

The U.S. Coast Guard in World War I

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 saw cutters become responsible for enforcing U.S. neutrality laws. With the declaration of war against Germany on 6 April 1917, a coded dispatch was transmitted from Washington to every cutter and shore station of the Coast Guard. Officers and enlisted men, vessels and units, were transferred to the operational control of the Navy Department. The Navy was augmented by 223 commissioned officers, approximately 4,500 enlisted men, 47 vessels of all types, and 279 stations scattered along the entire United States coastline.



On the morning of Dec. 6, 1917, a tremendous blast ripped through the sleepy town of Halifax, Nova Scotia **(left)**. The explosion destroyed 3,000 dwellings, killed more than 1,600 people and injured 9,000. Many of the dead were children. That morning the French freighter *Mont Blanc*, carrying 5,000 tons of TNT, collided with the Norwegian steamship *Imo* in Halifax's outer harbor.

Unfortunately, after the collision, a fire started, and the crewmen tried to put it out rather than scuttle the ship. When the fire reached the TNT, an explosion - equal to a small nuclear blast occurred. The *Mont Blanc* virtually disappeared, and the shock waves threw the *Imo* ashore. The *Mont Blanc* disaster ranks as one of the worst maritime tragedies of all times. This particular ship sailed from New York on its way to Europe, one of hundreds that loaded explosive cargoes in New York for the war in Europe. It was this disaster that stirred American leaders to empower the Coast Guard to ensure that this never happened in the United States.

The Coast Guard and its predecessor agency, the Revenue Cutter Service, have long been tied to the movement and anchorage of vessels in U.S. territorial waters. The RCS was first tasked with this job during 1888 in New York. By 1915, when the Coast Guard was created, the service was directed by the Rivers and Harbors Act "to establish anchorage grounds for vessels in all harbors, rivers, bays and other navigable waters of the United States" During World

War I, the Coast Guard continued to enforce rules and regulations that governed the anchorage and movements of vessels in American harbors. The Espionage Act, passed in June 1917, gave the Coast Guard further power to protect merchant shipping from sabotage. This act included the safeguarding of waterfront property, supervision of vessel movements, establishment of anchorages and restricted areas, and the right to control and remove people aboard ships.

The tremendous increase in munitions shipments, particularly in New York, required an increase in personnel to oversee this activity. The term "captain of the port" was first used in New York and this officer was charged with supervising the safe loading of explosives. During the war a similar post was established in other U.S. ports.

During World War I, CAPT Godfrey L. Carden, commander of the Coast Guard's New York Division **(right)**, was named COTP in that harbor. The majority of the nation's munitions shipments abroad left through New York. For a period of 1 1/2 years, more than 1,600 vessels, carrying more than 345-million tons of explosives, sailed from this port. In 1918, Carden's division was the largest single command in the Coast Guard. It was made up of over 1,400 officers and men, four Corps of Engineers tugs and five harbor cutters.



In August and September 1917, six Coast Guard cutters, *Ossipee*, *Seneca*, *Yamacraw*, *Algonquin*, *Manning*, and *Tampa* left the United States to join U.S. naval forces in European waters. They constituted Squadron 2 of Division 6 of the patrol forces of the Atlantic Fleet and were based at Gibraltar. Throughout the war they escorted hundreds of vessels between Gibraltar and the British Isles, as well as escort and patrol duty in the Mediterranean. The other large cutters performed similar duties in home waters, off Bermuda, in the Azores, in the Caribbean, and off the coast of Nova Scotia. They operated either under the orders of the commandants of the various naval districts or under the direct orders of the Chief of Naval Operations.

A large number of Coast Guard officers held important commands during World War I. Twenty-four commanded naval warships in the war zone, five commanded warships attached to the American Patrol detachment in the Caribbean Sea, twenty-three commanded warships attached to naval districts, and five Coast Guard officers commanded large training camps. Six were assigned to aviation duty, two of which commanded important air stations including one in France. Shortly after the Armistice, four Coast Guard officers were assigned to command

large naval transports engaged in bringing the troops home from France. Officers not assigned to command served in practically every phase of naval activity, on transports, cruisers, cutters, patrol vessels, in naval districts, as inspectors, and at training camps. Of the 223 commissioned officers of the Coast Guard, seven met their deaths as a result of enemy action.

The cutter *Tampa* distinguished itself during the war. Under the command of Captain Charles Satterlee, she sailed from New York on 16 September 1917 for service in European waters. *Tampa* proceeded to Gibraltar via the Azores Islands and was assigned to a division of escorts convoying between Gibraltar and England. On 5 September 1918, Rear Admiral Niblack, commanding the U.S. naval forces based at Gibraltar addressed a special letter of commendation to Captain Satterlee. He called attention to the fact that *Tampa*, since her arrival, had escorted 18 convoys between Gibraltar and the United Kingdom, was never disabled, and was ready whenever called upon. Admiral Albert Niblack stated,

This excellent record is an evidence of a high state of efficiency and excellent ship's spirit and an organization capable of keeping the vessel in service with a minimum of shore assistance. The squadron commander takes great pleasure in congratulating the commanding officer, officers, and crew on the record which they have made.



On the evening of 26 September 1918, the *Tampa*, having completed its duty as ocean escort for a convoy from Gibraltar to the United Kingdom, proceeded toward the port of Milford Haven, Wales. At 8:45 p.m. a loud explosion was heard by the convoy. *Tampa* failed to arrive at its destination and U.S. destroyers and British patrol craft made a search of the area. Nothing but a small amount of wreckage identified as belonging to the *Tampa* and two unidentified bodies in naval uniforms were found. It is believed that *Tampa* was sunk by UB-91 which reported sinking an American warship fitting *Tampa*'s description (**left**). One hundred-fifteen, 111 of whom were Coast Guard personnel, perished. With the possible exception of the collier *Cyclops*, whose fate and date of loss have never been ascertained, this was the largest loss of life incurred by any U.S. naval unit during the war. An additional 81 Coast Guardsmen lost their lives in World War I due to accident or illness. In the end 8,835 men had served in the Coast Guard during World War I.

Vice Admiral C.H. Dare of the British Navy, the commanding officer at Milford Haven, in a telegram to Admiral Sims, expressed the universal sympathy felt at Milford Haven by all ranks and rates in the loss of *Tampa*,

Myself and staff enjoyed the personal friendship of her commanding officer, Captain Charles Satterlee and had great admiration for his intense enthusiasm and high ideals of duty...

The British Admiralty addressed the following remarks to Admiral Sims:

Their Lordships desire me to express their deep regret at the loss of the U.S.S. *Tampa*. Her record since she has been employed in European waters as an ocean escort to convoys has been remarkable. She has acted in the capacity of ocean escort to no less than 18 convoys from Gibraltar comprising 350 vessels, with a loss of only two ships through enemy action. The commanders of the convoys have recognized the ability with which the *Tampa* carried out the duties of ocean escort. Appreciation of the good work done by the U.S.S. *Tampa* may be some consolation to those bereft and their Lordships would be glad if this could be conveyed to those concerned.

