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UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

ADDRESS REPLY TO:
COMMANDER
8TH COAST GUARD DISTRICT
ROOM 328, CUSTOMHOUSE
NEW ORLEANS 16, LA.



dpi
RECEIVED JAN 1956
PUBLIC INFORMATION

JAN 18 1956

U. S. COAST GUARD
WASHINGTON, D. C.

From: Commander, Eighth Coast Guard District
To: Commandant (CPI)

Subj: Story of CDR T. C. ODDERSTOL's early days in the Service; forwarding of

Ref: (a) Commandant (CPI) ltr to CDR ODDERSTOL dtd 26 Aug 1955
(b) Commandant (CPI) ltr to CCGDS (dpi) dtd 26 Aug 1955

1. Enclosure (1) is forwarded herewith in accordance with references (a) and (b).
2. SHAW, Gilbert (n), JO1, USCG, was utilized in the preparation of this story, as requested in reference (b).
3. It is suggested that the Commandant (CPI) address a letter of appreciation to CDR ODDERSTOL. He gave freely of his time in the interests of this project.

S. F. Gray
S. F. GRAY
By direction

Encl: (1) "THE U.S. REVENUE CUTTER SERVICE, AS I SAW IT", a story of recruiting problems in the earlier Service.

THE U.S. REVENUE CUTTER SERVICE, AS I SAW IT

By Commander Thomas C. Odderstol, USCG (Ret.)

Modern equipment and methods have certainly changed the Coast Guard from the organization I knew when I enlisted in the Revenue Cutter Service as a coal heaver in 1904. Even things like recruiting are vastly different.

I was 21 years old when I decided to enter the Coast Guard's predecessor, the Revenue Cutter Service. Since each cutter was responsible for the procurement of her own crew, I walked aboard the Cutter Dexter at Arundel Cove, Md., and volunteered. It made me feel good to know that I, a Norwegian citizen had been accepted into the service of the United States, and it made me feel even better knowing that I would be making the fabulous salary of \$25 a month.

Between December 1 and April 1 it was imperative that we have a full crew, since that was the "constant patrol" period. I put the words constant patrol in quotes because they weren't actually constant. During that period we were allowed to enter port for fuel and supplies, but were forbidden to spend more than 24 hours in. The extensive barge traffic and numerous sailing vessels plying in the coast-wise trade during the early years of my service made for a busy time for the cutters during the stormy winter season. Then too, we had a lot of small boat work when lines snapped and barges broke loose from their tow. In those days, as today, we had more than our share of schooners in distress and other vessels in danger of hitting shoals or running aground. It was rough! We didn't have the power equipment now available.

The intensive action of the winter months necessitated full crews. Many private yachts and other boats were layed up for the winter, so crew members sought enlistment in the Revenue Cutter Service. These men would come aboard our cutters when their ships were secured, and enlist for the one year period then required.

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The seamen would sail with us during the winter and in the spring they would disappear. No great effort was made to return these men to the Cutter, probably because we didn't need the big crew for most of the year, and military discipline wasn't then what it is now. The next winter, the same men would go to another cutter and enlist for the required year under different names. If a man was Olsen on the Cutter Dexter, he'd be Larson the following year aboard the Cutter Comanche. The only thing he had to worry about was running into an officer he had served with before, and even then there were no accurate records kept, so he needed only to deny previous service.

Examinations for enlistment in the early 1900s were next to nonexistent. A typical exam would consist of: The doctors assigned to major cutters would have a man read some printed material. This would not only prove his literacy, but would also be his eye examination, the doctor judging his eyesight by the distance the applicant held the paper while reading. If a man could hear the normal speech of the doctor his hearing was considered adequate. The remainder of the physical examination consisted of a brief inspection of the genitals.

The great number of Scandinavians in the Service during my early days in uniform led to the sobriquet "Skowegian Navy" for the Revenue Cutters. Personnel aboard the ships were called "North Sea Yankees" by seafaring men in those days.

Recruiting was often done by a warrant officer. He would visit boarding houses frequented by sailors and announce that the Cutter needed able bodied seamen and a certain number of men in other rates. He would then arrange a meeting for the following day and bring the men aboard for enlistment. This, incidentally, was the way I was enlisted in October of 1904, starting my 42 years in the Coast Guard.

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The Cutter Dexter had been stationed in New Bedford, Mass., and had a crew made up mostly of Western Islanders. When the ship was ordered to Arundel Cove, to be outfitted for duty in Puerto Rico, most of these Portugese sailors from the Cape Verde Islands requested transfer, resulting in almost a complete turn-over in crew, I being among the new members.

An amusing little ditty written about the Dexter during her New Bedford days, was reported to have been composed by one of the Western Islanders. It went:

"American ship,
Portugese crew,
Plenty to eat,
Nothing to do."

I'll go along with the first three lines, but after a very short time aboard the vessel, I found out that the fourth line was pure fantasy.

In some areas, where enlistments were plentiful, it was difficult to get assigned to a ship unless you had a close friend or relative aboard. A cutter in the Carolinas was manned almost entirely by the Midgett, Willis, Gray, Whitehurst, Etherige and Baum families. It was one case of pure nepotism. The Lifesaving stations were run by these same North Carolina families. Even now, promotion, retirement and transfer lists are rarely seen without at least one of these families represented.

Another method of obtaining sailormen was one not officially sanctioned by the officers. Crew members would visit merchant ships and talk to the seamen aboard, dropping subtle hints about the advantageous life of a Revenue Cutter sailor. They would encourage the merchant sailormen to desert and then join the Cutter Service. Since no certificates or papers were then needed and very few questions asked, these men were readily accepted in the crew. Experienced sailors were always welcome.

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Entrance requirements were so lax that, according to a Warrant Officer known in the service as "Surfboat Joe", a man came aboard and was passed by the ship's physician, and subsequently enlisted. One afternoon, several days later the Boatswain ordered all hands to roll up their trousers, take off their shoes and stockings and go over to scrub the ship's sides. The Boatswain noticed one man bare on one leg, but wearing a rubber boot on the other. It was then established that the man had a wooden leg. I can not swear that this is true, but my informant said he saw it. It could be possible, judging from my first physical exam.

After the Dexter had been in Puerto Rico for a while we had a bit of a recruiting problem. We started to lose men. One sailor was killed by a native while on shore leave, some men deserted, and others were paid off when their enlistments ran out. We called on Puerto Rican seafarers, and enough volunteered to fill in the crew. This set-up worked satisfactorily until the ship received orders to the U. S. and to operate out of New London, Conn. The night before we sailed nearly all of the Puerto Rican natives deserted. Although we were anchored far out in the bay at San Juan, the Puerto Rican crewmen made it in by swimming ashore and carrying their clothes on top of their heads.

We tried to find them before sailing, but the search was to no avail. As a result we had to sign on a green crew in order to have enough men to properly handle the ship. The newcomers to our vessel were of little help on our voyage, but they were no burden, once we reached the States. Upon arrival at Staten Island they deserted. Most of them had simply used the Revenue Cutter Dexter to get free passage to the United States.

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The winter cruises continued, but recruiting conditions were alleviated to some extent by letting Revenue Cutter men stationed on ships in the Great Lakes come aboard our ocean ships for the constant patrol period. Their ships were frozen in for the winter, and during the cold season crews were cut to a minimum. This almost put the Service in the Great Lakes in the category of seasonal employment. The men from the lake cutters had their choice of transfer to either coast during the winter.

In 1906 a law was passed regulating enlistments and punishments in the Revenue Cutter Service. These rules made conditions throughout the Service uniform, since in the days prior discipline was left pretty much to the discretion of the commanding officer.

My first duty in the Gulf area came in 1908 when I was transferred to the Revenue Cutter Davey in New Orleans. The Davey was a tug built for customs duty. We had a very small crew, so recruiting was no problem. When a man was transferred or paid off, one of the crewmen always had a friend to take his place.

I was an acting warrant machinist at the time.....acting because I was not yet an American citizen. In order to get my permanent warrant it was necessary to become naturalized, something I did at a later date.

Shortly after I went aboard the Davey the policy allowing for transfers within the service came into being. This didn't effect us to any extent, because a recent epidemic of yellow fever in New Orleans seemed to discourage men from asking for this area.

During World War I our recruiting problems ceased. We operated under the Navy Departemnt and they kept us supplied with personnel. After peace was reestablished and we returned to the Treasury Department we found the same problems we had previously encountered.

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Our uniforms in the days of the Revenue Cutter Service were similiar to those issued to Navy men. The main exception, at least until 1908 was that our rating badges had no stripes. We merely wore the eagle and specialty mark. We wore the same type of "hash mark" now in use, except that we got one for each three years of service.

There were a few differences in the uniform we wore in the early 1900s and the present Coast Guardsman's attire. We all carried knife lanyards, and wore our jumpers tucked inside our pants. In addition to the undress white jumper, now worn with a neckerchief for a summer liberty uniform, we were issued muster white jumpers with blue collars and cuffs, carrying the smae markings as our dress blues.

One thing that was hard to get used to (and I'm happy that they changed it soon after I enlisted) was the winter underwear. Our "longjohns" were made of dark blue flannel. The change to white woolen underwear was not for the reason of comfort, but because of the reluctance of some crewmen to launder their blue underclothes.

Whenever I think of uniforms I can't help but to think of once when I was on a landing party from the Dexter on Mona Island in the West Indies. We wore our regular uniforms, carried a Kragh-Jorgensen rifle with bayonet, wore a bandolier combination, haversack, canteen and carried a cutlass. This was uncomfortable to say the least, but it was regulation.

During working hours, we in the engine room got a break as far as unifrms. We were allowed to wear dungarees. The men on deck worked in blues, even for painting and scrubbing down.

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Recruiting has changed as much as the service itself since my days as a coal heaver making \$25 a month in 1904. Regardless of the methods of recruiting or duties performed, I think the Coast Guard is still getting the cream of America's young men.