

## **U.S. Coast Guard Activities on City Island, NY during World War II**

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### **Background**

During World War II, the harbor defense and port security resources assigned to the protection of the New York Harbor region were significantly expanded due to the important strategic value of the port, as well as its associated shipping and terminals. This effort was undertaken jointly by the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Coast Guard under the auspices of the wartime 3<sup>rd</sup> Naval District. Part of this effort included the establishment of bases/stations and facilities for boats and personnel engaged in harbor patrols and the boarding/inspection of incoming and outgoing merchant ships.

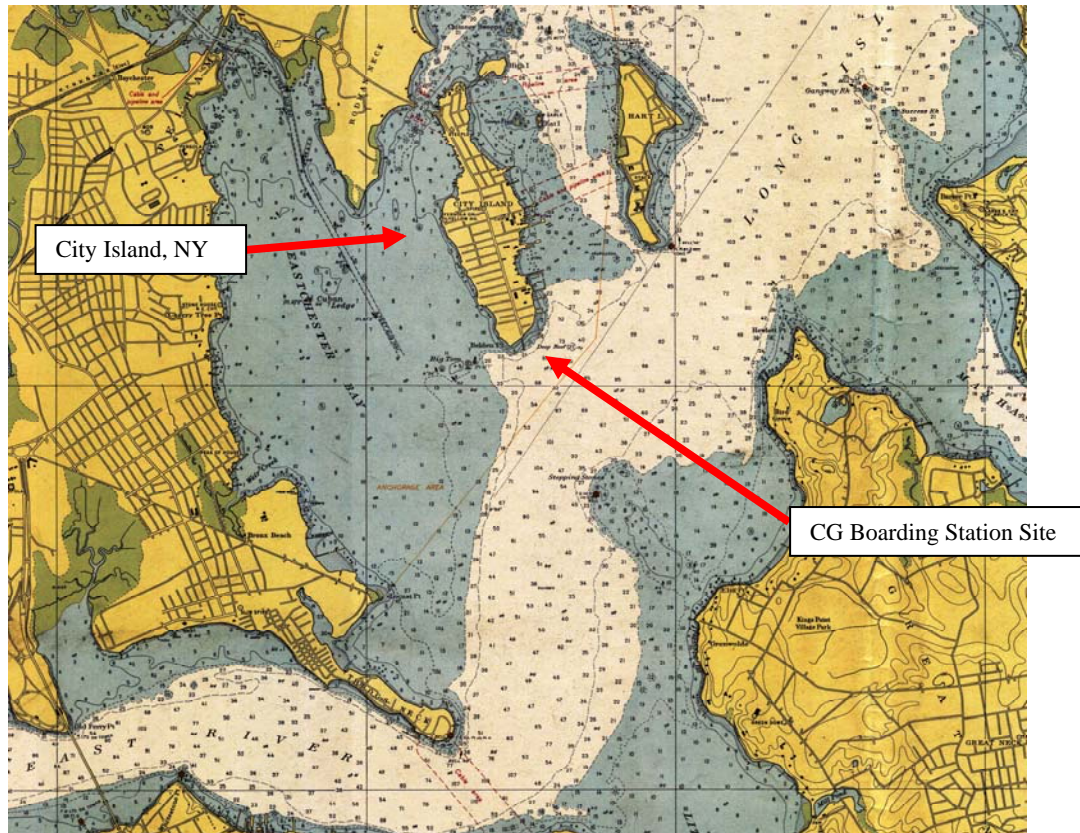
While most of these activities were directed towards the primary entrance into New York Harbor (i.e., Ambrose Channel and the Verrazano Narrows, between Brooklyn and Staten Island), other approach routes to the harbor had to be covered as well. These included the “back door” approach to New York Harbor from Long Island Sound through the famous Hell’s Gate narrows into the East River, as well as the “southern route” from Sandy Hook Channel, across the lower bay, and up the Arthur Kill and Kill Van Kull channels behind Staten Island. For this purpose, additional harbor patrol boat stations were established; 1) on Pier 9 on Manhattan; 2) on Ellis Island; 3) on Pier 18 Staten Island; 4) at Perth Amboy, NJ (to cover the approaches to the Arthur Kill); and 5) on City Island, NY to cover the Hell’s Gate approaches. Of these, the station built on City Island is the most interesting given the unique location and extent of the facilities constructed by the Coast Guard expressly for this purpose.

### **City Island, NY**

Well before World War II, City Island had become well established and recognized as the location of a number of very reputable and high quality wooden boat and yacht building yards, as well as a unique island-based residential suburb of the New York metropolitan area. City Island was also the location of a small station for the Hell’s Gate harbor pilots, who boarded and guided inbound and outbound shipping through the dangerous Hell’s Gate narrows and approaches to the East River and Long Island Sound.

During World War II, all of the New York area harbor pilots were inducted into Coast Guard service as temporary reserve personnel, but continued to perform the same piloting duties of boarding and guiding merchant ships into and out of the port areas. This change included the Hell’s Gate pilots based on City Island. What developed on City Island, however, was a far more extensive base of operations for boat patrols, harbor surveillance, and ship boardings than the small office and dock that the Hell’s Gate pilots had up to that point. This was the genesis of what became designated as “USCG Boarding Station, City Island”.

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**1942 Nautical Chart of City Island, NY Area**

**USCG Boarding Station, City Island**

In the first few months following the attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entry into the war in December of 1941, harbor patrols and port security operations in the western Long Island Sound area were the responsibility of the active and temporary reserve personnel of the already-existing Coast Guard Station Eatons Neck, Long Island, NY. The boats used for this purpose were a combination of regular Coast Guard rescue and utility craft assigned to Eatons Neck, along with former civilian recreational and fishing craft taken up by the Coast Guard for temporary wartime service. This included a prominent City Island resident Albert J. Schwarzler, who had volunteered for service in the Coast Guard reserves, and his private yacht, which was assigned the temporary Coast Guard boat number CGR-550. Chief Boatswains Mate (Temporary) Schwarzler and CGR-550, along with other temporary reserve personnel, would get underway daily from Station Eatons Neck and proceed westbound to patrol the approaches to Hell's Gate. Operating out of Eatons Neck, however, was not an optimal arrangement due to the transit distance and time involved in getting to the intended patrol area, as well as the fact that Eatons Neck was a smaller station that did not have the space or facilities for the berthing and care of a larger number of boats and assigned crews.

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By early 1942, it was decided that these patrol operations needed to be based closer to the actual scene of operations, and City Island seemed to be an ideal location, based mostly on its proximity and the availability of the local wooden boat yards for repair and maintenance purposes. To this end, the Coast Guard arranged for the temporary lease of some partially vacant land at the southern tip of City Island (including an existing pier) on which purpose-built housing, logistics, and operations facilities could be constructed. In the interim, Chief Schwarzler offered the use of his private floating pier on the east side of City Island as a temporary patrol boat station.

By the Fall of 1942, the new City Island Coast Guard facilities were completed, which included barracks buildings and a dining hall capable of accommodating 250 personnel (typically, the station had about 150 men assigned to it), a harbor surveillance and operations building (at the base of the pier), repair shops, a warehouse, an armory, and a recreation hall. All of these were built at the foot of City Island Avenue just below Hortons Lane. Co-located with the harbor patrol and port security personnel were the Hell's Gate pilots as well as U.S. Customs Service personnel. The primary mission of the harbor patrol boat force personnel and resources were to maintain surveillance of the area around Throgs Neck, which was a geographic choke point in the approaches to Hell's Gate and the East River. They also maintained surveillance of an area in nearby Hempstead Harbor, Long Island, where ships and barges loaded with munitions and explosives were temporarily anchored.

Boarding Station City Island, as one of the New York Harbor area patrol bases, was part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Naval District's Coast Guard harbor patrol fleet network of facilities, and reported directly to the commanding officer of the harbor patrol fleet. For operational purposes, it also had direct communications links to the fleet patrol officer, as well as to the nearby harbor entry control post (HECP) located at Fort Schuyler, New York; a facility operated jointly by the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army for coastal and harbor defense purposes. The boat forces assigned to Boarding Station City Island were designated as Division No. 8 of the harbor patrol fleet, and were under the command of an Officer-in-Charge (OIC).

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**1943 Photographs of U.S. Coast Guard Boarding Station City Island, NY Shoreside Facilities**  
(Official USCG photographs)

**U.S. Coast Guard Activities on City Island, NY during World War II**  
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**1943 Photographs of U.S. Coast Guard Boarding Station City Island, NY Pier Facilities**  
(Official USCG photographs)

**U.S. Coast Guard Activities on City Island, NY during World War II**  
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**1943 Photograph of U.S. Coast Guard Boarding Station City Island, NY  
Surveillance and Operations Building  
(Official USCG photograph)**

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Except for one boat, all of the patrol craft assigned to City Island were converted civilian craft, not standard Coast Guard design rescue/utility boats, as listed below.

**Patrol Craft Assigned to U.S. Coast Guard Boarding Station, City Island, NY**

<b>Boat Number</b>	<b>Length (feet)</b>	<b>Type</b>
CG420	31	Converted civilian cabin motorboat
CG422	30	Converted civilian cabin motorboat
CG444	42	Converted civilian motorboat
CG550	64	Converted civilian trawler
CG1132	30	Converted civilian motorboat
CG1979	42	Converted civilian cabin motorboat
CG1987	38	Converted civilian cabin motorboat
CG1991	46	Converted civilian cabin motorboat with fire pump
CG3021	38	Converted civilian cabin motorboat
CG3040	38	Converted civilian cabin motorboat
CG3044	25	Converted civilian motor skiff
CG3059	50	Converted civilian cabin motorboat
CG30322	30	Standard CG design 30ft. motor rescue boat
CG42021/ex-CG7258	42	Converted civilian cabin motorboat
CG56016-F	56	Fireboat converted from civilian motorboat

Although the station included a pier constructed prior to the war, the pier was not in good condition and required refurbishment. In addition, the Coast Guard constructed a boat mooring and maintenance facility on nearby Travers Island in Pelham Bay, NY. This facility was primarily intended for the storage and upkeep of former civilian boats that had been taken up into temporary Coast Guard service at the start of the war, but were no longer needed and retained in Coast Guard custody until the war's end.

USCG Boarding Station City Island was in operation from late 1942 until August 1945, and was an important site for the boarding/inspection of all merchant shipping entering and leaving the Hell's Gate/western Long Island Sound approaches, as well as for harbor security boat patrols of the immediate area. Boarding Station City Island also had the occasion to render search and rescue services for recreational boaters that sailed in western Long Island Sound, particularly after recreational boating restrictions were lifted later in the war. In August 1945, following the surrenders of Germany and Japan, the station was decommissioned, all of the land and buildings vacated, and the land returned to the original owners.

As many of the buildings were of typical wartime temporary construction, most were demolished not long after the station was discontinued and vacated by the Coast Guard. Today, nothing of the Coast Guard-built station facilities is left to indicate its former wartime use. A few of the buildings remain, some in use as restaurants, and one is a private home. One waterfront restaurant on the site, Sam's Restaurant, is located where the patrol boat pier used to be. Otherwise, in visiting the site, you would never know that there once was, during World War II, a very busy Coast Guard port security patrol base that made an important contribution to the defense of the New York Harbor area.

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### References:

Anonymous; "Harbor Patrol Fleet", The Coast Guard at War-Third Naval District, Volume 12, U.S. Coast Guard, Third District, 1946; part of multi-volume unpublished official narrative history of wartime U.S. Coast Guard activities and forces in the New York region.

Interview conducted on 7 April 2011 by author of DC1 Kenneth Sutherland, USCG (Retired), Staten Island, NY.

### Acknowledgements:

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