

The MAKAH influence



LT Tom Farrell, G-CPP-2

Native Americans in the early Coast Guard

Until recently, the only mention of Native Americans in early Coast Guard history is a letter from the lighthouse keeper at Gay Head, Mass., who hired Native Americans. Preliminary research in the National

Archives, however, reveals the employment of Native Americans at some light stations and lifesaving stations on the West Coast, plus some accounts of their bravery.

One mention of Native Americans in the early Coast Guard, or one of its direct predecessors, is near the

Northwestern tip of the United States at Neah Bay, Wash., the location of the Makah Reservation. In 1877, one of the earliest Life-Saving Service stations established on the West Coast was located on the Makah Reservation. The first crews at the station, except for the man in charge, the keeper, were Native American. Eventually, however, the make up of the crew changed until it was all white.

An example of the bravery of the Native Americans alongside members of the early Coast Guard is illustrated in the rescue of the British ship *Lammerlaw*, off the coast of Washington in 1882. At 5 a.m. Oct. 30, 1882, the Portland, Ore.-bound *Lammerlaw*, laden with 1,125 tons of coal and fighting through "very heavy seas" and "frequent squalls," struck the south end of the northern breakwater at the entrance to Shoalwater Bay, Wash.

Keeper Albert Stream, of the Shoalwater Bay Life-Saving Station, along with a crew made up of one Native American, known only as Lighthouse George, and four white men, went to the aid of the ship. Stream's boat met a tug lying off from the *Lammerlaw*, which would be used as a place to bring the shipwrecked sailors. Lighthouse George and the other crewmen were now ready to follow Stream's orders. The men put their backs into the oars.

"There was positively no lee for the boat's approach" to the *Lammerlaw*, stated an official report, the breakers "ran and volleyed around the hull of the barque on every side. The waters literally raged, the wreck (was) the center of an abatis of flying chutes and cataracts." The surfboat moved slowly toward the side of the *Lammerlaw*, the crew "keeping a terrible grip upon the oars and straining for their hold against the sea." The boat half filled with water, the crew bailed. An oar snapped. But eight sailors from the barque made it into the small surfboat, two of them dragged through the raging waters by a line.

The sailors were brought to the tug, and Stream and his crew made an additional trip through the tempest to bring out the remainder of the crew.

For his leadership in this rescue, the British government awarded Stream a medal. It is not recorded whether Lighthouse George and the rest of the crew received similar recognition.

In the records of the Lighthouse Service another Native American is mentioned in a rescue attempt near Point Arena, Calif. On the morning of Nov. 22, 1896, the steamer *San Benito*, laden with 4,000 tons of coal, came ashore about 200 yards from the beach and about four miles north of Point Arena. The *San Benito* broke in half, its two sections lying about 25 yards apart. Many crewmembers took to the rigging, but eight or nine of them managed to launch a lifeboat, which immediately capsized, and several of the men drowned.

Shortly after this, Jefferson Brown, the head keeper of Point Arena Light Station, arrived to see if he could help. Brown began calling for volunteers to help recover the *San Benito's* smallboat and attempt to save the sailors. Even though the official report on the rescue stated "there were hundreds of people" on the

beach, it was difficult to get anyone willing to brave the surf. The onlookers had good reason to demur: the *San Benito* sailors who had survived the capsizing "condemned the boat saying she was 'no good' and that an attempt to reach the ship with her would be suicidal through such surf as was running." Brown, however, kept haranguing the crowd and managed to get Lazar Poznanovich and Native American Sam Miller to volunteer.

Brown and his two volunteers, with help from onlookers, launched their boat into the raging surf. Brown manned the sweep. The boat played out a line from shore, apparently with the idea of pulling the boat and rescued sailors to the beach. The stalwart crew managed to make it through some of the breakers halfway to the men huddling in the rigging of the *San Benito* when the current set them north of the wreck. Witnesses stated that "it seemed as though the boat would be swamped" several times during this attempt, and it was "a matter of the greatest doubt" that the rescue crew would ever reach shore again. The rescue boat, after being set north of the wreck, was pulled ashore.

Brown, knowing the three men had little chance against the seas and current, again called for more volunteers to help. Two additional men volunteered to help make another attempt, with a line being let out over the stern as before. This attempt brought the boat to within 30 to 40 feet of the wreck, but was again set to the north of the desperate sailors in the rigging. The crowd on the beach again pulled the boat ashore. The rescue boat looked as if it might capsize, and the sweep oar broke from the force of the seas.

Brown's third attempt for more volunteers was met by silence from the crowd. The two extra men who had made the second attempt refused to go again. As Brown was trying to gather extra help, a sailor on the wreck, deciding no one could make it through the heavy seas, jumped into the ocean in a desperate attempt to make shore. The unfortunate sailor could not make the distance and drowned "in plain view of hundreds on the beach."

Brown now knew it was an impossible task to get the heavy boat through the seas with just two men and was forced to give up his attempts. On the afternoon of Nov. 22, the *Point Arena* crew hove to near the scene. After treacherous work, the crew managed to get all the sailors from the ship to safety.

For his heroic efforts, Brown was awarded the highest medal for rescue at sea — the Gold Life Saving Medal. The Life-Saving Service, noting that Brown could not have accomplished anything by himself, also awarded the Gold Life Saving Medal to Native American Sam Miller and Lazar Poznanovich.

The role of Native Americans in the history of the Coast Guard is little-known. Research now shows that Native Americans did contribute to the annals of the service and further research will undoubtedly reveal even more contributions.

Dennis Noble