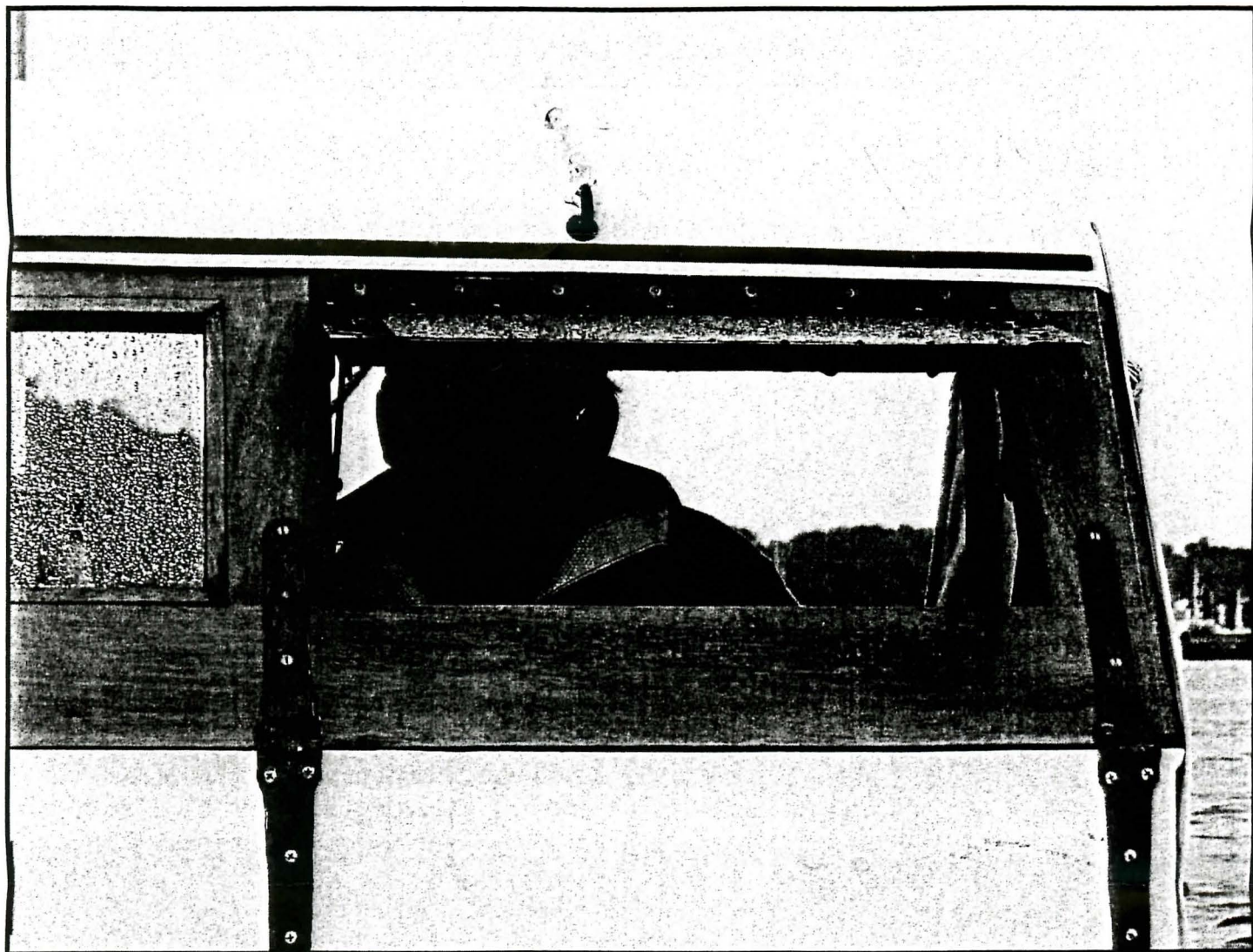


# WRECK & RESCUE

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HIGH TIMES IN THE DUNES OF OLD CAPE COD:  
THE 2006 USLSSHA ANNUAL CONFERENCE

BY JOHN J. GALLUZZO

WHY ONE SURFMAN QUIT

BY ERIC C. HARTLEP

A FORGOTTEN HERO: C.C. MAUETHROP  
AND THE REVENUE CUTTER COMMODORE PERRY

BY DENNIS L. NOBLE



# A FORGOTTEN HERO: C.C. MAUETHROP AND THE REVENUE CUTTER COMMODORE PERRY

BY DENNIS L. NOBLE

The men and women of the U.S. Coast Guard and their predecessors have accomplished some amazing feats, but are generally forgotten. Readers of *Wreck & Rescue Journal* may find this approximately three decades' journey to find the rescue accomplished by a forgotten hero of interest.

During the period from 1975 to 1978, while researching the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service in Alaska, I came upon an officer's description of the death of a seaman serving in the cutter *Commodore Perry* in 1896. Writing the required report of the death to his commanding officer, Capt. Horatio D. Smith, Lieut. J. Brown reported,

"While making evening colors, the pennant became fouled and would neither break out nor lower. Seaman C. C. Mauethrop, who was assigned as acting quartermaster and had the watch, went aloft to clear the pennant. He reached the trunk and endeavored, for the space of a minute, to break out the pennant, when for some unaccountable reason, he fell to the deck and was instantly killed."

Lieutenant Brown reminded Captain Smith that Seaman Mauethrop had previously performed a heroic deed while serving on the *Perry*.

There is so little known about the enlisted force of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service that I became interested in uncovering what deed Mauethrop accomplished that an officer would remember him in his report. I searched the files of the Gold and Silver Life Saving Medals in the National Archives and found nothing. The enlisted

men of the service had no service records, so that avenue remained a closed door. The only thing I knew about Seaman Mauethrop, beside his death and the comment by Brown, was his final resting place in the cemetery at Unalaska.



Well-known for a brief moment in time for a self-endangering rescue, Seaman C.C. Mauethrop is all but forgotten today (Image from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1896).

We now move ahead to the 1980s.

In 1985, Unalaska Pride started a movement to renovate the cemetery on isolated Unalaska Island. Later, I received an invitation to make the long journey to Unalaska as a part of the ceremony, to honor the final resting place of some of the crewmen of the old Bering Sea Patrol. By actually viewing Mauethrop's grave, my path again crossed the forgotten seaman's story.

Flash forward to the twenty-first century.

In 2005, while researching the 1896 court marital of Capt. Michael A. Healy, U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, I uncovered a collection of newspaper articles in a scrapbook filed in the Library of Congress' Manuscript Division. Someone had gone to great lengths to collect clippings on the service, which held much of the newspaper coverage of the trial. As I waded through the material, my eye caught a drawing of a man. Almost as if scripted by Hollywood, or a novelist, under the headline of "Victim and Hero of the *Perry*," the story of Mauethrop's heroism

unfolded. I then went to the Newspaper and periodicals room of the Library of Congress and read the account in the April 28, 1896, issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

According to the account, Mauethrop landed in San Francisco after serving on the yacht *Coronet* as an ordinary seaman. The owner of the yacht, Arthur Curtis James, wished to sail to Japan and "observe the eclipse of the sun in August." For unknown reasons, Mauethrop mustered



off the *Coronet* in Sausalito, just north across the bay from San Francisco.

The newspaper reported Mauethrop remained at the "house of Al White, whom he had known for many years." Mauethrop, born in Springfield, Massachusetts, had served a hitch in the U.S. Navy, being discharged in San Francisco. He then returned to the East Coast and eventually shipped in the *Coronet* and returning to the West Coast. He wished to again sign on board a Navy ship at the first opportunity. One day, however, Boatswain Alfred Halfell, serving on the *Perry*, came into White's house

"hurriedly and told White he needed a man. The place was offered to [Mauethrop] and he accepted it. He had no idea of going to the Behring [sic] Sea, but rough-and-ready sort of fellow that he is, made up his mind at once. Half an hour later he was rowed out to the *Perry*."

Halfell had "made his headquarters at San Francisco for years. He was in the Navy for nine years, his last [enlistment] being on the *Ranger*, where he rose to the rank of chief boatswain's mate." He served for many years in the Pacific Squadron. Halfell left the navy and "after a rest," signed on board the *Perry*. A native of Switzerland, "he came to America while quite young." At the time, he was thirty-five years-old.

While en route to Port Townsend, Washington, the *Perry* ran into high seas. "Halfell was swept overboard by one of the many seas that struck the vessel; a boat was manned [by four sailors] to attempt his rescue," but Halfell died before the boat reached him. While making the attempt, the rescue boat capsized, throwing the four sailors into the cold, heavy seas. "They struggled . . . and seemed doomed. . . ."

Mauethrop, "a powerful fellow, standing about six feet high, and weighing 180 pounds, [and described] as just the fellow who would attempt the seemingly impossible

[rescue,]" grabbed a line [rope] and leaped over the side. Mauethrop managed to swim to the four sailors now rapidly succumbing to hypothermia. With almost superhuman effort, Mauethrop worked the line around all four of the weakened sailors. Those on board the cutter then pulled the unconscious men aboard the *Perry*. "[Mauethrop], the last to be hauled aboard, was still fresh and strong."

The newspaper account recorded the praise Mauethrop received. It also noted a "proposal [by] Captain Smith of the *Perry* that [Mauethrop] be given a medal."

Thus, after 110 years the account of a brave, but forgotten, cutterman can now be told to a wider audience. The only remaining question is why did Mauethrop not receive a medal? I believe that once Mauethrop died in the Bering Sea, Captain Smith saw no reason to pursue the paperwork required for the medal. Next to nothing is known about those who served before the mast in the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and it is very likely that the commissioned officers of the

cutters also knew very little about the men who served in the enlisted force. For all practical purposes, the enlisted force consisted of merchant marine sailors and, as many maritime historians have pointed out, most sailors in the nineteenth century had few ties to the shore. It is, therefore, consistent with the times that Capt. Horatio D. Smith felt it not worth the effort to see if Mauethrop had a family that might appreciate a medal as a remembrance of the courage of their son or brother. Be that as it may, Mauethrop's name should at least be added posthumously to the list of Gold or Silver Life Saving Medals.

*Dennis L. Noble is the author of Alaska and the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service (with Truman Strobridge), That Others Might Live: The U.S. Life-Saving Service, 1878-1915, as well as many other books on the history of the Coast Guard. This is his tenth article for Wreck & Rescue Journal.*

