fighter pilots from Glenwood Naval Air Station in take off and landings and would train flight deck crew destined for the Pacific Theater. The USS SABLE, IX81 and the WOLVERINE, IX64, arrived at Navy Pier, Chicago in August 1942 and operations began immediately. To assist in these operations the Coast Guard brought in three 83' Patrol Craft, the CG-83478, 83479 and 83480 to escort the carriers and several pilots were rescued when they crashed into the lake. A maintenance and repair base was established on board an 80', 57-ton pleasure craft to service the Patrol Craft and was tied

up in the North branch of the river at North Avenue. During the open water season the Patrol Crafts were berthed at the Chicago Station.

With the steady expansion of the war effort by late 1942, it became apparent that the communication system at Wilmette Station was inadequate to handle the volume of radio traffic generated by units on Lake Michigan, Huron and Superior. That same year a site for a new facility was chosen along Dundee Road in Northbrook, with construction beginning immediately and became operational by early 1943. This station was closed on March 1, 1969.

By early 1944, the entire Group was interchangeable. Men were sent where they were needed and performed every sort of job imaginable, from putting out brush and rubbish fires along the banks of the Chicago River to removing logs and debris from the water that might prove a menace to navigation. Chasing suspicious looking individuals and spectators from restricted areas around industrial plants also became their responsibility, as well as checking or issuing identification cards. In all kinds of weather they provided security watches for explosive and cargo loading of vessels and other facilities engaged in the war effort. A Coast Guard fireboat, CG-7300 patrolled from Gary to South Chicago and the Pullman Standard Shipyard in conjunction with the Chicago Fire Department, and as a result no major fires accrued.

It is worth noting that because of the strain and anxiety imposed on everyone during the war, the imagination of some ran rampant with preposterous sightings throughout the Great Lakes. One that prevailed along the Chicago lakefront was the report of a German U-boat off the steel mills. There was no truth to the rumor, but it served its purpose in that boat crews became more alert on their patrols.

With the capitulation of Japan in August 1945, the Group again resumed its peacetime role but for the next ten months it would also serve as a mustering out depot for Guardsmen returning from overseas. At the same time, the Navy relinquished its authority over the Coast Guard and it was returned to its pre-war status. The Coast Guard, like all the other branches of the service underwent congressional economy cuts in personnel and equipment after the war. To save money, several stations in the Group became seasonal that remained open during the open water season and closed during the winter months.

At the close of the 1947 season, the Chicago Group was reduced from an authorized complement of 75 men to 47. Even with this reduced number, the Group turned in an impressive record of 411 cases. The Chicago Station answered 179, Jackson Park 78, Wilmette Harbor 73, Michigan City (which had become part of the Group during the war) 43, Calumet Harbor 38.

In the late 1940's the Coast Guard Reserve was reorganized into Units drilling one weekend per month and two weeks per year on active duty for training. There were three Units located at Forest Park, Great Lakes and Chicago. Eventually, due to a shortage of personnel at the stations within the Chicago Group, these units began augmenting the entire Group. At the same time the Coast Guard Auxiliary was organized into flotillas and began augmentation of the Group from the start.

Tragedy was to strike the North shore on the morning of October 28, 1951 when Wilmette's CG-30315 and her crew, EN1 Max Wage and BM3 Robert Sawyer disappeared on a routine search and rescue case some where off Waukegan. They had gone in response to a report that some duck hunters out on the lake were over due. At first light, Chicago's Captain of the Port, Captain William P. Hawley, sent the following message: TO ALL UNITS - SOUTHERN LAKE MICHIGAN - SITUATION IMMEDIATE - COMMENCE SEARCHING FOR CG-30315-

DEPARTED WILMETTE HARBOR LIFEBOAT STATION 27 OCTOBER 1951 – SITUATION - OVER DUE. Every available Coast Guard boat from Milwaukee to Muskegon got under way as did CG Auxiliary boats and private yachts. Aircraft from Naval Air Station, Glenview and Coast Guard Air Station, Traverse City along with small boats from the Great Lakes Training Center and the DE 585 DANIEL A, JOY, from Chicago joined the search.

The duck hunter's boat was found a half-mile off Waukegan Harbor partly submerged and of the three hunters, only one body was recovered on November 8th. What happened to CG-31351 is unknown to this day. The only things ever recovered were the wooden lid to the battery box and a side panel to the engine compartment, found 20 miles off Wilmette on November 1st.

On June 26, 1954 a Seiche slammed into the Chicago lakefront and its repercussions were felt from Milwaukee to Grand Haven. The wave left seven dead in its wake and reached a height of ten feet, the highest on recorded. It raised havoc with pleasure boats moored in harbors and breakwalls causing extensive damage to which the entire Group responded.

The decade of the 1950's saw many changes in boats at the Groups Stations. The Coast Guard began to phase out their pre-war and war surplus equipment with more efficient and faster rescue boats to replace their gasoline driven, wooden hull 30' and 38'. The new boats would be powered by diesel and built of steel. The first to be delivered was the 30' Mark I, single screw at 21.8 knots and was shortly followed by the 40' Mark I, twine screw at 20.3 knots. This version was improved to the Mark IV, at 23 knots and became a legend in its own time.

At the close of the decade the Coast Guard transferred the yard tug CGC ARUNDEL WYT-90 to the Chicago Group from Boston. Her duties were law enforcement, search and rescue and ice breaking along the Chicago lakefront and Southern Lake Michigan. She was a RARITAN Class Cutter at 110' displacing 328 tons and carried a crew of 16. She was commissioned on July 6, 1939 and saw service on the Greenland Patrol during World War II Chicago would be her homeport for the next 20 years and tied up in Ogden Slip at the head of Navy Pier. She departed Chicago in June 1979.

With the phenomenal growth of pleasure boating along the lakefront, the Chicago Police Department implemented a Marine Division to assist boaters in distress in the early 1960's. This alleviated some of the workload from the Coast Guard as boating safety was intensified and boardings became routine. The two stations most effected were Chicago and Jackson Park. A few years later the Coast Guard reevaluated these units in an effort to eliminate duplication and it was determined that in view that both were over 70 years old they would require major rehabilitation. In an economy move, the two stations were closed with the CPD Marine Division, taking over the entire geographic area.

Tragedy was again to strike the North Shore in a blinding flash and a deafening roar. On a quite August evening in 1965. United Flight #380 from LaGuardia to O'Hare disappeared from radar somewhere between Waukegan and Fort Sheridan on its final approach. The first to respond was Wilmette Harbor Station and was quickly joined by CPD's Marine Division, Kenosha Station, the Chicago Fire Department, CGC ARUNDEL and CGC WOODINE from Grand Haven. The aftermath became a grueling operation. In all, 24 passengers and 8 crewmembers lost their lives onboard the Boeing 727.

After 177 years under the Treasury Department, the Coast Guard was transferred to the newly formed Department of Transportation in 1967. At the same time the middy, Navy blue uniform

was replaced by a single breasted lighter blue uniform, similar to the type worn by the Surfmen. The whole image of the Coast Guard was changing with the introduction of the racing strip and the words U.S.COAST GUARD painted on her small boats, ships and plains.

In March of 1969, the Coast Guard established an Air Station at the Naval Air Station in Glenview. This enhanced the area stations response time to search and rescue throughout Southern Lake Michigan and these helicopters proved their value time and time again with some daring rescues. Unfortunately the Air Station came with a high price for on January 20, 1977 an HH 52A helicopter, number 1448 crashed into the Illinois River on a routine ice patrol flight. They had accidentally struck some electrical transmission wires that caused the crash. Those who perished were LTJG W. Caeser USN, LTJG J.F. Taylor USCG, AT2 J.B. Johnson USCG and W.S. Simpson, civilian. The Air Station was closed in the 1990's when the government sold the land to privet developers.

In the early 1970's the Group system was again reorganized with central command at Base Milwaukee, which encompassed the entire Western shore of Lake Michigan from Green Bay to Gary. Chicago became a Sub Group under Milwaukee covering Wilmette Harbor and Calumet Harbor Stations with the entire Great Lakes remaining under the command of the Coast Guard 9th District Headquarters at Cleveland. Today under the Sub Group system, Wilmette is a Coast Guard Auxiliary Station but continues to maintain a regular Coast Guard and Reserve crew under the direct command of Calumet Harbor Station.

By the mid 1970's, the 40' utility boats and the 36' motor lifeboats were showing their age and were fazed out and replaced by the 41' utility boat and a 44' motor lifeboat. Wilmette received a 41' at 26 knots and Calumet received a 44' at 14 knots. The other miscellaneous boats on these stations were overtaken by old age and replaced with inflatable rigid hull boats for quick response. At this time the term Lifeboat was dropped from the stations and replaced by SAR (Search and Rescue) Station.

During the late 1970's and early 1980's both the Wilmette Harbor and Calumet Harbor Stations were completely renovated. Although they maintainer much of their original facade they were enlarged and modernized with state of the art equipment. An interesting note; in 1931 when Wilmette opened, the total cost was \$39,791.00. Fifty years later, to add a 20' two story addition and remodel the interior of the original building ran well over \$100,000.00.

During the 1980's, the three Coast Guard Reserve Units in the area were united into one and became the Great Lakes Unit but continued to augment the two SAR Stations and the Marine Safety Office. In September 1990, a third of this unit was called up for active duty to serve in the Persian Gulf War as a port security unit for several Saudi Arabian cities.

In the early 1990's, the Captain of the Port, now known as the Marine Safety Office or MSO was relocated from 610 South Canal to Burr Ridge, Illinois. In 1994, all Reserve Units were desolved with their members being integrated with the regular Coast Guard personnel augmenting Stations Wilmette, Calumet and MSO.

Over the years, the Coast Guard has been heavily involved on Chicago's Lake Front and inland waterways not only in search and rescue and boating safety but also in law enforcement, water pollution and all aids to navigation. Their annual evolvment also includes the Chicago to Mackinaw Race, Chicago's Air and Water Show and Venetian Night to name a few.

Now on the threshold of the new millennium there will be a new generation of men, women and equipment destined for Chicago. Yet, one can not help but wonder what Lawrence O. Lawson might say if he were with us today or what his thoughts were that July day in 1880 when he took command of the little University Station. There is now doubt that he is with the Chicago Coast Guard in spirit, as are all those who served with fidelity, zeal and obedience.