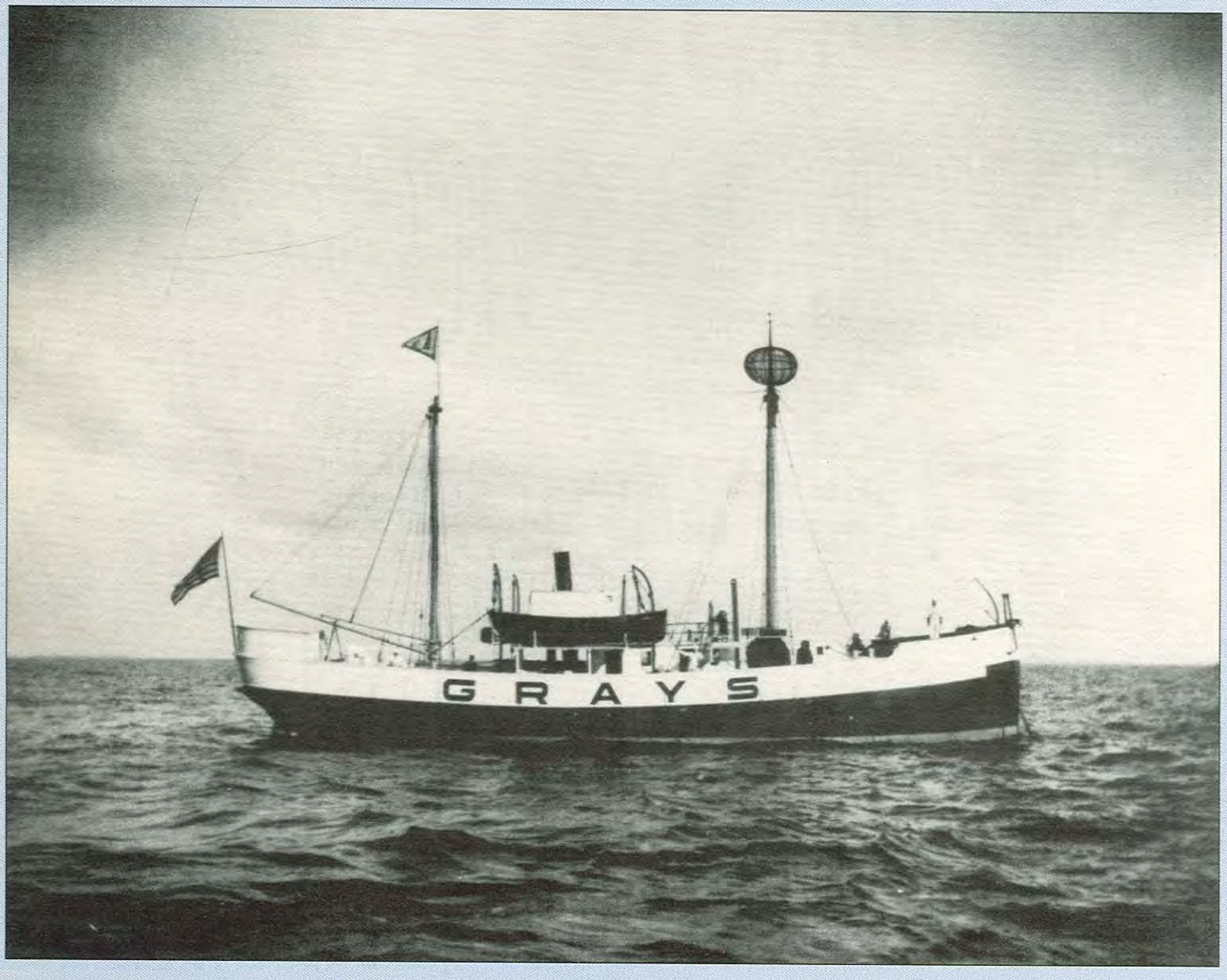
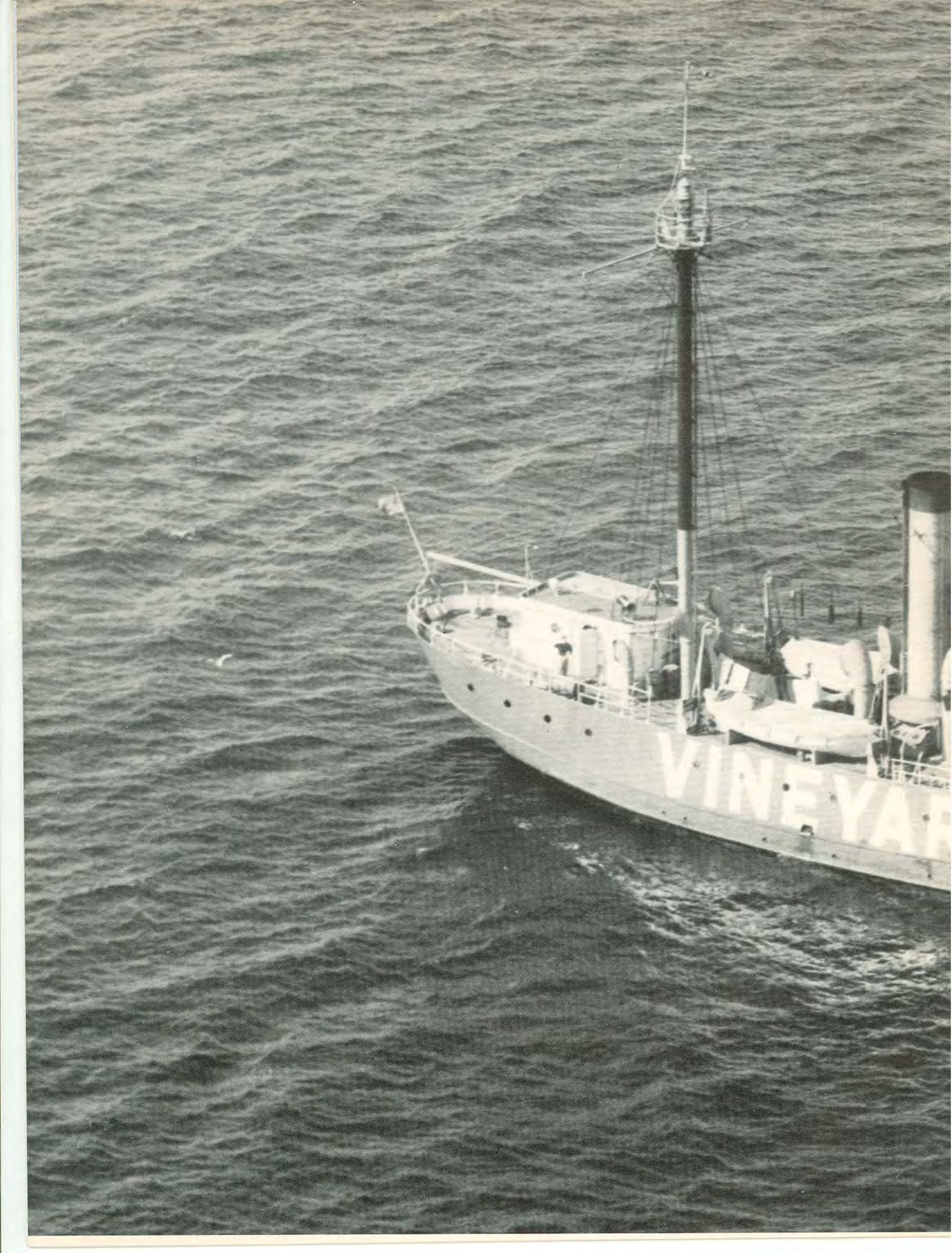
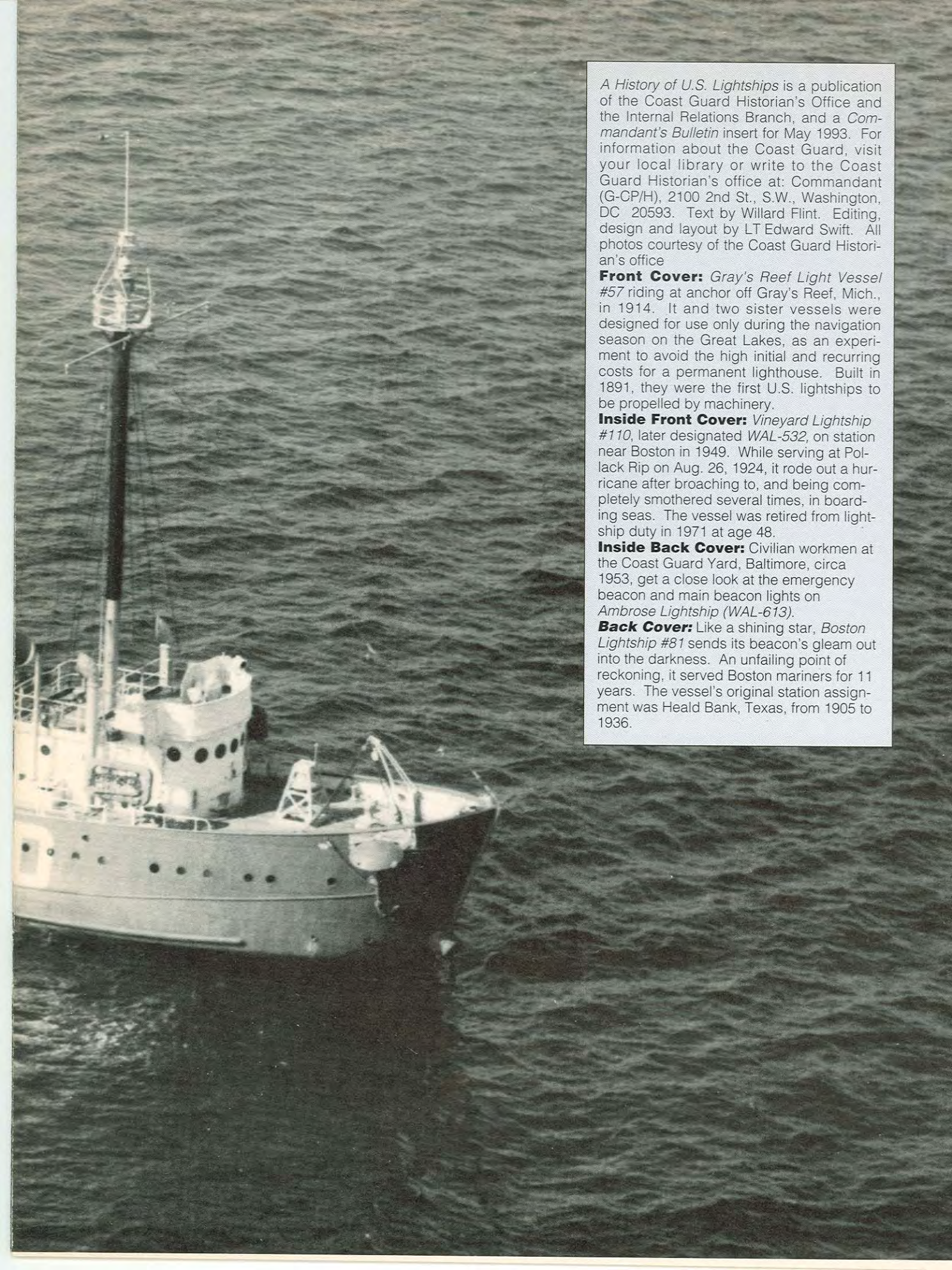
A History of U.S. Lightships



BY WILLARD FLINT


VINEYA



A History of U.S. Lightships is a publication of the Coast Guard Historian's Office and the Internal Relations Branch, and a *Commandant's Bulletin* insert for May 1993. For information about the Coast Guard, visit your local library or write to the Coast Guard Historian's office at: Commandant (G-CP/H), 2100 2nd St., S.W., Washington, DC 20593. Text by Willard Flint. Editing, design and layout by LT Edward Swift. All photos courtesy of the Coast Guard Historian's office

Front Cover: *Gray's Reef Light Vessel #57* riding at anchor off Gray's Reef, Mich., in 1914. It and two sister vessels were designed for use only during the navigation season on the Great Lakes, as an experiment to avoid the high initial and recurring costs for a permanent lighthouse. Built in 1891, they were the first U.S. lightships to be propelled by machinery.

Inside Front Cover: *Vineyard Lightship #110*, later designated *WAL-532,* on station near Boston in 1949. While serving at Pollack Rip on Aug. 26, 1924, it rode out a hurricane after broaching to, and being completely smothered several times, in boarding seas. The vessel was retired from lightship duty in 1971 at age 48.

Inside Back Cover: Civilian workmen at the Coast Guard Yard, Baltimore, circa 1953, get a close look at the emergency beacon and main beacon lights on *Ambrose Lightship (WAL-613).*

Back Cover: Like a shining star, *Boston Lightship #81* sends its beacon's gleam out into the darkness. An unfailing point of reckoning, it served Boston mariners for 11 years. The vessel's original station assignment was Heald Bank, Texas, from 1905 to 1936.

LONELY SENTINELS OF THE SEA-LANES

LIGHTSHIPS OWE THEIR ORIGIN TO ANCIENT ROMANS — EARLY GALLEYS PROVIDED LIGHTED BEACONS, DETERRED PIRATES

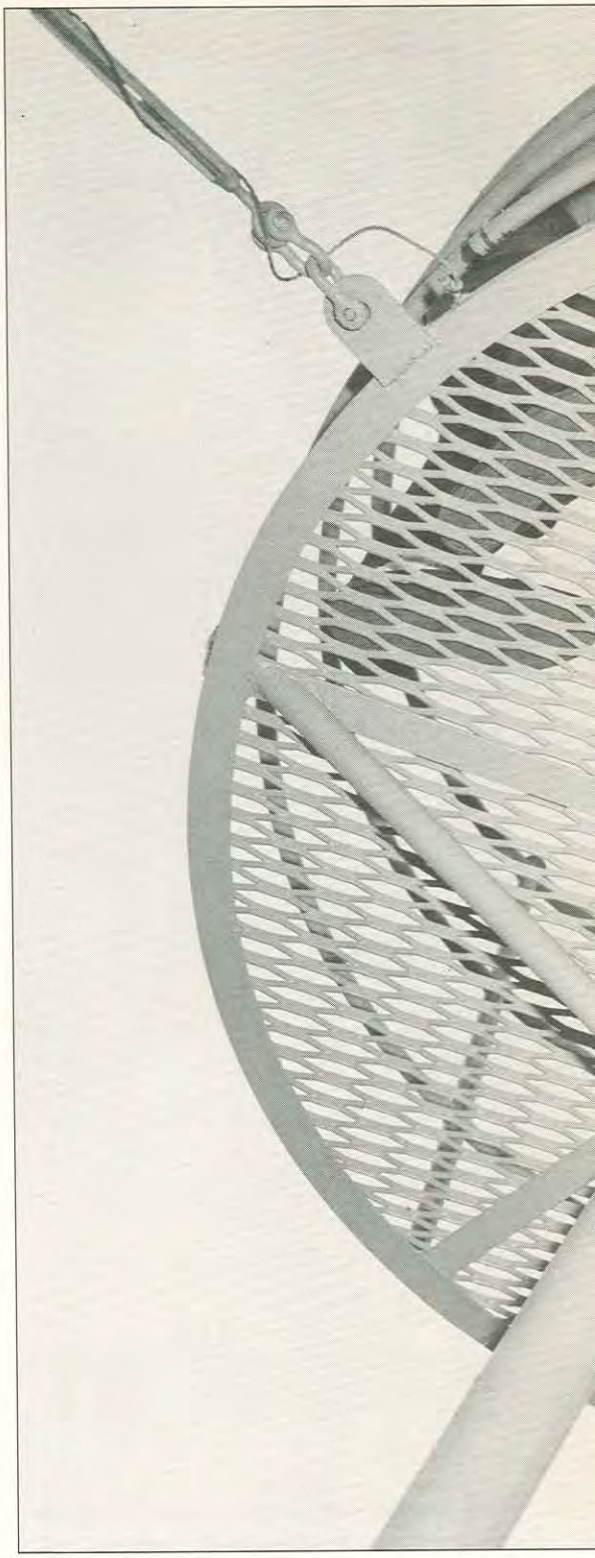
Lightships, as we commonly know or remember them, have been around little more than two centuries, though a prototype existed in the ancient world. During the last few centuries B.C., Roman coast guard galleys carried at their mastheads open framework baskets in which a fire sometimes was built, serving as a signal light. Manned by an armed crew, such vessels patrolled the Roman coasts to guide and protect incoming vessels by providing a beacon and to deter piracy by showing that a warship was at hand. But, since the prudent Roman sailor tried to avoid nighttime voyages whenever possible, the first lightships never attained the importance of their successors.

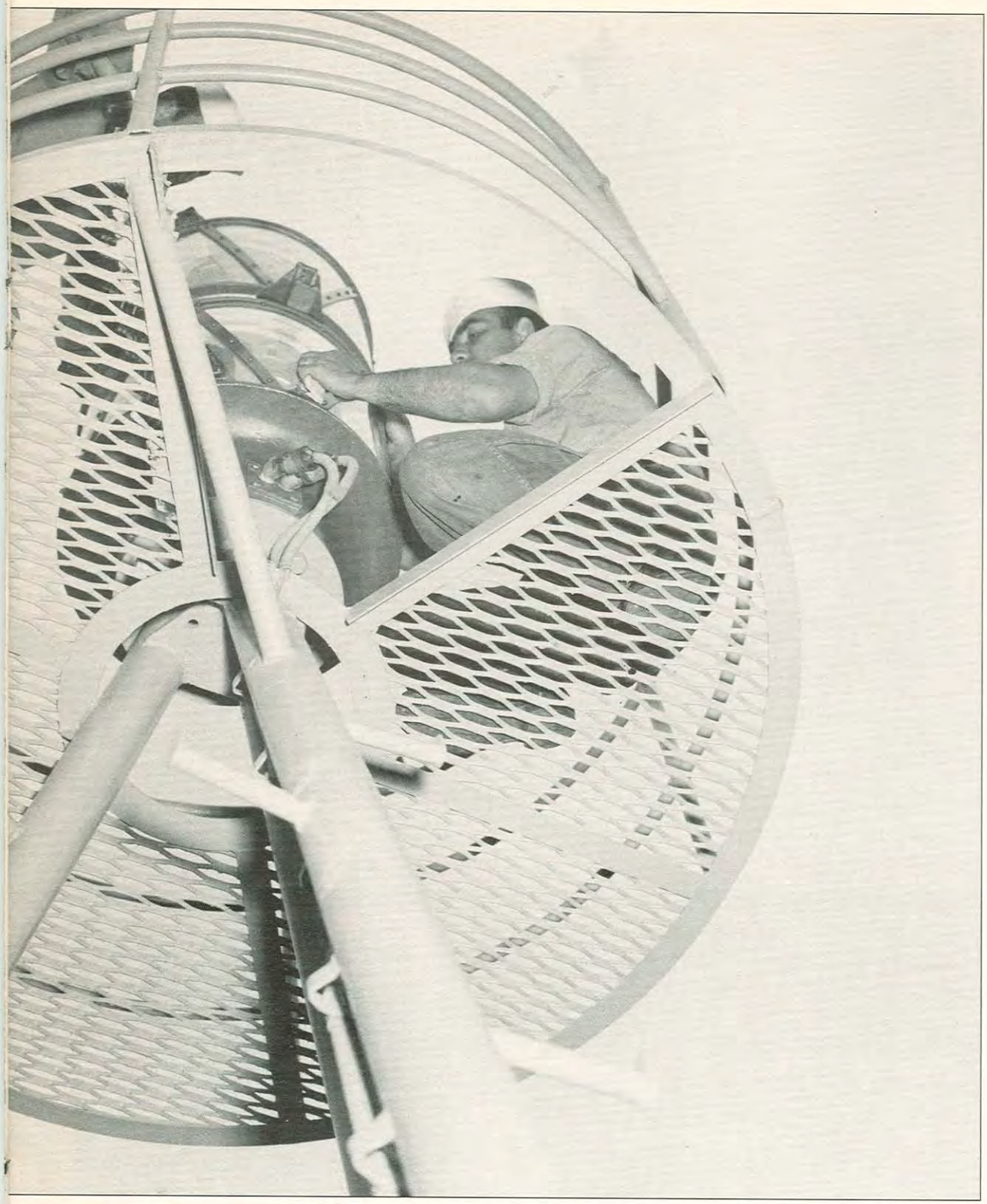
By the 18th century, however, maritime commerce had become a 24-hour-a-day undertaking, with ships ranging the entire globe.

In 1731, Robert Hamblin, an Englishman, obtained permission from King George II to outfit what would become the first modern lightship. His single-masted vessel was given the name *Nore* and took up its position a year later in England at Nore Sands in the Thames estuary. Resembling a small fishing sloop, the *Nore* carried two ship's lanterns, hung 12 feet apart from a cross arm high above the deck wherein burned flat wicks in oil. The *Nore's* log lists several accounts of almost futile struggles to keep the lanterns lit during any appreciable strength of wind, still, ship's masters considered the lightship a godsend, and similar vessels soon entered similar service off the coasts of most every seafaring nation.

FIRST U.S. LIGHTSHIP ENTERS SERVICE

At least six lightships were in use off England's coasts before the United States even ventured into the concept of lightships. The first U.S. contract was awarded in 1819 to John Pool of Hampton, Va., for a vessel " ... of 70 tons burthen, copper-fastened ... a cabin with four berths, at least ... spars, a capstan, belfry, yawl and davits." Delivered in the summer of 1820, this first "light boat" was initially stationed off Willoughby Spit, Va., as an aid to Chesapeake Bay commerce. Storms and heavy seas, however, scourged this exposed position, and the vessel had to be shifted to a safer anchorage off Craney Is-





Left: *A constant but necessary job ... ensuring the lightship's beacon is kept in proper working order.*

land, near Norfolk, Va. Within a year, four more lightships appeared, marking dangerous shoals in the Chesapeake. America's first true "outside" lightship — anchored in the open sea instead of in a bay or inlet — entered service in 1823, off Sandy Hook, N.J.

The lightship proved as successful on this side of the Atlantic as it had on the other. During the period 1820 – 1983, 116 lightship stations were established by the United States at one time or another. This figure includes those stations which were renamed and moved to a different position to better serve the same purpose, and those taken over later by Canada. The number of stations existing at any one time peaked in 1909 when 56 lightships were maintained. By 1927, 68 stations had been discontinued — replaced by lighthouses or buoys, taken over by Canada, or considered unnecessary.

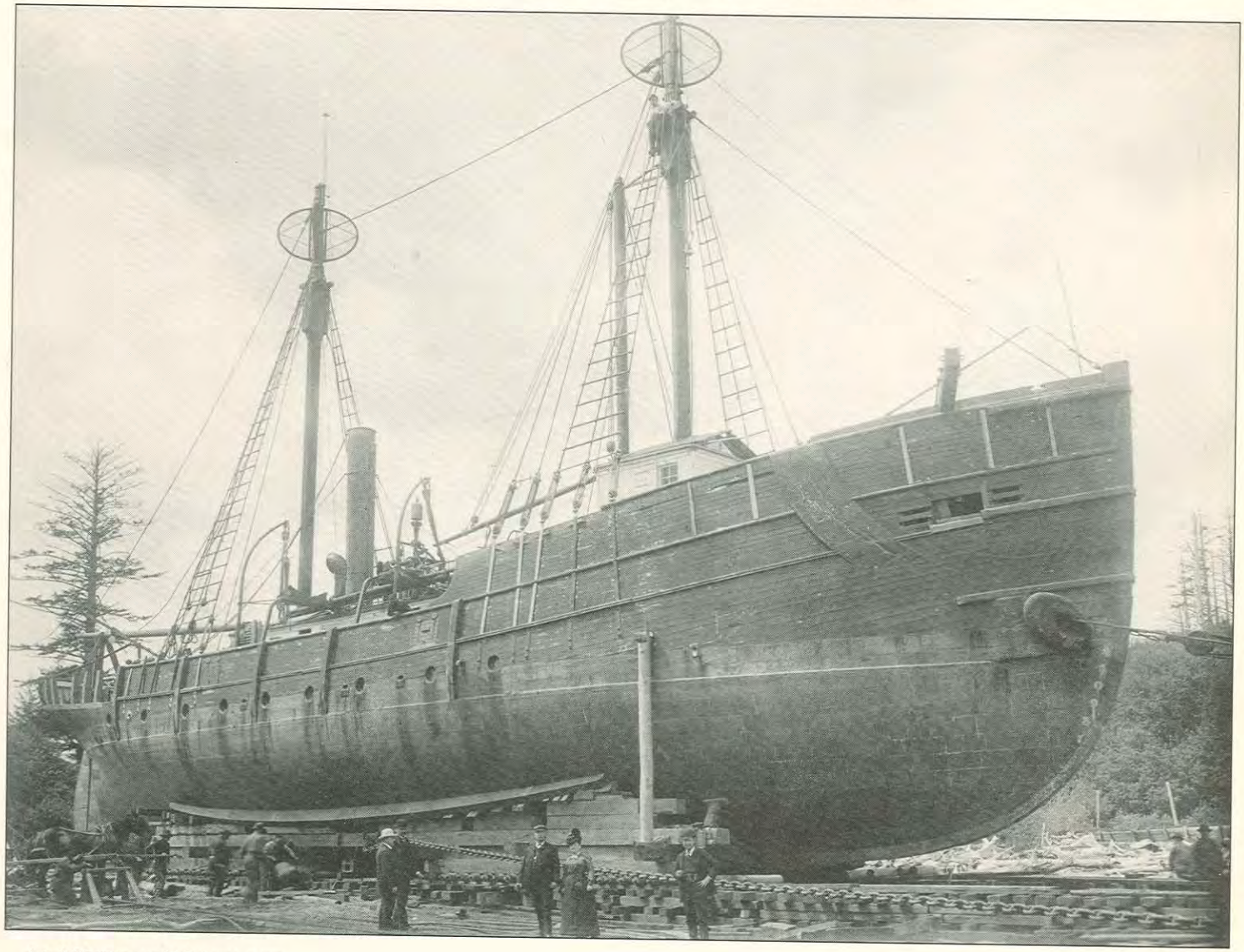
In 1939, when the Coast Guard assumed responsibility for aids to navigation, the number of stations had been reduced to 30, and although three additional stations were established during the 1954-1965 period, the total number of lightship stations continued to decline steadily until 1983 when replacement of the *Nantucket Shoals Lightship* with a large navigational buoy marked the end of America's lightship era.

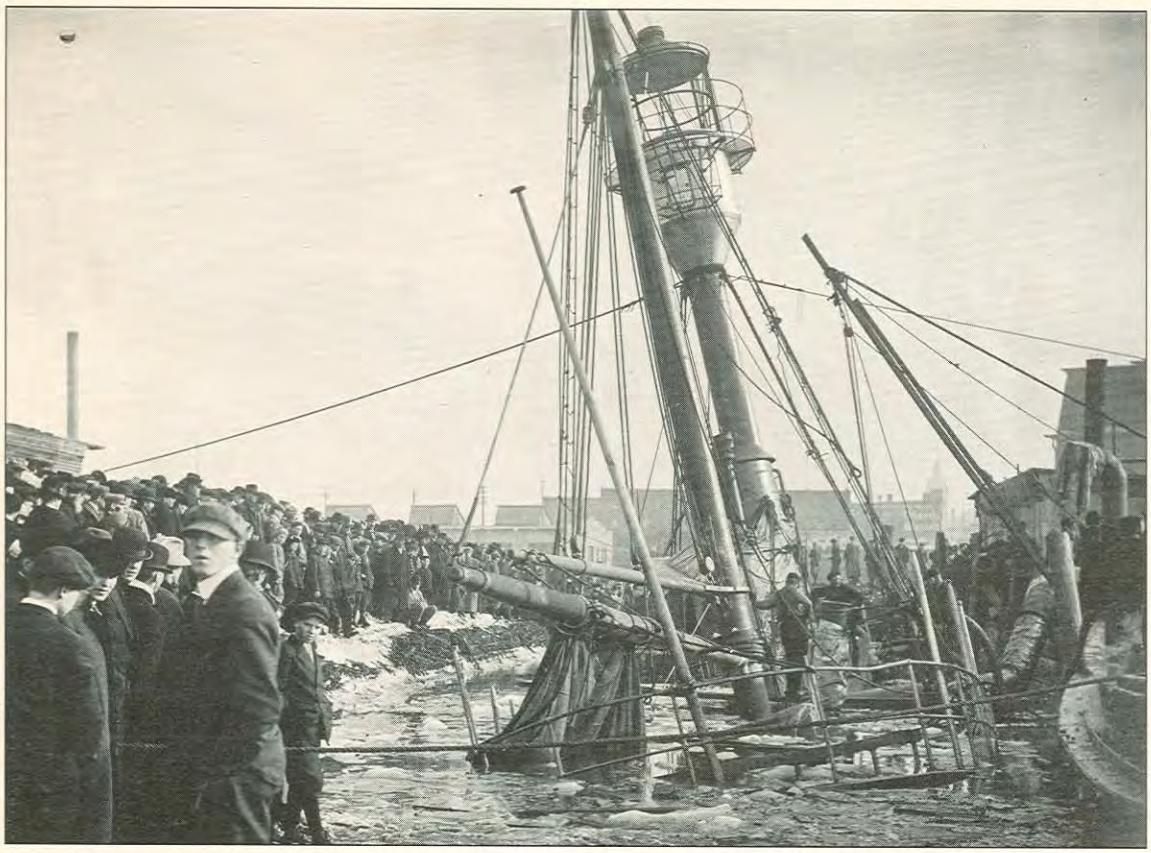
LIGHTSHIPS SATISFIED MULTIPLE ATON REQUIREMENTS

As seamarks, lightships satisfied multiple requirements. They could be moored in shallow water, even near shifting shoals where fixed structures could not be placed. They could just as easily be stationed in deep water many miles from shore, to serve as a landfall or a point of departure for trans-oceanic traffic. And being vessels, they could be readily repositioned to suit changing needs. In these roles, lightships served as day beacons, as light platforms by night, as sound signal stations in times of reduced visibility, and around the clock as transmitters of bearing- and distance-finding electronic signals. Outages or difficulties with any of their systems and equipment could be immediately detected and remedied on the spot by the crew. During their relatively brief era, U.S. lightships evolved into highly sophisticated and efficient aids to navigation.

Progress and development in the early years of lightships was woefully inadequate, due primarily to organizational and management deficiencies which were allowed to persist for many years. Initially, little consideration was given to suitable design and construction characteristics. Early light vessels were largely a product of opinion and arbitrary judgment on the part of builders who were often ignorant of the true purpose of the vessel or its harsh operating environment.

Below: *Getting back on track. Lightships were oftentimes victim to storms and* Columbia River Lightship #50 *was no exception. Breaking its moorings during a gale, Nov. 29, 1899, the vessel grounded off Cape Disappointment, Wash., remaining stranded as refloating efforts proved unsuccessful. A marine railway was eventually built at the site. The ship was jacked onto a cradle, then hauled into Bakers Bay, Wash., where it underwent hull repairs. It was placed back on station Aug. 18, 1901.*





Left: *"It must have been the wind." At least that's how one mariner explained the mysterious sinking of* Milwaukee Lightship #95 *on Dec. 26, 1911 in Muskegon, Mich. The vessel, which was still at the contractor's dock, was raised three months later. Construction was completed and* LV-95 *served at several locations as the* Relief Lightship *until decommissioned in 1965.* **Below:** *A salvaged* Milwaukee Lightship #95 *awaiting its first assignment.*

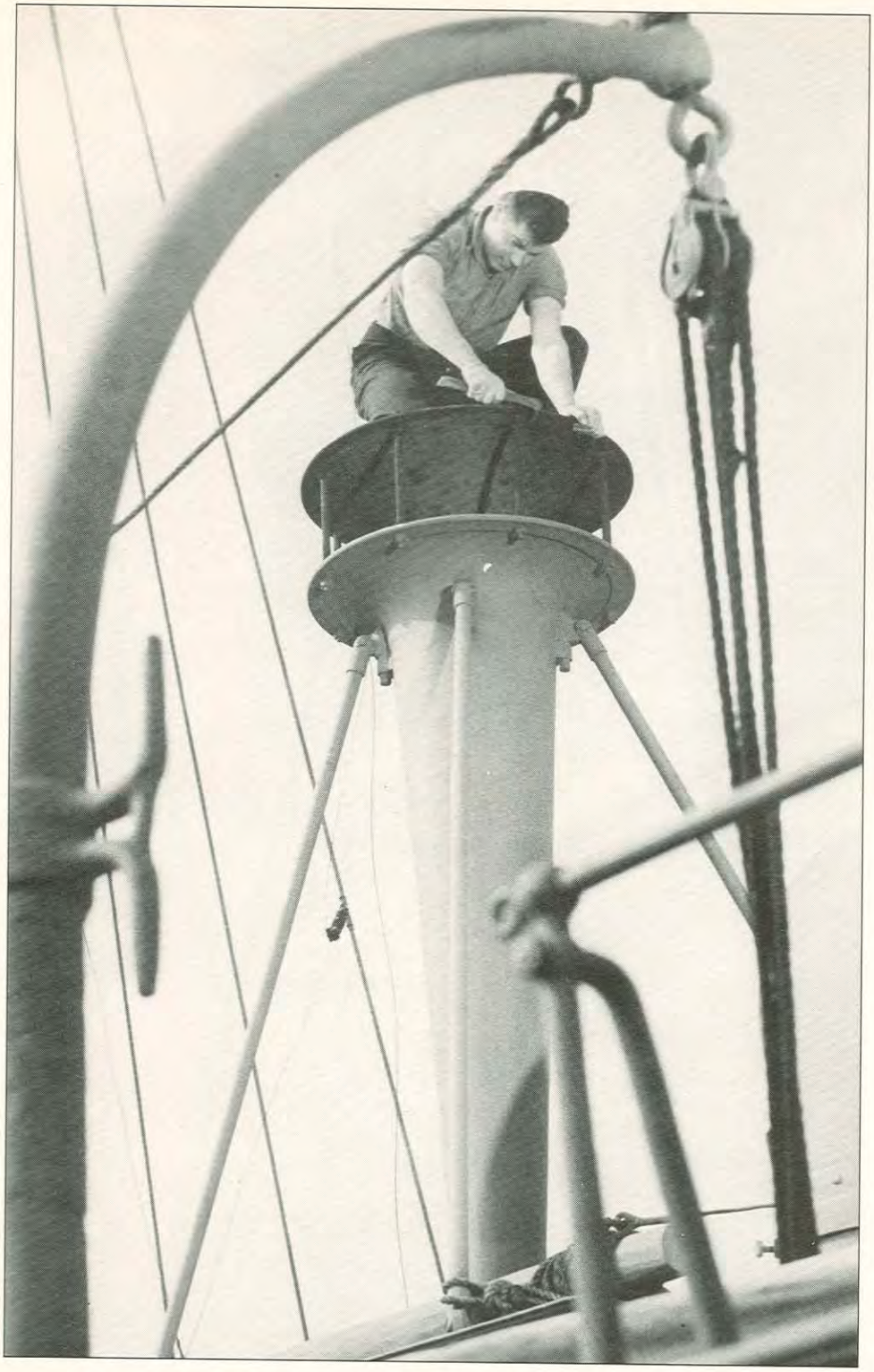
Initially, lightships were exceedingly poor light platforms; their full body, shoal draft and light displacement combining to cause undue rolling and violent pitching. Thirty-one years after the first American lightship dropped anchor in Chesapeake Bay, the skipper of a seagoing light was complaining that "her broad bluff bow is not at all calculated to resist the fury of the sea, which in some of the gales we experience in the winter season, break against us and over us with almost impending fury." Such rolling and pitching, in turn, resulted in frequent loss of moorings and breakage or damage to the lanterns.

"She rolls and labors to such a degree as to heave the glass out of the lanterns ..."

— Lightship captain, circa 1850

The captain of another such vessel described its hull as being "similar to a barrel," so that "she is constantly in motion, and when it is in any ways rough, she rolls and labors to such a degree as to heave the glass out of the lanterns, the beds out of the berths, tearing out the chain-plates, etc. and rendering her unsafe and uncomfortable."

Certainly by present-day standards, crew



Above: *Work to be done on a clear day included removing scale from* Boston Lightship #81*'s foghorn. Such work was impossible when the great lungs of the lightship bellowed its warning to mariners in foggy weather.*

accommodations on early lightships would have been judged uninhabitable. Even years later, in 1891, a visitor to the *Nantucket Lightship* reported on the boredom and discomfort he found there. The weather could toss the vessel about so violently that even veteran sailors became seasick. On calm days, nausea gave way to tedium, for the crew could service the light and make things shipshape within a few hours, leaving the rest of the day for making rattan baskets to sell ashore or for simply whittling away the hours. Seldom did anyone visit the ship's small library, and even shipboard food was monotonous, wholesome though it was. The most common dish was "scouse," which impressed the visitor as a "wonderful commingling of salt beef, potatoes and onions." And, in terms of tours of duty aboard early lightships, crewmembers spent eight months of the year at sea, two four-month stints separated by shore leave.

Scientific Advances

A visit to the *Nantucket* in the early 1970s would have produced a much different report. Scientific advances in hull design, the use of bilge keels, plus adoption of improved ballasting techniques produced more stable vessels. Not only did new hull designs reduce roll, but diesel engines also helped the captain keep his vessel headed into the wind for even greater stability. Unfortunately for some, however, the smell of diesel fuel was almost as distressing as the motion the engines helped prevent.

Over the years, creature comforts were upgraded too. Reading would become a popular pastime on lightships while radio, and later, television, helped to dispel boredom. Cooks produced a surprising variety of meals, and the murderous four-month tour was eventually reduced to approximately 30 days. One change, though, was for the worse, at least as far as crew comfort was concerned. The bleat of modern fog-horns was so loud that anyone venturing on deck without ear protectors risked pain and deafness.

These changes in safety practices, living conditions, and in ship and equipment design were slow in coming, and to understand why this was so, one must first understand how America's lightships were managed.

Supervisory responsibility for lightships, as well as all other navigational aids, was assigned in 1820 to the Fifth Auditor of the Treasury Department, with control being ex-

ercised through what was known as the Lighthouse Establishment — a loosely structured organization administered at the local level by the Collectors of Customs. These people operated independently, acquiring material and equipment, contracting for construction and deciding on their own what requirements were to be satisfied. They also hired and fired personnel, paid the wages and carried out or arranged for the annual inspections of existing aids to navigation. The inspection reports, together with recommendations which were based largely on personal preference and opinion, were then forwarded to the Fifth Auditor.

... the smell of diesel fuel was almost as distressing as the motion the engines helped prevent.

Stephen Pleasonton, the Fifth Auditor, had no familiarity with the nature of his

Left: *Lightship crewmen give the deck a wash down.*

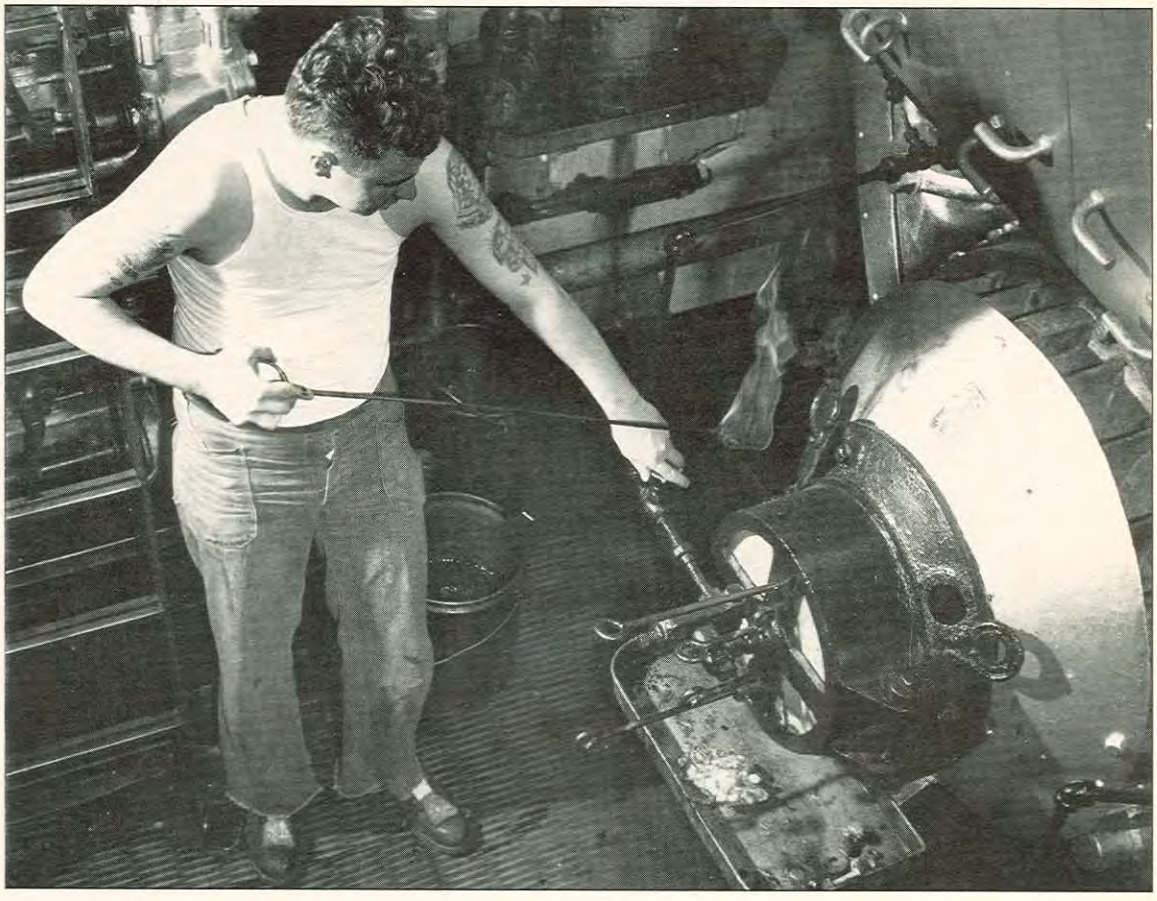
maritime involvement, and little interest in requirements for assisting mariners, distancing himself entirely from the events in progress. Control was exercised in single-handed fashion by arbitrary findings based on review of the inspection reports, and by tight control of the purse strings. This resulted in a host of misguided decisions, shoddy and unsafe construction, and a system of navigational aids which was inadequate to the need, behind the times and technically inefficient.

Eight Lighthouse Districts Established

In 1838, the situation was improved somewhat when Congress divided the Atlantic Coast into six lighthouse districts and the Great Lakes into two, each with a Navy officer assigned, and a revenue cutter or leased vessel made available for conducting inspections. Reports generated by this action gave evidence of large-scale mismanagement and pointed out in great detail, defects in equipment, low morale, incompetence among personnel, and irresponsible performance by contractors. Although Pleasonton was apparently displeased by these reports, he continued to sidestep any remedies and remained unduly concerned with the costs cited for improving the situation.

Due largely to the meager funds made available, lightship development continued to lag far behind progress being made in Europe. Although some standardization had been achieved, by 1842, the 30 lightships in U.S. service ranged from 40- to 230-tons burden, constructed entirely of wood, poorly rigged in many cases, and had no machinery-driven means of propulsion. Illuminating apparatus was limited to multiple-wick sperm oil lamps of poor visibility which had to be raised and lowered to the deck for servicing. Ground tackle was inadequate and hull design still failed to consider the weather and sea conditions encountered by these small vessels. Neither tenders nor relief vessels were available at the time, and, as a consequence when the vessels were frequently blown adrift, stations remained unmarked for periods measured in weeks and months.

Congress eventually became aware of the serious disarray and, using competent and qualified inspectors, carried out an investigation in 1851. A voluminous but meaningful report resulted. This report was extremely critical, pointing out that many of the lightships were extensively rotted and poorly maintained; their lighting equipment



Right: Winter Quarter Lightship #107 *used fuel oil under its boilers. A member of the ship's "black gang" would use a torch to start the main burner.*

Left: *Periodic supply runs meant replenishment of food for the crew and other items needed about the ship.* **Below:** *Engineroom duty never ended, only the watch schedule changed. An "oilcan jockey" lubricates the valve gear on* Columbia River Lightship #93 *as part of his duties.*

inadequate; and that entire crew complements were often absent for lengthy periods. Also criticized was the practice of hiring farmers and other landsman as officers and crewmembers who, in some cases, hired stand-ins to perform their duty. Much was made of the fact that the published range of visibility of all lights was erroneous; that there was no uniform system for coloring, numbering or otherwise identifying floating aids; that the positions of many lightships had been poorly selected; and that additional vessels were required. Recommendations were comprehensive, specific and, for the most part, worthwhile.

Lighthouse Board formed

The outcome of this report led to formation of the Lighthouse Board in 1852 as a separate branch of the Treasury Department. This was a nine-member committee composed of officers of the Navy, Army Corps of Engineers and civilian scientists. The board, guided by conclusions and recommendations of the 1851 investigation, acted at once to take advantage of available technology, to upgrade equipment and to revise contracting procedures.

The organizational structure was drastically overhauled to provide seven districts on the Atlantic coast, two on the Gulf coast, two on the Great Lakes and one on the Pacific coast — each with a Navy officer as district inspector. Separate subcommittees were established to address all require-

Above: *Music, magazines and conversation were, for years, popular ways to pass time aboard lightships when not standing watches.*
Right: *More modern forms of entertainment, like television, eventually found their way into the lightship's isolated environment.*

ments for ATON. These included finance and contract management, design and engineering, and lighting, as well as one that tested and evaluated new equipment, determined requirements and developed standard maintenance procedures.

By 1855, this had led to construction of several lightships of new, and more or less standard, design, and installation of new and more efficient illuminating apparatus on most existing vessels. The merits of various types of sound signals, illuminants and methods of marking or otherwise distinguishing one lightship from another were also investigated.

Until this time, lightships were identified only by the name of the station which they occupied, and no specification or requirement existed for color or marking. Although station names were painted on the sides of lightships at about this time, no numbers were used to identify individual vessels until 1867.

As progress in the technical area continued, so did efforts to upgrade the caliber and competence of lightship crews. However, with the 1852 ration allowance for lightship crewmembers being set at 20 cents per day, wages, benefits, accommodations and food remained rather spartan.

At the district level, an engineer was assigned to assist the inspector and, as time progressed, each district established a depot for supply and maintenance of its own equipment. Modern equipment continued to be introduced, and supervision and general effectiveness was improved.

There is little question that the Lighthouse Board caused noteworthy progress, however, the committee organization did not lend itself to prompt action on day-to-day operating matters, and translating plans and recommendations into accomplishment continued to be a cumbersome and diffuse process.

Congress again stepped in, considering that the board structure was unwieldy, and hindered by undue military influence and

bickering. Feeling the need for an improved command structure and an organization capable of functioning as an entity responsive to a single civilian authority, the Lighthouse Board was disbanded in 1910. In its place was established a Bureau of Lighthouses within the Department of Commerce, having as its operating agency the U.S. Lighthouse Service. Heading up the bureau, a commissioner of lighthouses reported directly to the secretary of commerce, and also directly controlled the day-to-day operations of the service. For the first time, lightships, as well as all other aspects of navigational aids, had found a place in a service–oriented organization with an adequate command structure.

George Putnam named Commissioner of Lighthouses

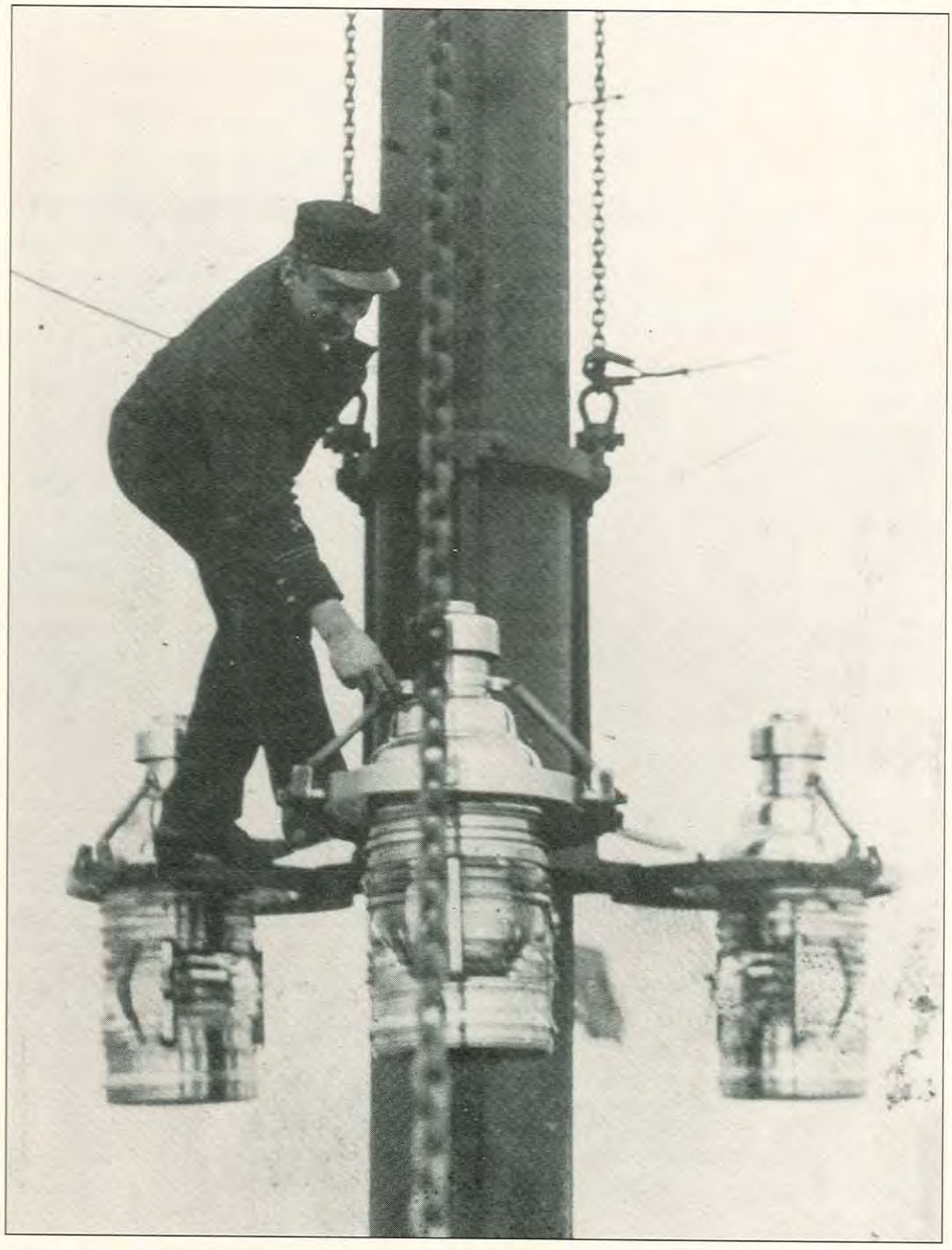
Under the able and progressive leadership of Commissioner George Putnam, the Bureau of Lighthouses moved rapidly to the forefront of the world's agencies engaged in developing and maintaining ATON. Although technological advances were highlighted during Putnam's tenure, his most valuable contribution was probably in the

Above: *Mascots were often found aboard lightships, like this puppy on a 3rd District vessel in 1955.*
Left: *Gift exchanges and a decorated tree made holidays like Christmas a bit more "homey" for lightship crewmen on station.*

area of organization and personnel administration. Here he emphasized competence and demanded professional performance by all employees, and he was responsible for remedying the long-standing problems with pay, living conditions, benefits, and a safe and efficient work environment.

This organization prospered for nearly 30 years, developing and perfecting the use of the radio beacon, modernizing illuminants and optical equipment, improving signalling methods, advancing the use of automated aids, and demonstrating the feasibility of unattended and radio-controlled light vessels and lighthouses. The lightship itself, through innovative engineering and naval architecture, was developed into an effective vessel specifically built to handle its environmental requirements, and with propulsion and auxiliary systems adequate to its needs. Watertight integrity and a variety of other safety features were also highly developed in lighships of the late 1930s.

Below: *Crewman from* Shovelful Shoals Lightship #3, *circa 1913, inspects the ship's oil-powered lights, 40 feet above deck. Four other vessels were later assigned to this station, located one-half mile off Monomoy Point, Mass., at the eastern end of Nantucket Sound, between 1852 and 1963.*



Lighthouse Service merges with the Coast Guard

In 1939, the mission of the Coast Guard was expanded to include responsibility for ATON, and resources of the former Lighthouse Service were transferred at that time. Lightship officers and crews, as well as other civilian employees, were offered two choices — integration into the Coast Guard with military rank commensurate with existing salary; or retention in civilian status under Coast Guard command. Exercise of these options resulted in about a 50-50 split. For lightships, many operated initially with either an all-military or an all-civilian complement. This later gave way to a mix of military and civilian personnel. The mixed crews were in evidence well after World War II and a few of the Lighthouse Service civilian employees were still active into the 1970s. In 1967, the Coast Guard became part of the Department of Transportation.

From 1939 until the end of the lightship era in 1983, the high standards of professionalism and technology introduced by the Lighthouse Service were carried forward and improved upon by the Coast Guard — well in keeping with its long history of dedication to the interest of mariners.

Lightships contend with nature's fury

Life aboard the lightships, aside from being viewed as monotonous by many, was exposed to many hazards. Survivors from *Five Fathom Lightship #37*, which took four men to the bottom with it, told of how their ship foundered off Five Fathom Bank, N.J. after an army of mountainous waves

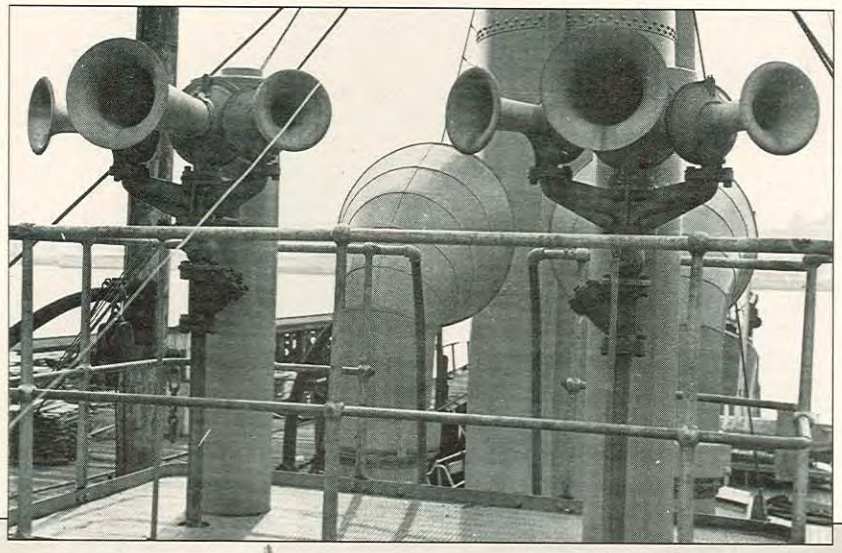
marched across its bulwarks, tore off its ventilators and hatch covers and filled it with water through the resulting deck openings.

> *"Goodbye, Nellie, ship is breaking up fast."*
>
> — Master Hugh M. Williams, *Buffalo Lightship #82*

There were no survivors, however, when *Buffalo Lightship #82*, located near Buffalo, N.Y., foundered in a gale that swept across Lake Erie in November, 1913, but a message from its dead captain to his wife told it all. Scrawled on a board that washed ashore a few days after the disaster, the message read: "Goodbye, Nellie, ship is breaking up fast. – Williams." Six months passed before the submerged wreck was located, more than two miles from its assigned station.

A diver who penetrated the 63 feet of water that enshrouded *Buffalo #82* reported that the storm had apparently parted its cables, battered in its superstructure, then dragged it to destruction. The body of one of the six men lost with it was found a year later, 13 miles from the site of the sinking.

Cross Rip Lightship #6 left no survivors or messages when it vanished off Mas-

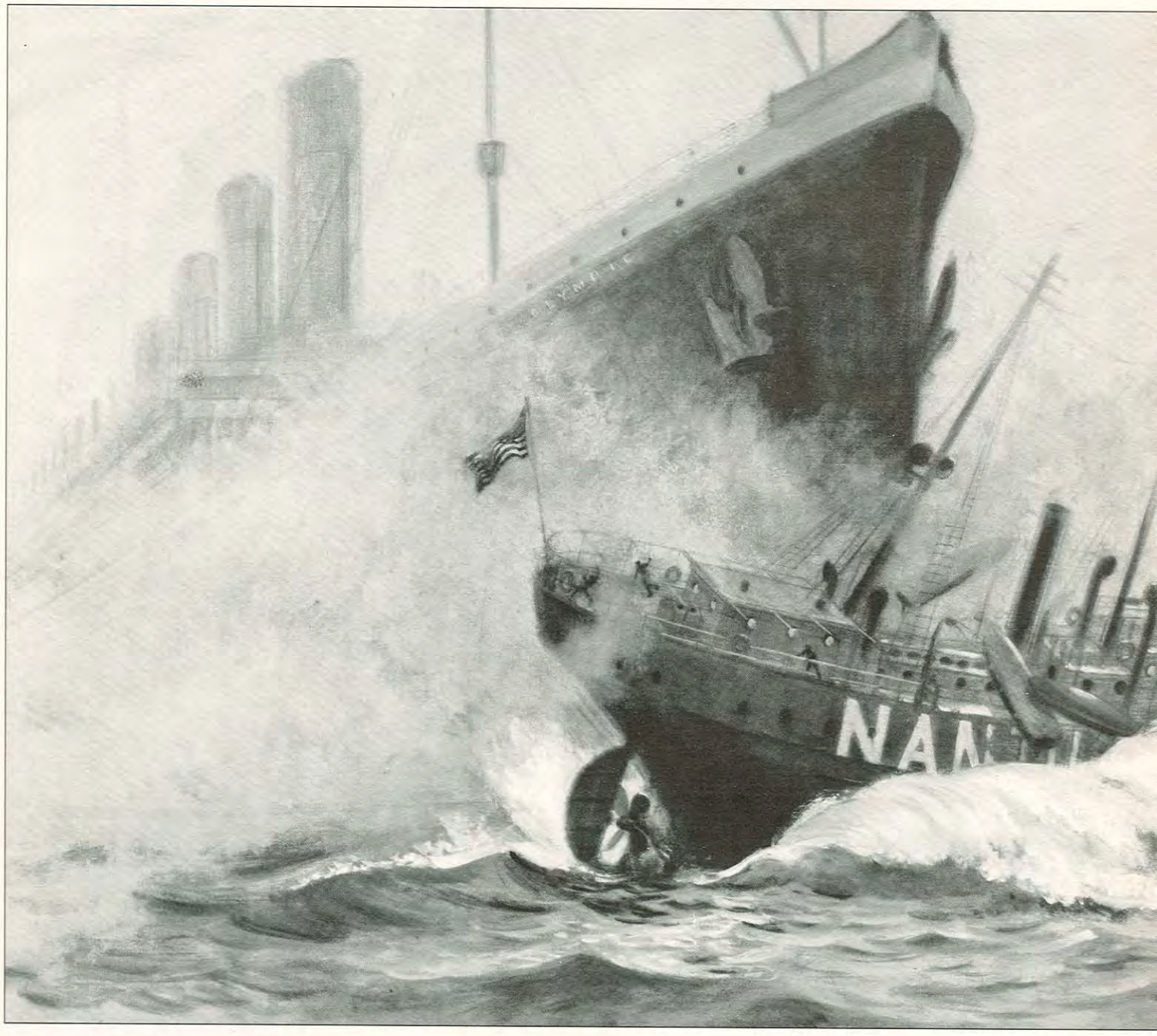


Left: *A Cunningham air-diaphragm horn replaced many old fog signals. This signal produced sound by a disk diaphragm vibrated by compressed air. Other diaphragm horns used steam or electricity.* **Below:** *The* Hen & Chickens Lightship #86 *had its original fog signal apparatus replaced by a Cunningham horn in 1934.*

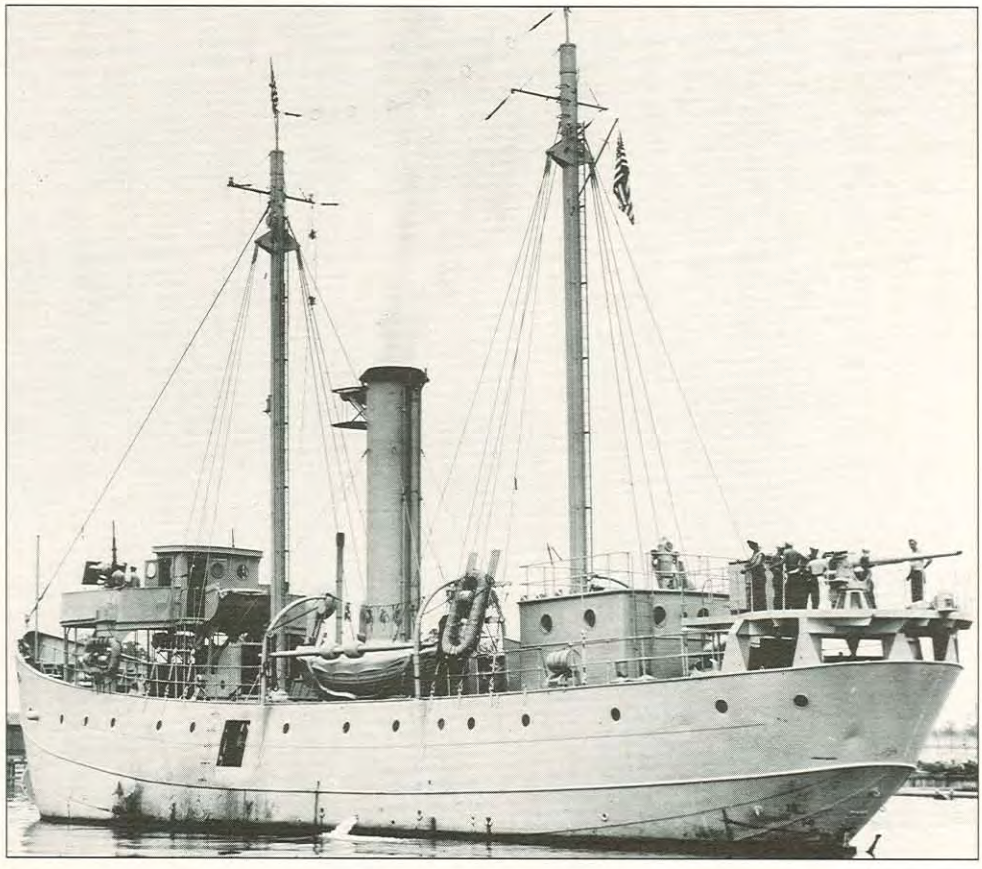
Below: Nantucket Lightship #117 *was sunk the morning of May 15, 1934, when it was struck broadside by* R.M.S. Olympic, *sister ship of the* R.M.S. Titanic. *The 133-foot ship sank within minutes with the loss of seven of its 11 crewmen. Just months before, the* Nantucket *had a narrow escape when it was sideswiped by the ocean liner* U.S.S. Washington.

sachusetts with all hands Feb. 5, 1918. Observers on shore reported seeing the helpless lightship torn loose from its moorings by a huge mass of windblown ice and carried away. The aged wooden vessel had no masts, sails or other means of motive power and, not being equipped with a radio, its fate and that of its six-man crew remained a mystery for 15 years. No trace of the ship was found until 1933, when a government dredge working in the Vineyard Sound area sucked up splintered pieces of oak planking and ribs, and a section of a windlass believed to be from the long-lost vessel. The most likely explanation for its loss is that the ice crushed its hull, and the crewmen perished in the winter sea.

Another mystery surrounds the loss of *Vineyard Sound Lightship #73*, which foundered during a 1944 hurricane with the loss of all hands. Its storm-battered wreck was explored by divers a few weeks after it sank, and again 20 years later, yet the actual cause of its loss remains unknown. Residents of Westport, Mass., reported seeing a series of red and white flares streaking across the cloud-filled skies in the general direction of the lightship. After the storm abated somewhat, they struggled down to the beach and scanned the murky horizon, only to discover that *Vineyard Sound #73*, which had been guarding Sow and Pigs Reef,



Left: *On Aug. 6, 1918,* Diamond Shoal Lightship #71 *(shown here as* Nantucket*) reported by radio the presence of a German submarine which had sunk a passing freighter. The message, warning other Allied ships, was intercepted by the submarine* U-104. *After surfacing and giving the lightship crew an opportunity to abandon ship, they sank* LV-71 *with deck guns.* ***Below:*** Vineyard Sound Lightship #73 *showing its World War II fore and aft mounted guns. The vessel survived wartime threats but was lost with all hands in a hurricane, Sept. 18, 1944, off Sow and Pigs Reef, Mass.*



had vanished from its station. This account of the incident and the rather intriguing aftermath is dedicated to its crew who remained at their posts until the end.

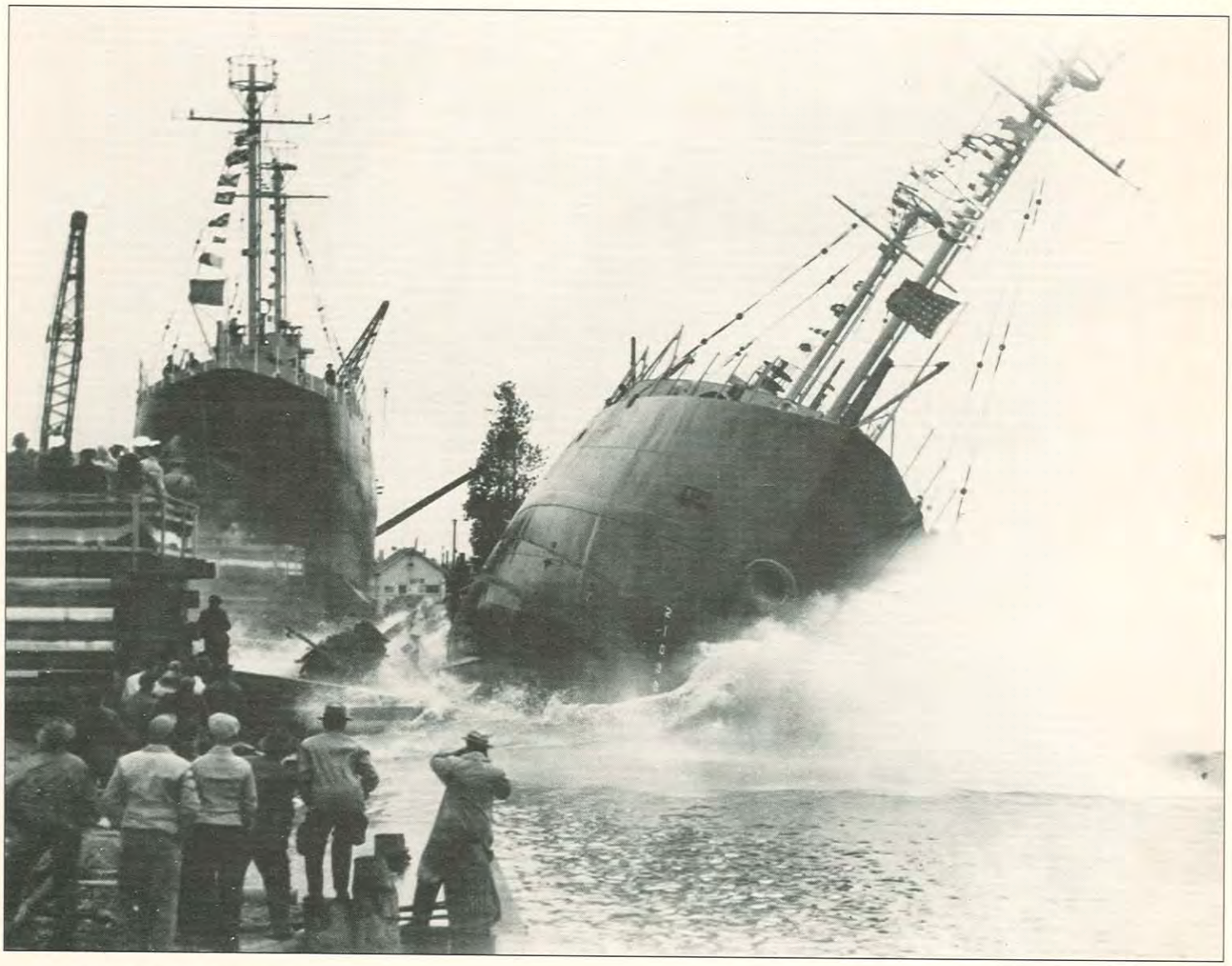
In December 1936, a 100-mph gale assailed the *Swiftsure Lightship #113*, anchored in the Strait of Juan de Fuca off the Washington coast.

"The wind came shrieking and snarling out of the south," its skipper recalled, "blowing a hurricane." The sea, he declared, "writhed and steamed like a bowl of boiling milk," and the sky was "full of innumerable tiny particles of water torn from the crests of the waves until the air was so thick we could barely see half the length of our vessel." Captain Eric Lindman flinched as waves broke over the pilothouse and the seas forced its way "through every fissure, no matter how small, even squirting in through the keyholes in the outer cabin doors." Unlike its ill-fated sisters, however, *Swiftsure* survived the intense 12-hour battering.

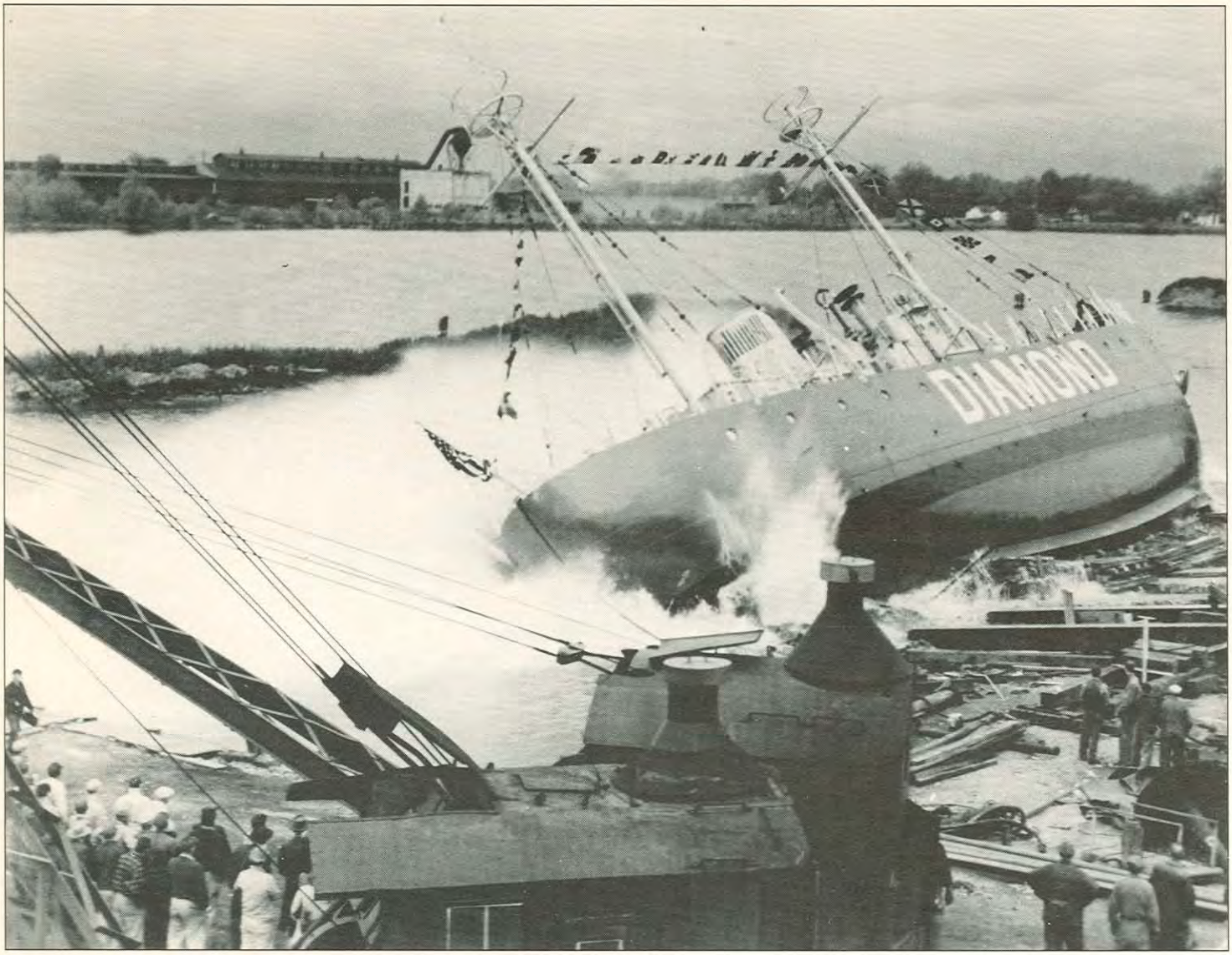
> *"The sea writhed and steamed like a bowl of boiling milk."*
>
> — Captain Eric Lindman, *Swiftsure Lightship*

Storms were certainly not a lightship's only threat. Man, rather than nature, caused the loss of the *Diamond Shoals Lightship #71* in 1918 off Cape Hattaras, N.C. A German submarine, provoked by the lightship's radio message warning off shipping, surfaced and, after allowing the 12-man crew to abandon ship, sank it with shell fire. The lightship's sacrifice was not in vain though, for more than 25 Allied ships had received its timely radio warning.

Sixteen years later, on May 15, 1934, the *Nantucket Lightship #117* was riding at anchor in 192 feet of water off Nantucket



Below Pollack Rip Lightship (WLV-196) *(left), awaits its turn for ducking while its "twin,"* Diamond Shoals Lightship (WLV-189) *is launched. The "twins" were the first lightships designed and built by the Coast Guard since its1939 merger with the U.S. Lighthouse Service. Both vessels employed all-welded-steel frames and several watertight compartments.*



Shoals. Its horn boomed into the fog to warn away the trans-Atlantic shipping that passed nearby. Unseen by sailors aboard the *Nantucket* was the 47,000-ton British luxury liner *Olympic*. Steering to the lightship's radio beacon signal, the ocean liner intended to alter course at the last moment and pass close by the *Nantucket*.

On the bridge of the *Olympic*, someone miscalculated though. The liner, sister ship to the *Titanic*, suddenly materialized out of the fog; its towering bow hung poised like the blade of a guillotine, then severed the lightship in two. Seven of the *Nantucket's* 11-man crew died in the collision. In response to the tragedy, the British government replaced the *Nantucket* with a new lightship, one resembling a miniature battleship. Its hull was fashioned from armor plate, enclosing a maze of 43 watertight compartments. Atop its mast was a light visible from almost 50 miles. And, whenever the foghorn would sound, a radio transmitter would automatically broadcast a signal, enabling navigators of oncoming ships to calculate the distance to the lightship.

Certainly, dangers posed by weather and collision were ever-present. Official records contain 237 instances of lightships being blown adrift or dragged off-station in severe weather or moving ice. Five lightships were lost under such conditions, but the majority, despite heavy damage to hull and superstructure on many of these occasions, remained on station unassisted. This attests to a high order of seamanship, and commendations for bravery and outstanding ship handling often resulted.

Minor bumps, sideswipes and near-misses

Without regard to frequent minor bumps, sideswipes and near-misses, 150 more serious collisions with lightships are document-

Above: Diamond Shoals Lightship (WLV-189) *is launched Oct. 16, 1946, in Bay City, Mich. This was the last of a line of lightships stationed along the North Carolina coast since 1897. It was replaced in 1966 by an offshore light structure. The lightship later became a museum at Atlantic City, N.J.*

Above: Huron Lightship #526 *serves as a temporary "hands-on" classroom during a port visit to Detroit in 1946. Detroit was home of the Coast Guard's Aids-to-Navigation School at the time.* **Right:** *Last of the Great Lakes lightships, the* Huron *was decommissioned Aug. 21, 1970, at Port Huron, Mich. Prior to decommissioning, it held the distinction of being the oldest active U.S. lightship. It was also the only light vessel that had a black hull, which appropriately designated its position on the port side of the channel.*

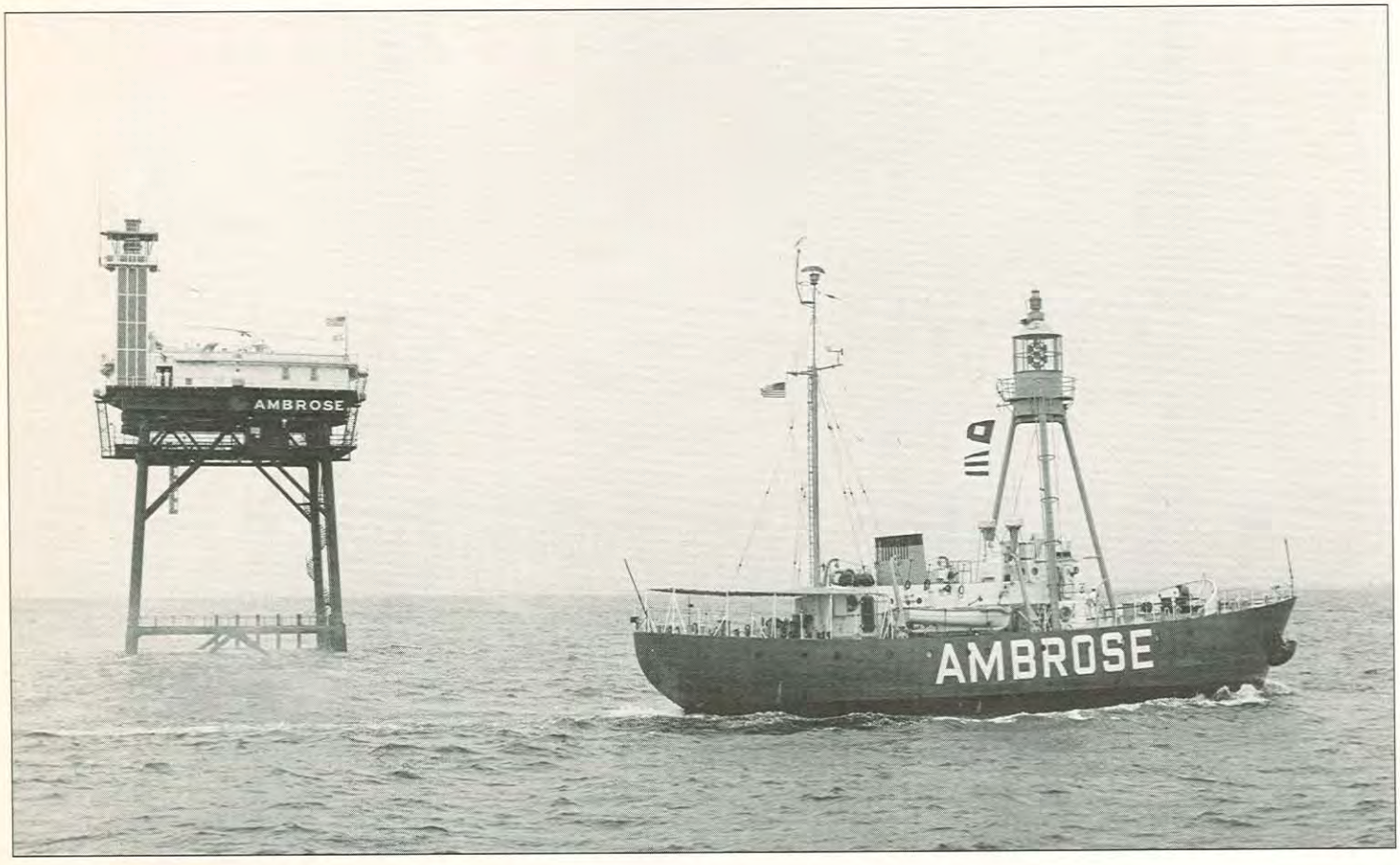
ed. Most of these involved sailing vessels, but long tows of multiple barges accounted for a sizeable number. Collision damage ranged from superficial to severe, and, in at least one case, the lightship came out unscathed, with the colliding vessel going down nearby. On another occasion when a lightship was struck by a passing vessel, the impact was sufficient to knock the on-watch lightship crew from their feet, and shatter all 16 lamp chimneys in the masthead lanterns. Besides the *Nantucket* in 1934, four other lightships were sunk as the result of being rammed. Fog was a factor in many of these collisions, however most occurred under conditions of reasonably good visibility. Vessels attempting to cross the bow of the lightship without making due allowance for current and leeway was found to be the usual cause.

Although compensated for to some extent in later years, a variety of factors contributed to lightships being veritable targets for all traffic. Many were positioned in midchannel. Early charts were overprinted with dotted lines running from lightship to lightship giving the course and distance, and sailing directions in early *Coast Pilots* openly encouraged passing lightships close aboard. Ships' officers handling coasters during the 1800s were by and large sadly deficient in the practice of piloting and navigation. Charts were often either not carried at all, or were not used for plotting. Instead, reliance was placed on listings of courses, bearings and distances found in a variety of government and commercial publications, or simply passed on by word of mouth. Little wonder that lightshipping carried with it such a large measure of apprehension.

"We must now look somewhere else to find the stuff that sea stories are made of."

— From last message sent by *Nantucket I Lightship*

Below: *Another "victim" of progress,* Ambrose Lightship (WLV-613) *is replaced Aug. 23, 1967, by the permanent Ambrose offshore light tower. Commissioned Aug. 4, 1952, the 540-ton* Ambrose *was the last U. S. lightship built. Her 700,000-candlepower light, which could be increased to 2.5-million c.p., was the most powerful of any lightship.*



AMERICA'S LIGHTSHIP ERA ENDS

March 29, 1985, saw the final chapter of America's lightship era come to a close with the decommissioning of the *Nantucket I.*

In a farewell message, Coast Guard Commandant ADM James S. Gracey said, "Technology has found a way to replace her with a more cost-effective aid to navigation, but

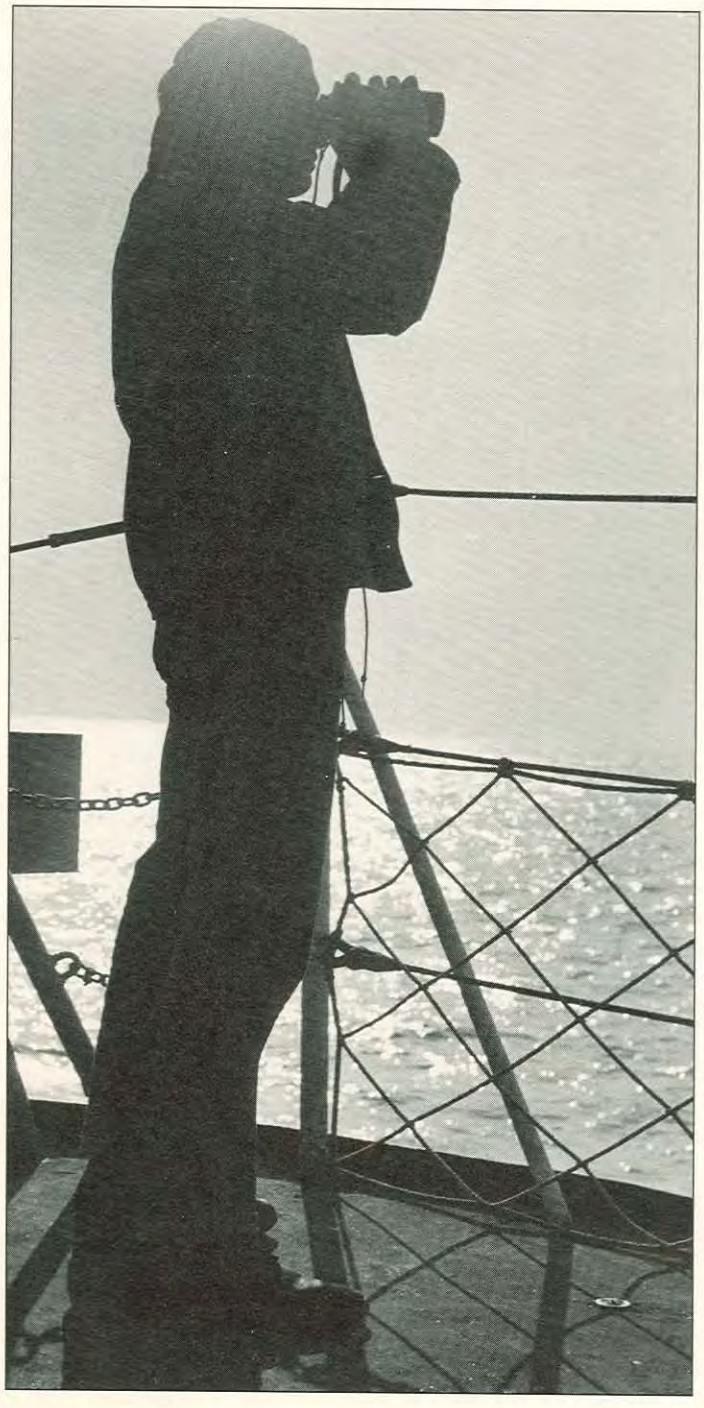
Nantucket I's sailors can never be replaced."

In many cases lightships were replaced with "Texas Tower" type offshore light platforms, other fixed structures or large navigational buoys, all offering considerable savings in manpower and in construction and maintenance costs.

The last message sent by the ship read in part, "An important part of Coast Guard history ended today. We must now look somewhere else to find the stuff that sea stories are made of."

Most of the decommissioned lightships are long gone. Quite a few were sold and served in coastwise and harbor roles. Two provided bonfires at Fourth of July celebrations and several were used as target ships by the Navy. A few were transferred to other countries for use as lightships, some were used as floating clubhouses by various organizations, but the majority ended up in a shipbreakers yard. However, 19 lightships still survive, the three oldest built in 1904. Most of these veterans remain afloat, restored for use as museums or exhibits open to the public. Two serve as floating restaurants and one is in use in the charter trade.

This cannot end with the traditional look to the future of lightships, for there is none. However, the vessels themselves, and certainly all those who served in them, constitute a unique and proud segment of America's maritime heritage — one sometimes overlooked, but never to be forgotten. •



Below: *Alone and on watch, a Coast Guardsman stands a constant vigil, somewhat like the lightships once did.*

ADDITIONAL READING

- Flint, Willard. *Lightships and Lightship Stations of the U.S. Government.* Washington, D.C.: Coast Guard Historian's Office, 1989.
- Ehrman, CDR William E., USCG (Ret.). *Lost on Voyages to Nowhere.* Washington, D.C.: *Commandant's Bulletin* - Jul/Aug 1984.
- Nalty, Bernard C. and Strobridge, Truman R. *Bright and Steadfast Light.* New London, Conn.: *U.S. Coast Guard Academy Alumni Bulletin* - Nov/Dec 1975.
- Bennett, William E. *White for Danger: True Dramas of Lightships and Lighthouses.* New York: The John Day Company, 1963.
- Floherty, John J. *Men Without Fear.* New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1940.

—G-CP/H

U.S. LIGHTSHIPS
PRESERVED AS MUSEUMS

Lightship #79 — A survivor of the second generation of steam-propelled lightships, *LV-79* is being restored by the Philadelphia Ship Preservation Guild, Delaware Avenue & Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106. Ph: (215) 923-9030. Built in 1904 at Camden, N.J. The *LV-79* displays the name *Barnegat*, is afloat and open to the public. Its last official designation was *WAL-506*.

Lightship #83 — Built as part of a five-vessel contract, *LV-83* served three major ports (Eureka and San Francisco, Calif., and Seattle) between 1905-1960. The ship is owned by Northwest Seaport, Inc., 1002 Valley St., Seattle, WA 98111. Ph: (206) 447-9800. The *LV-83* displays the name *Relief*, is afloat and open to the public. The ship's last official designation was *WAL-508*.

Lightship #87 — While serving the port of New York (1908-1932), the *LV-87* was the site of the first successful shipboard radio beacon used to guide ships at long distances in poor weather. The *LV-87* is owned by the South Street Seaport Museum, 207 Front St., New York, NY 10038. Ph: (212) 669-9400. The vessel displays the name *Ambrose*, is afloat and open to the public. Its last official designation was *WAL-512*.

Lightship #101 — The *LV-101* served at least five stations in the middle Atlantic states between 1916-1954. The vessel is owned by the Portsmouth Lightship Museum, P.O. Box 248, Portsmouth, VA 23705. Ph: (804) 393-8741. The ship is located on land and open to the public. It displays the name *Portsmouth* although there was never a station by that name. Its last official designation was *WAL-524*.

Lightship #103 — The *LV-103* is the only surviving lightship type specifically built for service on the Great Lakes. It is owned by the City of Huron, 905 7th St., Port Huron, MI 48060. Ph: (313) 987-6000. The *LV-103* is exhibited on land at Pine Grove Park and open to the public. The *LV-103* displays the name *Huron*. Its last official designation was *WAL-526*.

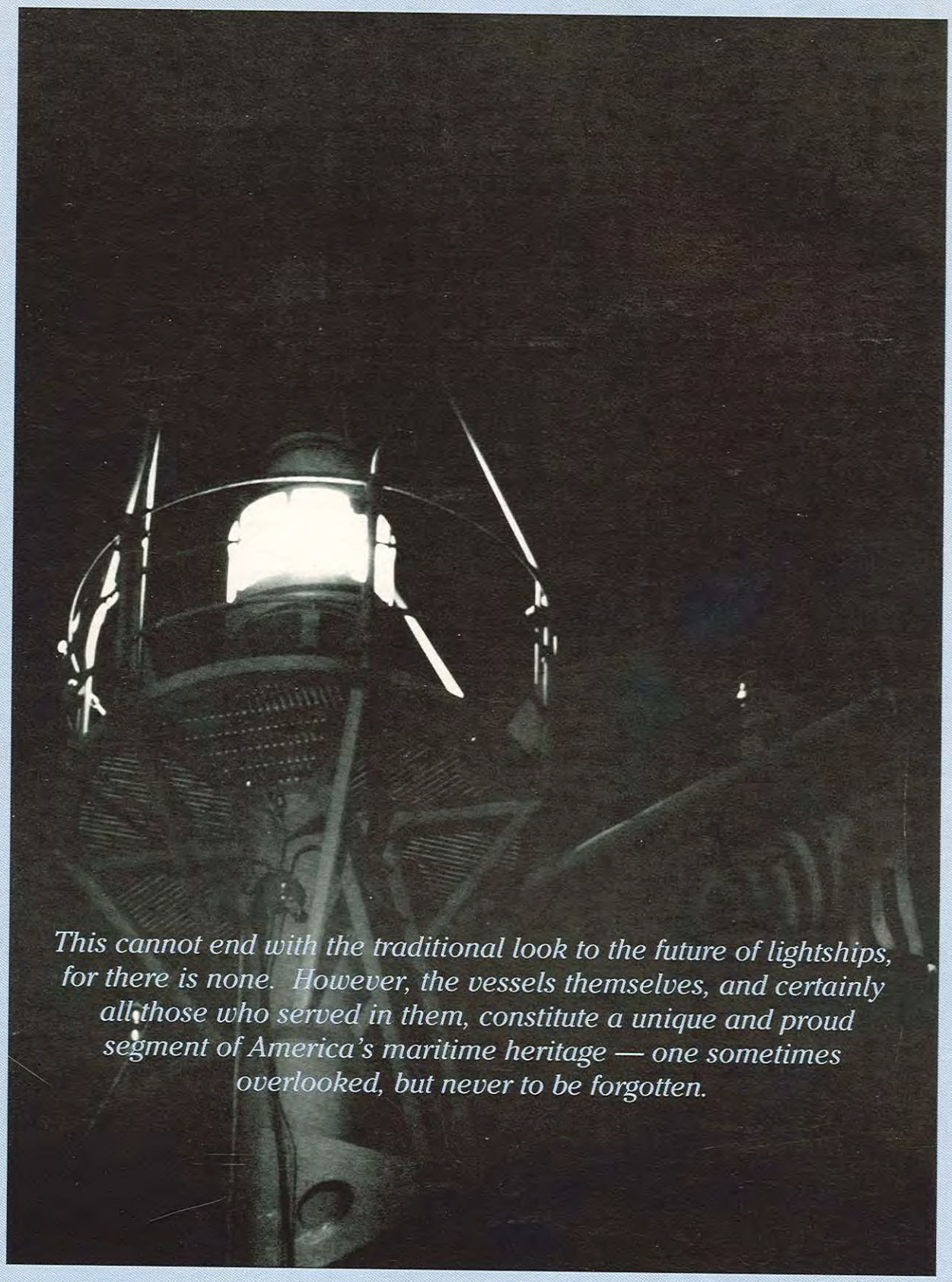
Lightships #112 and #84 — The *LV-112* is the only U.S. lightship still operating on the open seas, occasionally cruising the New England coast. It, and *LV-84*, are owned by the Intrepid Sea-Air-Space Museum, W. 46th St., & 12th Ave., New York, NY 10035. Ph: (212) 245-2533. Both vessels are afloat and open to the public. *LV-112* displays the name *Nantucket* and its last official designation was *WAL-534*. *LV-84* displays the name *Relief* and its last official designation was *WAL-509*.

Lightship #116 — In addition to serving the "Fenwick," "Chesapeake," and "Delaware" stations, the *LV-116* served as an examination vessel off Cape Cod, Mass., protecting the port of Boston during World War II. It is owned by the National Park Service and on loan to the City of Baltimore. The ship is part of the Baltimore Maritime Museum, Pier 4, Pratt St., Baltimore, MD 21202. Ph: (301) 396-5528. The *LV-116* displays the name *Chesapeake*, is afloat and open to the public. Its last official designation was *WAL-538*.

Lightship #118 — Although never actually assigned to "Overfalls" station off the Delaware coast, that is the name this vessel displays. The *LV-118* actually served several other stations between 1938-1972. The *LV-118* is owned by the Lewes Historical Society, West 3rd St., Lewes, DE 19958. *Lightship #118* is afloat and open to the public. Its last official designation was *WAL-539*.

Lightship (WAL-604) — One of two of the last class of lightships built by the Coast Guard, the *WAL-604* spent its entire 28 years of duty off Columbia River, Ore. station. Retired in 1979, it was the last lightship serving on the Pacific Coast. The ship is owned by the Columbia River Maritime Museum, 1792 Marine Dr., Astoria, OR 97103. Ph: (503) 325-2523. The *WAL-604* displays the name *Columbia*, is afloat, open to the public and capable of operating under its own power.

Lightship (WAL-605) — Originally stationed at "Overfalls" on the East Coast, this vessel was subsequently sent to the Pacific to serve at the "Blunt's Reef" station off Cape Mendocino, Calif. It is currently being restored as an operating museum vessel. The *WAL-605* is owned by the U.S. Lighthouse Society, 244 Kearny St., 5th floor, San Francisco, CA 94108. Ph: (415) 585-1303. The *WAL-605* displays the name *Relief*, is afloat, open to the public and capable of operating under its own power.



This cannot end with the traditional look to the future of lightships, for there is none. However, the vessels themselves, and certainly all those who served in them, constitute a unique and proud segment of America's maritime heritage — one sometimes overlooked, but never to be forgotten.