The Coast Guard Flies to the Rescue: Salem Air Station, Where Lieutenant Commander F. A. Leamy Commands, Does Some Great Work

Unknown author, circa 1937
Coast Guard Magazine Volume 10, Number 6 (April, 1937), pp. 3, 30-31.

U.S. Coast Guard Air Station Salem, circa 1938. Note the Fokker-General Aviation PJ-1 in the hanger and the Curtiss SOC-4 Seagull on the flight line. The station was originally commissioned in February, 1935 and remained in service until the fall of 1970.

Salem Air Station, Where Lieutenant Commander F. A. Leamy Commands, Does Some Great Work.

"N.C.U----N.C.U----N.C.U" Trawler *Atlantic*----" The radio operator at CG Air Station Salem hitched his chair around to face his typewriter. As the dots and dashes whined in his ears, he tapped out the message, letter by letter----a message from a vessel that needed help.

RADM F. A. Leamy, USCG in 1959

Seconds later, LCDR F. A Leamy, station commandant, read the message, glanced automatically out the window of his little office.

Outside, a dismal rain fell on Salem Harbor, and a rising wind was kicking up a chop. Beyond the harbor entrance, Commander Leamy knew a heavy, low-lying fog shrouded Massachusetts Bay.

Somewhere in that fog, the message in his hand told him, a fisherman squirmed and groaned in his bunk on the trawler, suffering an intense pain from an appendix that would burst and kill him if he didn't reach a hospital soon---far sooner than any plodding watercraft could make it.

That sounds like the opening of a fiction tale, culminating in a death defying dash to save a life, with the accompanying heroics. Well, it did culminate in a death defying dash, and the life was saved, but the tale is not fiction.

This particular dash actually happened, and it was only one of 26 such trips made from Salem base to save stricken persons on vessels at sea during the fiscal year of 1935-1936.

Also, there were no heroics. With a few quiet orders, given as he was climbing into leather coat, flight helmet, and gloves. Commander Leamy gathered a crew around him to man the twin motored amphibian monoplane waiting on the ramp outside.

While a chief pharmacist's mate put an emergency first aid kit aboard the plane, and the crew stowed the necessary gear, Commander Leamy and his co-pilot huddled over a chart and plotted their course over the Atlantic.

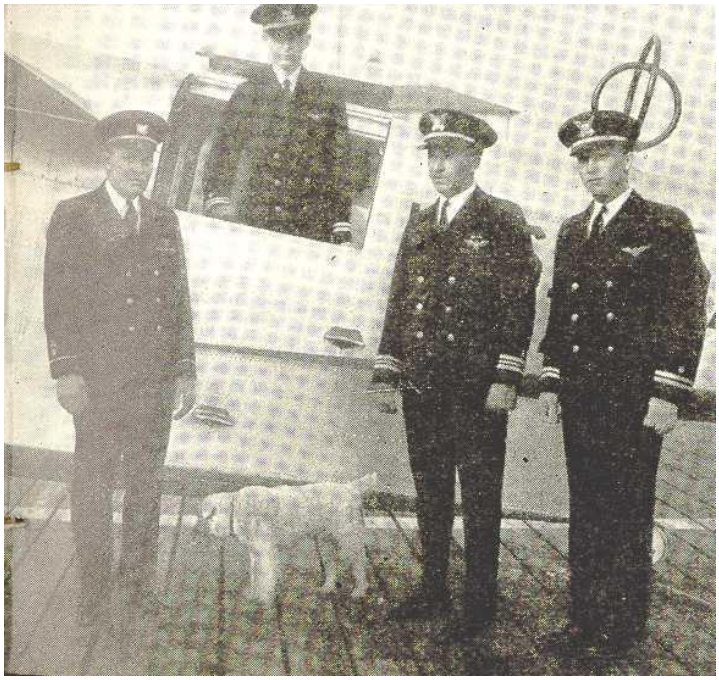


Photo scanned from the article. The original caption stated: "Just four reasons why Salem Air Station is so popular; Lieutenant-Commander F. A. Leamy, Commanding Air Station [third from left]; Lieutenant P.S. Lyons [far right??]; Lieutenant T. G. Miller [second from left??]; Machinist J. R. Orndorff." Lieutenant Lyons was killed in the line of duty one year

after this article was published when his aircraft crashed. He was, at that time, serving with the El Paso Aviation Detachment in Texas.

Meanwhile, the radio operator was telephoning the Chelsea Marine Hospital, notifying them of the case, and estimating the probable time of the plane's return with the sick man in her cabin.

In all such emergencies, the Chelsea Hospital has an ambulance waiting at the top of the ramp at the air base, and the Salem Hospital stands by in case the patient must be put in to a hospital at once, without giving time to reach Chelsea.

As Commander Leamy and his officers study the chart and get the latest weather reports from ships in the vicinity, mechanics outside start the necessary half-hour warming up of the amphibian's powerful motors.

Fog----the airman's greatest fear and the one weather factor that has cost more lives in the air than all others put together---is the report from outside.

As his plane roars out through the harbor entrance, Commander Leamy finds it---thick cottony fog that shuts off vision as effectively as if the windows of the plane had been painted white.

Fokker PJ-1, Coast Guard No. 255, at Air Station Miami. This is the type of seaplane flown by LCDR Leamy on the rescue described in this article. These aircraft were built specifically for the Coast Guard. They were known in the service as FLB's or Flying Life Boats.

Hopefully, he puts the ship into a climb and at 1,000 feet clears the fog bank. It stretches beneath the ship, as far out to sea as his eyes can reach, apparently a limitless blanket so thick it looks solid.

Somewhere underneath that impenetrable canopy is the ship he is looking for---one small trawler in all the vast expanse of the North Atlantic.

Once well out to sea, the plane's radio operator picks up the trawler's signals on the directional radio---faint signals at first, growing stronger as the plane roars towards the ship.

Eventually the signals become so strong Commander Leamy knows he is near his goal. Then the difficulty is there is no way to tell whether the trawler is dead ahead or whether the plane has passed over her. And so comes the dangerous part of the flight.

Nosing abruptly down through the fog, flying blindly by means of instruments before him, the skipper levels off a few feet above the sea, and skims along in hopes of seeing the ship.

Minutes pass and no sign of it. Then the radio signals begin to weaken, and the flyer knows that the *Atlantic* lies somewhere astern.

The search for the little vessel becomes a race against time. Glimpses of the sea through the shredding fog bank as the plane skims along a few feet above the waves shows the sea rising. An hour more and it will be too dangerous to land.

Wheeling to fly back over his course once more in hope of picking up the trawler, Commander Leamy climbs above the fog again. And, as he tells the story, he says "Right then I got about the luckiest break in my life. Right below me a little hole opened in that fog bank and right at the bottom of the hole was the Atlantic. Think of it----one hole in that expanse of fog, and in it, the ship I was looking for."

Seconds later, the plane swooped down in the lee of the trawler, and the groaning sailor was transferred for the dash back.

"Such a transfer in open sea is no mean feat in itself. While the vessel lowers a dory and the patient is rowed over to the bobbing airplane, the plane's crew opens a hatch in the hull and stand by with a folding stretcher. The stretcher now in regular use, was invented by an enlisted man at the Salem base, Rupert Germaine, and is considered the best found for the purpose.

As the dory comes alongside, one of the Coast Guard crew, steps aboard and gently lifts the sick man to the stretcher that is then passed up to the sailor standing in the hatch.

The radio direction finding equipment used to locate vessels in distress as described in this article. Note the operator adjusting the direction-finding antenna on the roof of the cabin as he attempts to locate the direction of an incoming radio signal.

SPECIAL STRETCHER.

If the man is not too ill, he is hoisted back into the plane's cabin, where a special stretcher bed is fastened to the floor, but in cases like that of the Atlantic fisherman, the crew make him as comfortable as possible in the forward compartment.

During the few minutes it takes to put the fisherman aboard, the sea, already dangerously high for open sea work, has been rising fast. In the words of Commandant Leamy's report: "Encountered slight difficulty in taking off, due to increasing seas."

What this means to Commander and crew, was that as the plane, now burdened with the additional load of the sick man, strove to lift itself from the water, pounding seas reach up, hammer the bottom, snatch her back again. Commander Leamy said: "Finally one unusually big roller gave her a good lift, and the next swell wasn't quite high enough to reach her. So we got away."

Official reports and figures tell not only that story, but scores of others since the Coast Guard Air Service was started nearly 20 years ago.

NEVER GROUNDED.

Bad weather outside never grounds the Coast Guard. Ask Commander Leamy how bad the weather has to be to keep his ships down, and he waves his hands at Salem Harbor, says simply “As long as we can see to get out of here, we fly.”

That makes it possible to understand how in 1936 from January 1 to December 31, the six pilots at the Salem air base flew the base’s four planes 97,737 miles up and down 1,000 miles of coastline for which the base is 41 responsible, more than four times around the earth at the equator.

During that year, the pilots identified 2,654 vessels and 334 planes, and 36 times went to the aid of ships at sea, in addition to their manifold other duties.

During the last fiscal year the Salem Air Base saved 59 lives and $86,525 worth of property. The nearest to that record was the Miami station, with 41 lives, and $14,925 in property saved.

But those statistics do not take into account the dirty flying weather which is the rule along the New England coast. During only a few weeks during the spring and fall is the weather ideal for flying along this coast.

One night the station got a call from the liner *City of Baltimore*, Norfolk bound with a load of refugees, evacuated from revolution torn Spain by the Coast Guard Cutter *Cayuga*. One of the passengers, a woman, was critically ill, and needed immediate hospital treatment.

Shown here is an example of the stretcher, as mentioned in the article, in use during another rescue. It was designed by an enlisted Coast Guardsman.

HEAVY FOG

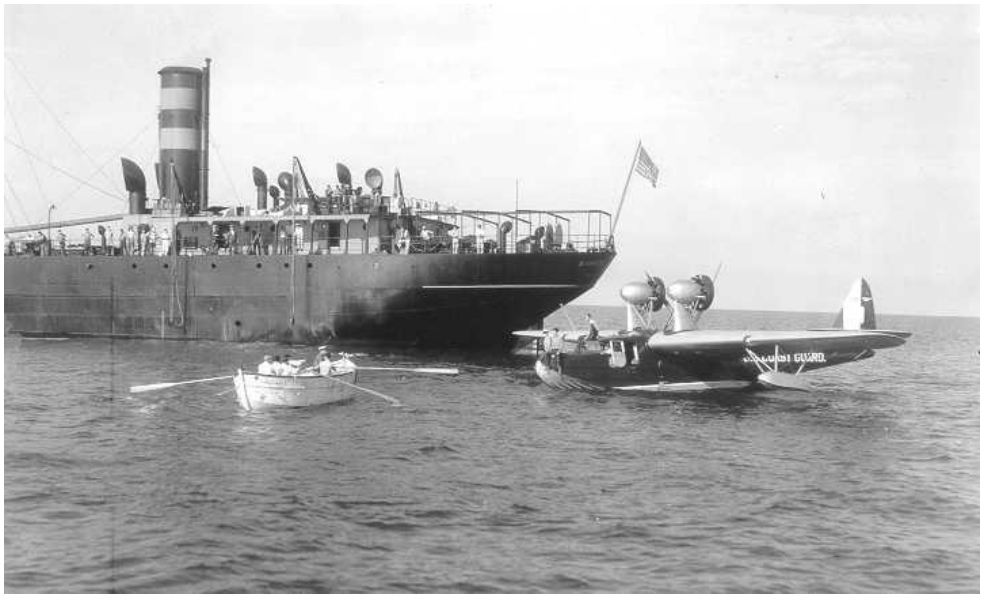
Fog hung heavy over Narragansett Bay, and Commander Leamy had to fly though it to reach Nantucket Light where he was to meet the liner. Flying blind, the commander tried to urge his ship up over the fog, but as he said "that fog bank must have reached almost to heaven." He added: "But I got lucky again. I was getting good and tired of flying blind, when suddenly the fog ended as if it had been cut off with a knife, and right below me were the lights of Hyannis, right on my course."

At Nantucket, the *City of Baltimore* eased up, hove to, and transferred the sick woman. She was rushed to Chelsea hospital and her life saved. Of the six pilots stationed at the Salem Base---three are commissioned officers, one a warrant officer, and two enlisted men. All are graduates of the Naval Flying School at Pensacola, Florida, and all have received official commendations for skill and daring in the air.

The officers are Commander Leamy, Lieutenants T. G. Miller and P. S. Lyons. Machinist J. R. Orudorff, the station's assistant maintenance officer, is the warrant officer, and the enlisted men are Ted McWilliams, and Edmond T. Preston, who comes from Haverhill.

Preston recently received a commendation from headquarters for his flying skill, in token of making a forced landing after being trapped in heavy fog over Cape Cod. The big Fokker was slightly damaged, but not a single crewmen received a scratch.

Every man of them has a story to tell, and all the stories, couched in the dry skeletal language of officialdom, can be found among the dry heavy sheaves of paperwork in Commander Leamy's desk.



A Coast Guard Fokker PJ-1 during a medical evacuation of the type described in the article

although in this instance the weather is fair. This photo dates from September, 1934 and shows the FLB Antares rescuing a "stretcher case" from the merchantman SS Samuel Q. Brown.

THE BLACK HAWK

There was the time, for instance, when LT Lyons, unable because of fog to locate the tanker freighter *Black Hawk* in order to take ashore a critically ill seaman, radioed the ship's skipper to send up clouds of black smoke from her stack.

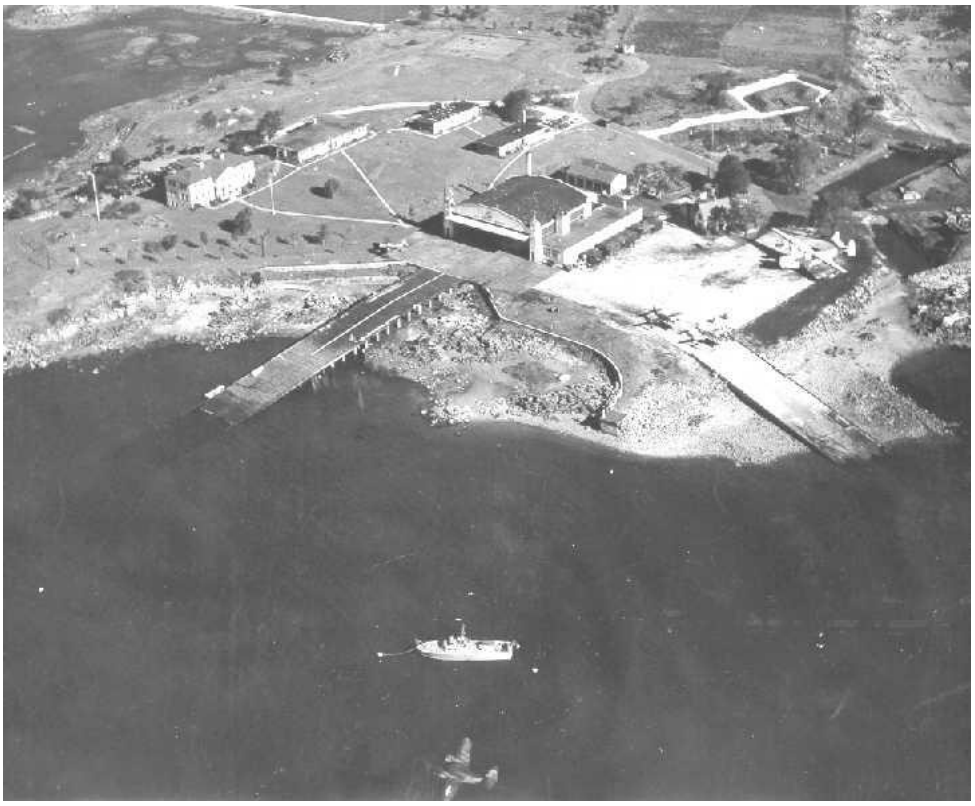
Guided by the smoke, LT Lyons set his flying ship down in a heavy swell, took the sailor aboard, brought him to the hospital, and saved his life.

Not all of the unit's work is rescue work, of course. Duties range from counting migratory waterfowl for the U. S. Biological Survey to searching the seas for suspect vessels---known to the Coast Guard as "blacks."

Included are such tasks as carrying provisions, mail and medical assistance to icebound islands during the winter, rushing serum to epidemic threatened communities, making aerial maps and conducting photography, and locating small boats that carry no radio.

Sometimes emergency services draw a plane far inland. Last spring for instance, during the big floods through western Pennsylvania, LT Miller flew one of the station's planes to Pittsburgh, and basing there, made the first comprehensive survey of the flooded area.

Because of this survey, Pittsburgh authorities were able to give by radio broadcasts a complete picture of the complete state of affairs in the area, and the Coast Guard received generous praise for the work.



Another overhead view taken in 1945. Note the ASR "crash" boat and the Grumman JRF "Goose" in the foreground.