



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Asian American and Pacific Islanders and the U.S. Coast Guard

*Historical Information on Asian American and Pacific Islanders in the Coast
Guard and Its Predecessor Services*



Keeper Samuel Amalu, USLHS



LTJG Taylor Lam of MSST 91101

Most of the first documented Asian American and Pacific Islanders to serve in the Coast Guard actually served in one of the service's predecessor agencies, the U. S. Lighthouse Service. Quite a few served, with distinction, on the lonely light stations along the nation's coasts:

Manuel Ferreira



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Manuel Ferreira, a native of Maui, Hawaii, served as the keeper of seven lighthouses during his career, which began in 1908 with the U.S. Lighthouse Service and ended with his retirement from the Coast Guard in 1946. He was born on 15 August, 1885, and became known as "one of the grand old men of Hawaiian lighthouse lore." He ultimately became the keeper of the Kauiki Head Light Station on Maui. In 1919 he rescued the crew of a Japanese fishing trawler when that vessel ran aground off Barber's Point, Hawaii, where Ferreira served as the light keeper. He was also instrumental in saving the schooner *Bianca* and its crew in 1923 when the ship lost its sails and was in danger of smashing on a reef. Ferreira was unable to launch the lighthouse skiff due to the high surf. Instead, he ran three miles to the nearest telephone and called for help. The USS *Sunadin* was dispatched and reached the wallowing schooner just in time to tow it from the jaws of destruction. From 1927 through 1929, he served as a keeper of the Molokai Light Station, located only two miles from the Kalaupapa Leper Settlement on the island of Molokai.

Samuel Amalu

Samuel Amalu (pictured in the photo above), Hawaii's renowned dean of lighthouse keepers, was the keeper of the Kilauea Light Station. Kilauea Light, the northernmost lighthouse in Hawaii, was built in 1913. The last manned light in the Hawaiian Islands, it guided the first transatlantic aviators to the islands in 1927 and was the first light to operate a radio beacon. Amalu, who had the longest tenure of any light keeper at Kilauea, took charge of the light on 9 April, 1915 and served there for ten years. Back then, efficiency pennants were awarded to the best kept station in each district, and Amalu was the recipient of one in 1920.

Amalu joined the Lighthouse Service in 1906 and by the time he reached the Kilauea light he had served as a keeper at the Kawaihae Light on the island of Hawaii and at Barber's Point Light on Oahu. In a 1939 interview with the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, he said that being a "lighthouse keeper is a good job. I'm my own boss. A lighthouse keeper is master of all trades. He works with pick and shovel in the garden. He is a machinist to keep the timing mechanism of the light going. And he is a carpenter, painter, and engineer." A trailblazer among Hawaii's light keepers, Amalu laid a path of devotion to duty and discipline for Kilauea Point's successive keepers. [Story written by Sharon Wilkerson, USCGR]

Light keepers were not the only Asian-Pacific Americans to serve in the Coast Guard.

Chiao Shun Soong



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Chiao-Shun Soong served in the Revenue Cutter Service signed aboard the cutters *Gallatin* and *Schuylar Colfax* from 1879-1881 as a seaman, making him probably the first Asian-Pacific to serve in one of the Coast Guard's predecessor services. He went on to a successful business career in China and raised several children who went on to great success in that country.

The Sanjuan Family

The Sanjuan family, including the father, Vivencio, and two of his sons served in the Coast Guard. Vivencio Sanjuan served on board the Coast Guard-manned attack transport USS *Samuel Chase* during the invasions of North Africa and then Salerno, Italy. His son, Pedro, was stationed on board the attack transport USS *Bayfield* and saw service during the Normandy invasion and the invasion of Southern France as well. Another son, Ramon, served on board four Coast Guard cutters during his career and retired from the service in 1969. Another son, William, served in the Coast Guard in the Vietnam conflict. He was awarded the Purple Heart for a combat injury received while under a Viet Cong mortar attack.



Master Chief Electronics Technician Melvin Kealoha Bell

Melvin Kealoha Bell, a native Hawaiian, enlisted in 1938 as a mess attendant on board USCGC *Taney*. By his own initiative he became a radioman and was serving at Diamond Head Light when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. He intercepted Japanese radio messages throughout the war and then went on to transfer to the newly established rating of Electronic Technician. He later became the first Master Chief



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Electronics Technician and the first Master Chief Petty Officer of color in the Coast Guard. He retired in 1958.

Florence Ebersole Smith Finch

Florence Ebersole Smith Finch, a member of the Coast Guard Women's Reserve (or SPAR) during World War II, was the only SPAR to receive the Pacific Campaign ribbon. She earned the ribbon for her service in the Philippines prior to her joining the Coast Guard. Finch, whose mother was a Filipino and whose father was a former U.S. soldier, was in the Philippines when the Japanese conquered the islands in 1942. When they took control of the island nation, she told enemy soldiers she was Filipino and was not imprisoned with the other Americans. She immediately joined the Filipino underground and smuggled food, medicine and other supplies to the American captives. However, she was eventually caught and arrested by the Japanese. Finch said she was beaten with sabers, tortured and routed through three prison camps before the Americans liberated the Philippines in 1945. "We were terrified; we didn't know what was going to happen to us," she said. "We had seen the death march and the condition of the American troops. You just can't comprehend what it was like. I was 80 pounds when we were liberated." Immediately following her release, she caught a ride aboard a Coast Guard transport back to the United States, where she enlisted in the Coast Guard to help "avenge the death of her late husband," who was killed aboard a Navy PT boat while running supplies to besieged Corregidor. Finch was also awarded the U.S. Medal of Freedom, one of the few American women to be so honored. [Story by Edward Moreth, USCG]

Carmelo Lopez Manzano
Benjamin Ayesa
Juan B. Lacson
Conrado Aguado

In December, 1942, four former officers of the Philippine Army received commissions in the Coast Guard Reserve after first finishing the U. S. Navy's Submarine Chaser School: LCDR Carmelo Lopez Manzano, LT Benjamin Ayesa, LTJG Juan B. Lacson, and ENS Conrado Aguado. They were certified as being qualified to command patrol vessels. LCDR Manzano and LT Ayesa also held all-oceans, all-tonnages merchant marine licenses. LTJG Lacson held a master's ticket and ENS Aguado held a chief mate's license.



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

LCDR Manzano had served as a major in the Philippine Army and also served as an aide de camp to MAJGEN B. J. Waldes. He also had 14 years of seagoing experience and his last vessel was destroyed in an attempt to run the Japanese blockade of Bataan. He was born in 1904 and held command of an ocean-going vessel for four years.

LT Ayesa was born in Barcelona, Spain, in 1904 and became a naturalized Philippine citizen in 1937. He formerly was a captain of the off-shore patrol of the Philippine Army and had 21 years of experience at sea.

LTJG Lacson was born in 1898 and had 20 years experience at sea. He also served in the off-shore patrol of the Philippine Army. During 1940 and 1941 he was a second and a chief officer of the Philippine Coast Guard.

ENS Aguado, born in 1913, attended San Beda College and the Philippine Nautical School. He formerly was a second lieutenant of the Philippine Army's off-shore patrol and had 10 years experience at sea.

Jack N. Jones

Jack N. Jones was the first Asian-American and the first Chinese-American Coast Guard Academy graduate. He was a member of the Class of 1949.

Manuel Tubella, Jr.

Manuel Tubella, Jr. is the first Asian-Pacific Island American (Filipino American) aviator in the United States Coast Guard, and the first to be promoted to the rank of Captain.

Captain Tubella began his aviation training in 1954 as a Naval Aviation Cadet at Pensacola, Florida, where he underwent basic training in propeller aircraft. After basic training, he was transferred to Beeville, Texas for advanced training in jet aircraft. Upon completion of advanced training, he was designated a Naval Aviator and received a commission as a Second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserve. He returned to Pensacola for helicopter training, which was completed in October 1956, and was assigned to Marine Corps Air Facility, New River, North Carolina.

In 1958, he received a commission in the Coast Guard Reserve as a Lieutenant (Junior Grade). His first assignment upon entering active duty in 1958 was at Coast Guard Air Station, San Francisco, California followed by an assignment at Coast Guard Air Detachment, Kodiak, Alaska.



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Captain Tubella was designated a Reserve Program Administrator (RPA) in the Coast Guard Reserve Program in 1962. Following his aviation assignments, he served two tours of duty at Coast Guard Headquarters, and two tours in the Third District. He was also assigned to the Eighth and Fourteenth Districts. His last assignment was as Chief, Reserve Division, Third District, Governor's Island, New York, prior to retiring in November 1984.

Captain Tubella's personal decorations include the Coast Guard Meritorious Service Medal; the Coast Guard Commendation Medal with two gold stars; the Coast Guard Achievement Medal; the Coast Guard Arctic Service Medal; the Armed Forces Reserve Medal with two hour-glass devices; the National Defense Service Medal with gold star; and a Coast Guard Letter of Commendation Ribbon.

Kwang-Ping Hsu

Kwang-Ping Hsu was the first Chinese-born Coast Guard Academy graduate. He was a member of the Class of 1962. Hsu became an accomplished aviator, who flew in the Arctic and Antarctic and served for thirty years.

Juan T. Salas

Juan T. Salas was the first Chamorro (Asian Pacific Islander from Guam) to graduate from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and from any military service academy (Class of 1968). He was also the first Chamorro to command a cutter when he took command of USCGC *Lipan* (WMEC-85) in 1986. He served as CO until 1988. He was also the first cutterman to be Captain of the Port, Marine Safety Office Guam, 1992 to 1994.

Jeffrey Lee

CAPT Jeffrey Lee was the first Korean-American to graduate from Coast Guard OCS. He became the first Korean-American to command a 95-footer, an icebreaker, and a High Endurance Cutter. He commanded CGC *Hamilton* when the cutter seized more than 1.6 billion dollars worth of contraband in the Eastern Pacific Ocean and also shared in the largest drug bust in maritime history by capturing 19.5 metric tons of cocaine.



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Mark Unpingco

On 11 March 2008, ENS Mark A. Unpingco became the first Chamorro (Asian Pacific Islander from Guam) Dive Officer of the Coast Guard after graduating from the Marine Engineering Dive Officer (MEDO) course at the U.S. Navy Dive and Salvage Training Center in Panama City, FL.

Gilbert "Gil" J. Kanazawa

Captain Kanazawa was the first Japanese-American to attain the rank of O-6 in the Coast Guard. During Captain Kanazawa held a number of important positions during his distinguished career.

In 1983, he was assigned as an overseas marine inspector at the Marine Safety Office (MSO) in Honolulu, Hawaii where he conducted overseas merchant vessel inspections in Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Guam, and American Samoa. He also served as the Chief of the Regional Examination Center. He was next assigned to the Fourteenth District Office in Honolulu as the Regional Response Team (RRT) Coordinator where he was instrumental in the rewrite and approval of the State's Dispersant Use Preapproval Plan and the development of the State of Hawaii's hazardous materials response program.

In 1989, he was again assigned to the Eighth District as the Supervisor of the Coast Guard's largest Marine Safety Detachment (MSD) in Lake Charles, Louisiana. As the only Coast Guard presence, he directed the MSD in search and rescue, law enforcement and marine safety missions throughout Southwest Louisiana. An assignment as the Chief of the Marine Inspection Department at the MSO/Group in Portland, Oregon followed in 1992.

During this assignment, he was temporarily deployed to the staff of the Commander in Chief, Allied Forces Southern Europe at NATO Headquarters in Naples, Italy. He worked on the staff as the Coast Guard Liaison Officer coordinating and directing Coast Guard LEDETs and TACLETs assigned to the NATO task force, in the enforcement of United Nations Security Council sanctions against the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. In 1995, he returned for a third time to the Eight District as the Executive Officer of the MSO in New Orleans, Louisiana. He was instrumental in the direction of the unit's successful responses to many major marine casualties and pollution incidents including the collision between the foreign freight ships ENIF and ALEXIA, the M/V BRIGHT FIELD crash into the Riverwalk Mall, hurricanes Erin and Opal, and the record high water levels on the Mississippi River in 1997.



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

In 1998, he was assigned as the U.S. Coast Guard Advisor to the Panama Canal Commission in the Republic of Panama providing assistance in maritime safety, security, and environmental protection during the transition period prior to reverting the Canal back to Panama. He is currently the Commanding Officer of the Marine Safety Office Honolulu. As the Captain of the Port, he directed the eight month long, \$13 million removal project of oil and hazardous materials from nine abandoned foreign long-line fishing vessels aground on the reefs in Pago Pago Harbor, American Samoa. Captain Kanazawa's personal decorations include the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, the Coast Guard Commendation Medal with 3 gold stars, the Coast Guard Achievement Medal, and a Commandant's Letter of Commendation Ribbon. [Written by William F. Anonsen]

Bryon Ing

Bryon Ing was the first Chinese-American Coast Guardsman to command a Medium Endurance Cutter when he commanded USCGC *Venturous* from 1995-1997. He also commanded CGC *Nunivak* from 1988-1990. He was the first Chinese-American and Coast Guard Liaison Officer to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (J7-Doctrine) in 1997. He was the first Chinese-American DAWIA/DHS Level III Certified Systems Acquisitions (2002). He was the first Chinese-American DHS Certified Level III Acquisitions Program Manager (PM) (2005) leading the Response Boat-Medium (RB-M) acquisition (2002-2006), awarding the contract for the 45' RB-M replacement vessels for the 41' UTB in 2006.

Hung M. Nguyen

Captain Hung M. Nguyen was the first Vietnamese-American to graduate from the Coast Guard Academy, the first to command a Coast Guard unit, and the first to reach the rank of O-6.

Ifong Lee

In 2010 F&S2 Ifong Lee became the first and only Samoan CWO2 in the Coast Guard.



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Christine Igisomar

On October 1, 2019 LT Christine Igisomar was promoted to the rank of LCDR, becoming the first Chamorro (native Pacific Islander from the Mariana Islands) woman to achieve this rank.
