



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Native Americans in the U.S. Coast Guard

by Dennis L. Noble, Ph.D.

Recent research reveals Native Americans have served with the U.S. Coast Guard since at least 1877. The isolated U.S. Life-Saving Service Station at Neah Bay, Washington, located on the Makah Reservation, consisted of a white keeper (the man in charge of the unit) and a crew of Native Americans. The Neah Bay crew makeup continued as Native American until it was replaced by whites. [Except for units of Native American scouts for the U.S. Army, this marks the first time the majority of a federal unit was made up of Native Americans.] The sole purpose of the U.S. Life-Saving Service was to rescue those shipwrecked close to shore. In 1915, the U.S. Life-Saving Service merged with the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service to become the U.S. Coast Guard.

Another U.S. Life-Saving Service station in Washington, at Shoalwater Bay, was also in an isolated location. The service reported they consistently used Native Americans from the local Quinault Tribe in difficult times. In 1882, a member of the Quinault Tribe volunteered to help Keeper Albert T. Steam, of the Shoalwater station in the rescue of the British iron bark *Lammerlaw*. Along with a crew of four others, a Native American, identified only as Lighthouse George, struggled against a raging sea to rescue the entire crew of the ship. The official account of the U.S. Life-Saving Service reported that Lighthouse George and the others rowed through a sea with breakers that "ran and volleyed around the hull [of the bark] on every side." The "waters literally raged," the wreck "the center of an abatis of flying chutes and cataracts." The boat filled with water. The crew frantically bailed. An oar snapped. The first load of sailors from the *Lammerlaw*, however, managed to clamber aboard the small boat. Incredibly, the rescue boat made two trips to pull everyone safely off the ship.

Native Americans served with units of the U.S. Lighthouse Service. A keeper at the Gay Head, Massachusetts, light station, for example, wrote that he preferred to hire Native Americans for their reliability. The U.S. Lighthouse Service was established in 1789 and in 1939 was merged into the U.S. Coast Guard. An interesting case involving a U.S. Lighthouse keeper and a Native American occurred in Northern California in 1896.

The steamer *San Benito* ran aground about 200 yards from the beach and about four miles north of Point Arena, California, on the morning of 22 November 1896. The force of the swells and the grounding caused the ship to break in half, with much of the crew taking to the rigging. Eight or nine crewmen managed to get the lifeboat away, which immediately capsized and several of the sailors drowned.



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Shortly after this, Jefferson M. Brown, the keeper of the Point Arena light station, arrived on the scene to see if he could help. Even though "there were hundreds of people" on the beach, it was difficult to get anyone willing to brave the surf. There was a good reason for concern: the *San Benito* sailors who 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. . . ." Keeper Brown, however, kept haranguing the crowd and managed to get a Native American by the name of Sam Miller, along with another on-looker by the name of Lazar Poznanovich, to volunteer to help crew the lifeboat.

The small crew set out. They trailed lines behind them to help pull the loaded lifeboat back if they made it to the ship. The boat made it about half way to the wreck and then was set toward the north, with witnesses later relating that it was "a matter of greatest doubt" that the rescue crew would reach shore again. The rescue crew did make it to shore.

Undaunted, Keeper Brown called for more volunteers, the first attempt proving it would take more than two men at the oars to make it. The crowd did not want to take the chance, especially after seeing what happened in the first attempt. Finally, Keeper Brown's pleading worked, two more men decided to help Sam Miller and Lazar Poznanovich. The boat started off again and this time made it to within thirty or forty feet of the wreck before being set once again toward the north.

Keeper Brown could not rally any additional help for a third attempt. He knew it was impossible without more help and gave up the attempt. The next afternoon the steamer *Point Arena* arrived on scene and after great difficulties managed to get the remaining sailors off the wreck. For their heroic attempts, Keeper Jefferson M. Brown, U.S. Lighthouse Service, the Native American Sam Miller and Lazar Poznanovich all received the Gold Life Saving Medal, the highest award for saving life from the sea.

Until recently, the role of Native Americans in the history of the U.S. Coast Guard has been little-known. Research now shows that Native Americans have either served with or worked closely with the service since at least 1877 and some have been recognized and decorated for their work in rescuing people from the sea. Further in-depth research at the National Archives and other historical depositories will undoubtedly reveal more instances of the role Native Americans played in the history of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Chronology:



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- Charles W. Vanderhoop served as the Head Keeper for the Gay Head Lighthouse, thereby perhaps becoming the first Native American to serve as the principal keeper of a U.S. lighthouse.
- Coast Guardsman MoMM2/c Joseph R. Toahty was "the first Native American to participate in an offensive operation with United States naval forces in World War II." Toahty, a member of the Pawnee Nation, enlisted in the Coast Guard in 1941 and trained to become a landing craft coxswain. He participated in the initial landings at Tulagi and Guadalcanal. [As quoted in "Seagoing Indian," *Coast Guard Magazine* (September, 1943), p. 36.]

Articles:

- "Station Nea Bay Breaks Ethnic Barriers at Turn of the Century" by PA3 Sharon Wilkerson; published in *Coast Guard Magazine*, November, 1995.
- "The Makah Influence" by Dennis Noble; published in *Coast Guard Magazine*, November, 1996.