



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

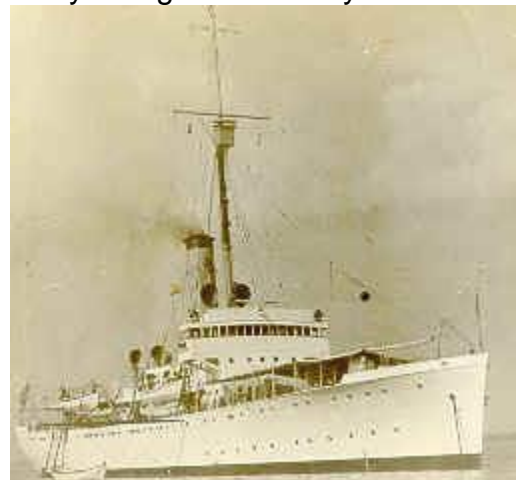
Alexander Palmer Haley, Chief Journalist, USCG (Ret.)



1921-1992

Alexander Palmer Haley was born in Ithaca, New York, on 11 August 1921. He graduated from high school at the age of 15 and attended the State Teacher's College in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, for two years and, at the urging of his father, he enlisted in the Coast Guard in 1939. Haley signed up for a three-year enlistment in the Coast Guard on 24 May 1939. He enlisted as a Mess Attendant Third Class, since the Mess Attendant and Steward's Mate ratings were the only ratings in the Navy and Coast Guard open to minorities at that time.

As was the case in the pre-World War II Coast Guard, which had no enlisted training center as of yet, Haley was immediately assigned to the cutter *Mendota* (right), based out of Norfolk. She was a newer 250-foot "Lake" Class cutter that had been in service only a few years when Haley reported aboard. Here he learned his new job through "on the job" training from the *Mendota's* veterans.





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During the long patrols Haley began writing letters to friends and relatives, sometimes sending over 40 a week. He received in reply almost as many letters as he sent out, and became somewhat famous among his shipmates. Haley soon found himself fielding offers from his fellow crewmen to help them with their letters. Some of his fellow crewman even offered a financial compensation to lure the ever-eloquent Haley into composing convincing love letters to the objects of their affections, without, of course, letting the "object" know that the letter was actually written by Haley. Apparently his ghost-writing was successful and Haley consequently accumulated a goodly sum for his off-duty writing.



Haley also listened to the old salts aboard when they would spin their nautical yarns and decided to begin writing in earnest. He composed short articles and sent them off to magazine publishers, including the *Coast Guard Magazine*, a privately-printed magazine that was popular with most Coast Guardsmen of the time. On 21 February 1940 the Coast Guard transferred Haley to the old cutter *Pamlico* (left), which was first commissioned in

1907 and was home-ported in New Bern, North Carolina. From here the cutter sailed the shallow waters of coastal North Carolina and continued to serve in those waters after the United States entered World War II as a belligerent. Haley was promoted to Officer's Steward, Third Class on 26 March 1942 while on board.

The following year, 7 May 1943, he was transferred to the large cargo vessel USS *Murzim* (AK-95) which saw service in the Pacific Theatre. Duty on board these vessels was extremely hazardous -- her sister ship, the USS *Serpens*, was completely destroyed while offloading cargo in Guadalcanal, causing the worst loss of life ever suffered by the Coast Guard. Haley soon began writing what combat was like, and the *Coast Guard Magazine* published his article "In the Pacific" in their February 1944 issue. This is the first published article by Haley that we were able to uncover. In the article he describes life on board *Murzim* as she crossed the Pacific, steaming towards another invasion--and what it was like to undergo yet another call to "General Quarters."

Haley started a mimeographed ship's newspaper entitled "Seafarer." In one of his editorials entitled "Mail Call," he depicted the disappointment felt by servicemen whose family and friends did not write to them. The editorial was reprinted in major newspapers across the country.



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Towards the end of the war, Haley was assigned to edit the "Outpost," an official Coast Guard periodical published by the Coast Guard's Personnel Separation Center. His editorial work here earned him a "commendable mention" from the Ships Editorial Association, a Navy board of overseers. Later Haley became a reporter, then assistant editor, and then editor for the Coast Guard publication "Helmsman" while working in the Third Coast Guard District's headquarters building in New York City. The Coast Guard finally (and officially) recognized his talents and, on 29 June 1949, Haley changed ratings and was promoted to Journalist, First Class. JO1c Haley made chief later that

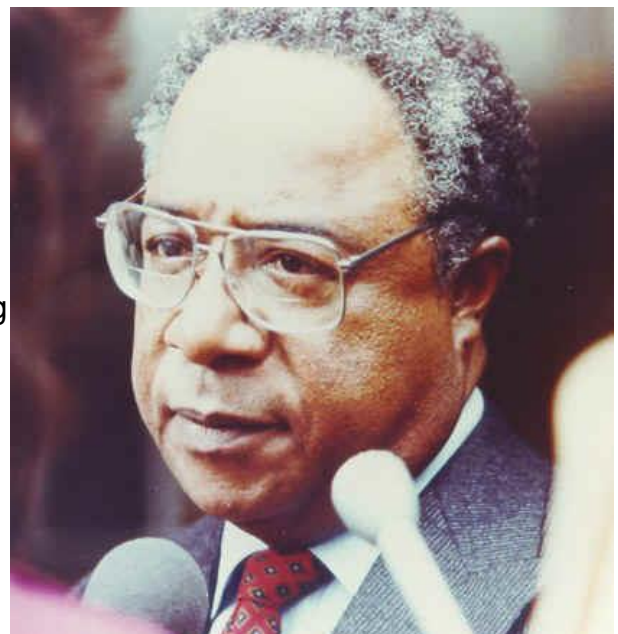
year, on 16 December 1949 (left; click on thumbnail for a 300 dpi image).

He was, at that time, the only chief journalist in the Coast Guard. An article written about him at this time noted:

"New York Newsmen Pay Glowing Tribute to Coast Guard's Only Chief Journalist: . . . You can call him 'chief' now -- the amiable, industrious and ever helpful Alex Haley, the man behind the public information phone at New York City's Coast Guard Headquarters, who has just about become 'Mr. Coast Guard' to the working press of the metropolis. When there's a ship in distress along the Atlantic coast, a plane down at sea, a fishing party marooned or on any one of a hundred other mishaps, Haley's the guy who feed the newspapers and wire services the latest information. If he's got it, you have it. If he hasn't got it, he'll get it -- that's Haley. This amazing, 28 year-old dynamo, who has two phones in his home so his pretty wife can take information from C. G. headquarters while he passes it on to the papers, has just been notified that he has received the rating of chief journalist, the only such title in the service."

While in New York, he served as the assistant to the public relations officer and continuously wrote articles that were published in the *Coast Guard Magazine*. He transferred to the 12th Coast Guard District in September of 1954 and retired in 1959 to pursue his dream of becoming a full-time, free-lance writer.

He said of the Coast Guard: "You don't spend twenty years of your life in the service and not have a warm, nostalgic feeling left in you. It's a small service, the Coast Guard, and there is a lot of esprit de corps."





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Haley went on to a distinguished career as a writer, gaining international fame with his book *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, first published in 1976 and later made into a television mini-series. He passed away in 1992.

JOC Alex P. Haley, USCG U.S. Coast Guard Service Record



Born: 11 August 1920

Place of Birth: Ithaca, New York

Citizenship: U.S. Citizen

Date of Enlistment: 24 May 1939

Service Number: 212-548

Units Served / Date / Rate / Remarks:

Seventh District / 24 May 1939 / M. Att. 3c. [Mess Attendant, 3rd Class] / Orig. Enl. Three Years Auth. F-2626-B 5-18-39

MENDOTA / 5-24-39 / M.Att. 3c. / Tr. made perm. 5-25-39

MENDOTA / 11-29-39 / M.Att. 2c. / Cr. HL 9-30-39



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PAMLICO / 2-21-40 / M.Att. 2c. / Tr.

PAMLICO / 10-3-40 / M.Att. 1c. / Cr. Pers. Bulletin 2-40

PAMLICO (ND) / 9-1-41 / M. Att. 1c. (Pro.) / Tr.

PAMLICO / 3-26-42 / Off. Std. 3c. [Officers' Steward, 3rd Class] (Pro.) / Cr.--

PAMLICO / 6-4-42 / Off. Stdd. 3c. (Pro.) / Enl. ext. 3 years

PAMLICO / 6-12-42 / Off. Stdd 2c. (Pro.) / Cr.--

ELIZ. CITY AIR (ND) / 9-27-42 / Off. Std. 2c (Pro.) / Tr.

USS MURZIM / 5-7-43 / Off. Std. 2c. (Pro.) / to AK 95

USS AK 95 [MURZIM] / 5-14-43 / Off. Std. 2c. (Pro.) / [illegible]

BASE HOSPITAL / [illegible]

3RD CGD /

OC3CGD NY (03) / 6-29-49 / JO1 [Journalist, 1st Class] / HD(EE)

OC3CGD NY (03) / 6-30-49 / JO1 / Reenl. Reg. Estab. 3 years

OC3CGD NY (03) / 12-16-49 / JOCA / CR

OC3CGD (PI) (03) / 10-16-51 / JOC / CR

OC3CGD (PI) (O3) / 6-30-52 / JOC / HD, EE & 1 Day Extension

OC3CGD (pi) / 7-1-52 / JOC / Reenl. for Six Years.

OC3CGD (pi) / 8-30-54 / JOC / TR OCCGD12

OCCGD12 / 9-29-54 / Rptd fm c-3 fasdu; Disch. 7-1-58 Reen (3) yrs. (24 hrs) 7-1-58
Placed on ret. list (20 Yr) eff. 6-1-59.



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AWARDS & CITATIONS

Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal

European, African & Middle Eastern Campaign Medal

American Theatre Campaign Medal

American Defense Service Medal with Sea Clasp

World War II Victory

Honorable Discharge Button

Korean Service Medal

Coast Guard Good Conduct Award (7 total)

Commandant's Letter of Commendation

Expert Rifleman