

U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Flotilla One



**No caption. No date listed; probably June 1944.
No photo number listed. Photographer unknown.**

Left to right: the USCG-29 (83417), USCG-4 (83321), & USCG 2 (83304) tied up at Poole, England.

A few weeks prior to D-Day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt suggested that Operation Neptune needed a rescue flotilla (so the story goes; some even claim that Winston Churchill lamented that the losses in the Channel would be prohibitive and it was too bad that the Allies did not have a dedicated rescue force on hand to which the President declared "But we do—the Coast Guard!" Roosevelt then ordered the Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Ernest J. King, USN, to work out the details. ADM King in turn contacted the Commandant of the Coast Guard, Vice Admiral Russell R. Waesche, who noted that there were dozens of coastal patrol craft that might do the job. The Coast Guard had 83-foot patrol boats, nicknamed the "matchbox fleet," on anti-submarine duty along the East Coast of the United States. Sixty 83-footers were selected and each cutter was transported piggy-back on freighters to the U.K. where they were offloaded, formed into "Rescue Flotilla One" based at Poole, England, and modified for service as rescue craft. They were under the command of Commander Alexander Stewart, USCGR.

They were assigned to each of the invasion areas, with 30 assigned to the British and Canadian sectors and 30 assigned to the American sectors. During Operation Neptune/Overlord these cutters and their crews carried out the Coast Guard's time-honored task of saving lives, albeit under enemy fire on a shoreline thousands of miles from home. The cutters of Rescue Flotilla One saved more than 400 men on D-Day alone and by the time the unit was decommissioned in December, 1944, they had saved 1,438 souls.

The USCG-1, formerly the 83300, escorted the first waves of landing craft into the Omaha assault area on D-Day morning. Her crew pulled 28 survivors from a sunken landing craft out of the English Channel right off the beaches before 0700, 6 June 1944.



On D-Day, 6 June 1944 the cutters got underway early in the morning but one had engine trouble and had to return to Poole. After an engine change she too got underway for the beaches on D-Day. The others made the journey across the English Channel unscathed that morning. Once the invasion

commenced, the patrol boats from the matchbox fleet had a hectic and dangerous morning. Unlike the troops who could seek shelter, they, along with the assault boat crews, braved enemy fire and obstacles time and again from H-Hour through the rest of the day. Originally, most were to remain near the transports, but it soon became evident that they would be needed close ashore.

The 83-foot CGC-16, nick-named the "homing pigeon" arrived off the beachhead prior to the invasion and began picking up survivors from disabled landing craft in the assembly area at 5:30 a.m. Throughout the morning, the vessel's crew pulled 90 soldiers and sailors from the water. By 9:30 a.m., after administering first aid to the wounded, the crew transferred the survivors to the *Dickman*. By the end of the day they had pulled 126 men from the English Channel, the largest number saved by any of the Coast Guard matchbox-fleet craft that day.

Gold, Juno & Sword Beaches

Meanwhile, along the Allies' left flank four Coast Guard LSTs and 29 cutters from the matchbox fleet accompanied the British and Canadian assaults at Gold, Juno and Sword. One cutter had mechanical problems and was unable to make the trip across the Channel until later in the month. The four Coast Guard-manned LSTs safely delivered their troops and cargo as their allies attempted to take the town of Caen. Although the LSTs got along well with their British cousins, the cutters had some difficulties. The HMS *Hind* almost opened fire on four 83-foot craft when they attempted to join their convoy. Other British commanders were not sure how best to use the cutters and ordered them to stand by a cruiser where they milled about during the invasion and then returned to Britain. The CGC-24 stood by the HMS *Albatross* for two days and acted as a courier, including "fetching an officer's pipe" and transporting personnel. Despite these minor SNAFUs, most of the cutters were well used and spent the day pulling British and Canadian soldiers and sailors from the channel.

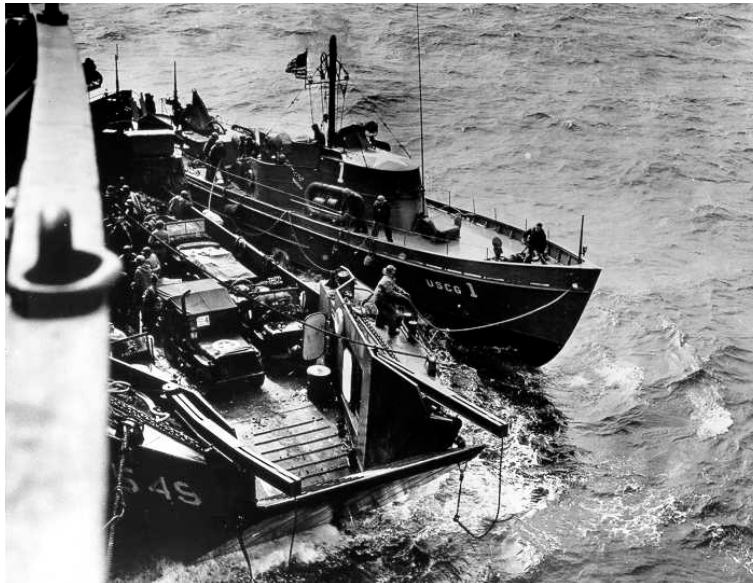
". . . fetching an officer's pipe" - what the crew of one cutter, assigned to the British invasion forces, did on D-Day, according to their official Action Report.

The CGC-35 traversed the channel in support of 24 Royal Navy LCI(L)s and followed the first wave in to the Sword landing area at 7:40 a.m.

The cutter sailed to a burning craft, and rescued five survivors. Unable to transfer them to a transport because of the heavy seas, the crew made the survivors comfortable below and returned to their patrol station. The CGC-34 pulled 32 British soldiers and seamen from the channel on D-Day. The CGC-53 took station off the beaches and soon thereafter the crew rescued five men from a swamped landing craft and came under fire from German shore

batteries. The crew watched as the battleship HMS *Rodney* opened fire and silenced the Germans before they proceeded back to Britain.

The cutters assigned to the Eastern Naval Task Force ably lived up to the Coast Guard's tradition of saving lives at sea and the Coast Guard LSTs also distinguished themselves in support of their allies. Fortunately, no Coast Guard vessels were lost off the British beaches on D-Day, but the same was not true at Omaha Beach.



Omaha & Utah Beaches

The matchbox-fleet patrol boats kept busy rescuing survivors along the entire Omaha beachhead and the experience of one of these diminutive wooden-hulled patrol craft typified the role of the cutters that day.

The 83-foot Coast Guard cutter *USCG 1* off Omaha Beach on the morning of D-Day, tying up to an LCT and the *Samuel Chase*. *USCG-1* escorted the first waves of landing craft into the Omaha assault area on D-Day morning. Its crew pulled 28 survivors from a sunken landing craft out of the English Channel right off the beaches before 0700, 6 June 1944.

The *CGC-1* formed up with the Omaha assault force and arrived at its station at 6 a.m. It escorted a group of LCVPs to the beach. Two miles offshore a lookout spotted men from a sunken British LCA in the water and the *CGC-1* went to their assistance.

The Coast Guardsmen had to jump overboard and tie lines to the freezing survivors because they were too cold to help themselves aboard. The cutter's crew succeeded in pulling 24 soldiers and four Royal Navy sailors from the Channel. They then sailed back to the transport area and transferred the survivors to the *Chase*. The *CGC-1* then returned to the waters off Omaha. At 9:45 a.m. they recovered 19 survivors from the *LCI(L)-91*, 14 of whom were part of the LCI's Coast Guard crew and transferred these men to the *Chase* and once again returned to their station. They spent the better part of the day within 2,000 yards of the beach under enemy machine-gun, mortar and artillery fire. No crewman was injured and the crew returned to Britain unscathed.

Carrying out the Coast Guard's time-honored task of saving lives, albeit under enemy fire on a shoreline thousands of miles from home, the cutters of Rescue Flotilla One saved more than 400 men on D-Day alone and by the time the unit was decommissioned in December, 1944, they had saved 1,438 souls. As at North Africa, Sicily, Italy and throughout the Pacific, the Coast Guard was instrumental to the invasion's success. An admirable record for the United States' oldest continuous sea-going service.

