



Coast Guardsman John Wilmott in the Surfman Uniform, circa 1935 (photo from obituary published by Seaboard World Airlines)

## **The U. S. Coast Guard Surfman Uniform – A Photo Essay**

**by Captain Bob Desh, USCG (Retired) – Foundation for Coast Guard History**

The birth of the Coast Guard in January of 1915 often is described as the *merger* of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service (USRCS) and U.S. Life-Saving Service (USLSS). In reality, it was more of a *combination* with the two services remaining distinct branches under the new U. S. Coast Guard banner. In the early days of the new service, each branch—life-saving and cutter (aka, seagoing)—would continue to function much as it had in the past; the blending of the two would take time.

Perhaps the most visible aspect of the slow merging process was the uniforms that Coast Guard enlisted personnel wore. Cuttermen wore a traditional naval-style uniform, surfmen a unique uniform authorized only for the life-saving branch. This unique surfman uniform would last for decades and would be worn with great pride by the lifesavers. It also would be the eventual inspiration for the modern-day Coast Guard uniform.

## The Early Days

When the new Coast Guard organization was formed, the USLSS was the slightly larger force, numbering approximately 2,200 men staffing 273 boat stations. The USRCS consisted of approximately 1,800 officers and men. The USLSS was a *uniformed* service, but not a *military* one; that changed instantly in 1915. However, the primary mission of the surfmen would remain unchanged; rescuing those in peril on the sea. The transition to this new military Coast Guard would see the USLSS station keepers promoted to warrant officer (W1) and senior surfmen to petty officer. Surfman now was also a military title and pay grade for non-rated personnel similar to seaman and fireman in the cutter branch. When the Coast Guard added chief petty officer (CPO) to the enlisted rate structure in 1920, many of the senior surfman were promoted to CPO. A unique lifesaving designation, (L), was included in surfmen's ratings (e.g., boatswain's mate first class [L]). As with their unique uniform, that (L) designation was a tremendous point of surfmen's pride—sometimes to the chagrin of their cutterman counterparts.



Crew of Coast Guard Station Sturgeon Point, Alpena Michigan, circa 1915 (Alcona Historical Society Photo)

As with most uniform changes, the transition did not happen overnight. The easiest, most expedient, and thus the first uniform change for the service and the surfmen was simply to replace the USLSS hatband with one reading "U.S. Coast Guard," while continuing to wear the existing Life-Saving Service uniform. The photo above shows the crew of Station Sturgeon Point, Alpena, MI, during this early transitional period.

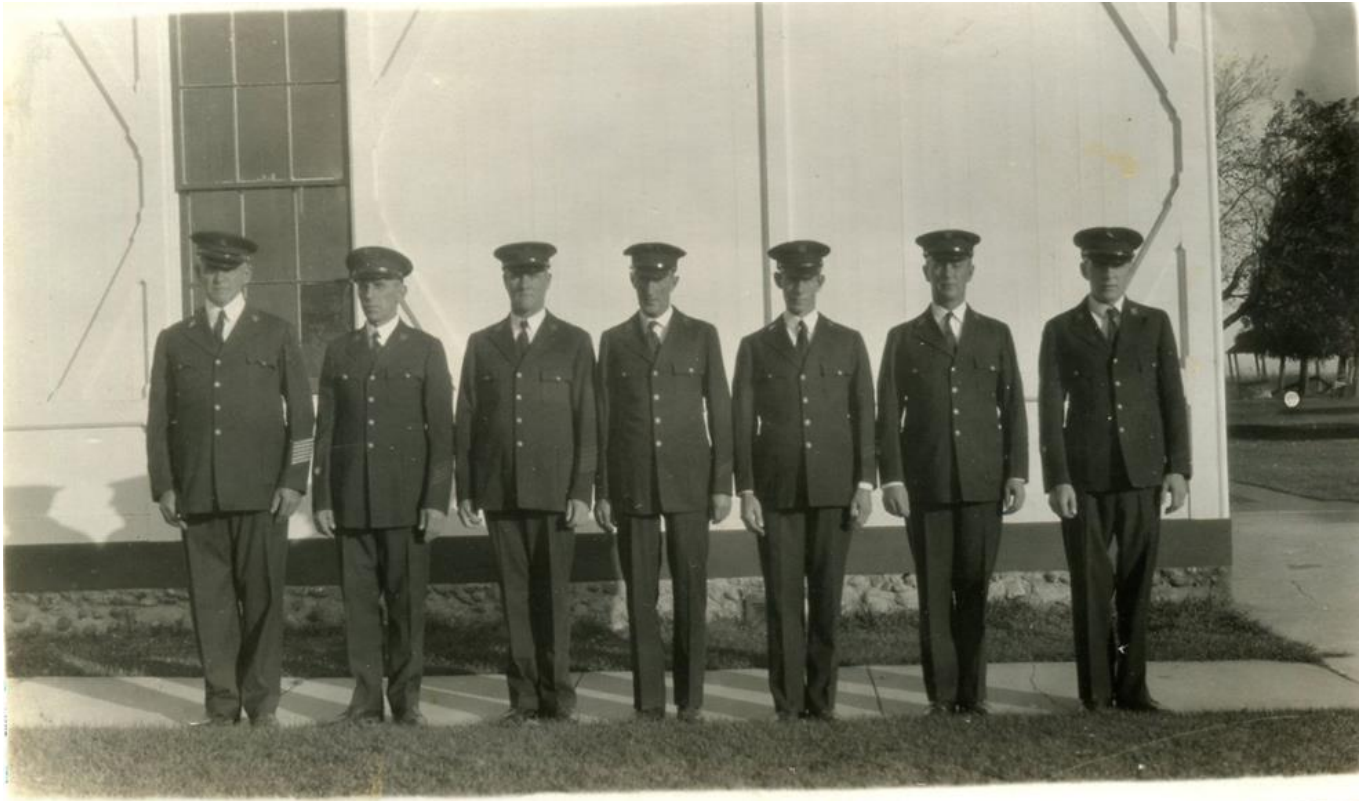
## The Surfman Lapel and Cap Device

As time passed, a uniform more military and modern in its cut would be developed. The seal of the U.S. Life-Saving Service (boat hook and pulling oar centered in a life-ring) would be the inspiration for a unique collar/lapel and cap device to be worn on the surfman uniform. The new device would be crossed oars atop a life-ring, honoring the heritage of USLSS and clearly identifying the surfmen as a member of the life-saving branch. This collar device would later become the inspiration for the modern-day surfman qualification badge.



## The Coast Guard Shield

This photo shows the crew of Station Sturgeon Point in the 1920s after the transition to the new surfman uniform. The unique Coast Guard shield, worn on the right sleeve, had been added to the naval-style uniform worn by the cutter branch to distinguish enlisted Coast Guardsmen from their Navy counterparts. This unique shield was also worn on the surfman uniform. The Coast Guard shield remains a point of pride on modern-day Coast Guard uniforms.



Crew of Coast Guard Station Sturgeon Point, Alpena Michigan, late 1920s (Alcona Historical Society Photo)

## From Tunic to Tie

In addition to taking time, the service-wide uniform transition process was often very unit or location specific. This was further complicated by a change in uniform styles after WWI as all branches of the military moved from the traditional high-collar, tunic style uniform that had been popular in the early part of the twentieth century to various versions of the jacket, tie, and trouser-type uniforms that are still with us today. The two photos on the next page showing the crews from the early 1920s from Coast Guard Stations Racine, WI, and Merrimac River, MA, illustrate this transitional period. Note the change in cover color and style and the inclusion of the distinctive surfman collar and cap devices, as well as the naval-style petty officer rating chevrons. The warrant officer station keepers donned the naval-style double-breasted uniform. Chief petty officers also would transition to the double-breasted uniform worn by their counterparts in the cutter branch.





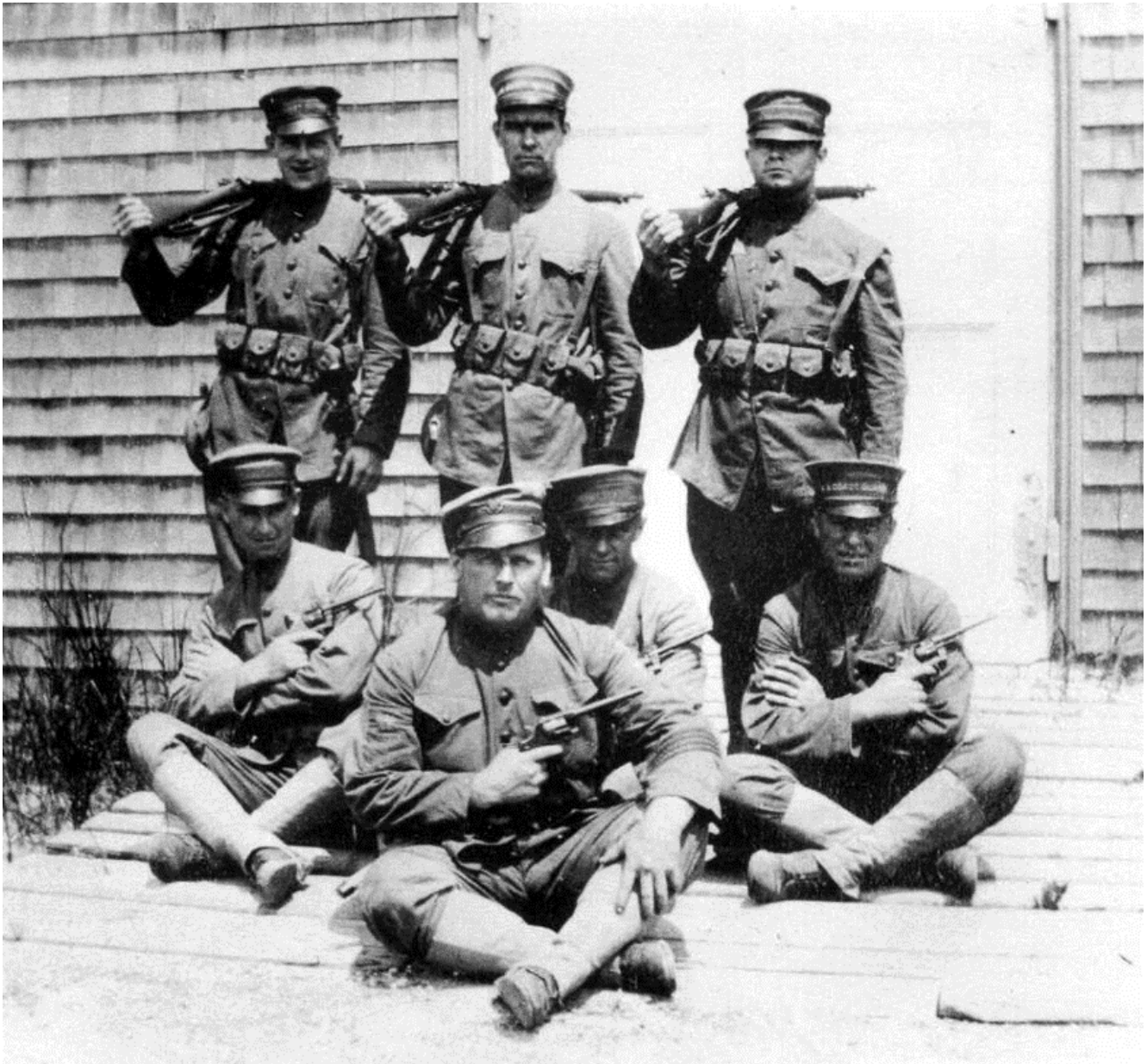
Crew of Coast Guard Station Racine, Wisconsin, 1920s (Coast Guard photo)



Crew of Station Merrimac River, Massachusetts, 1920s (Coast Guard photo)

## **World War One The Olive Drab Uniform**

The onset of World War I brought significant changes for the surfmen of the Coast Guard stations, including the addition of an olive drab uniform, weapons qualifications, and a wartime security aspect to their traditional beach patrols. The WWI style olive drab uniform would be phased out after the war.



Crew of Station of Coast Guard Station Quonochontaug, Rhode Island, WW I (Coast Guard photo)



## The Surfman Insignia

The surfman device, like the uniform, would go through several refinements and transitions over time. For a few years, the device included the number of the specific station to which the surfmen was assigned. But the military nature of the Coast Guard required that surfmen now move far more frequently between stations than in the days of the USLSS, so the impracticality of including the station number quickly became evident and it was removed.

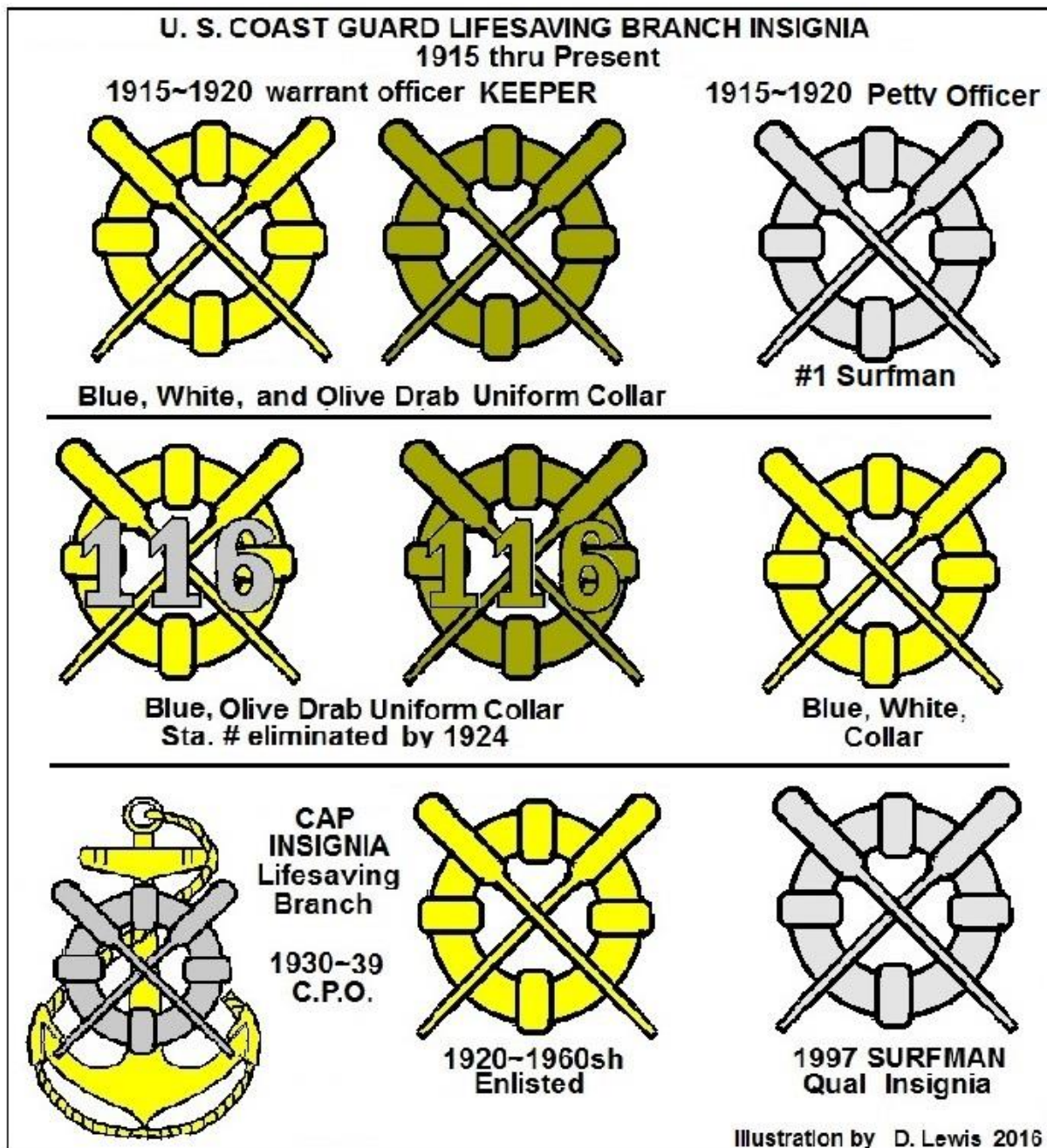


Illustration by CWO Dana Lewis, USCG (Retired)



Surfman uniform, 1920 (Coast Guard photo)

This photo from the USCG Historian's collection provides an excellent example of the surfman uniform of the 1920s. With few minor adjustments, this uniform would be the standard into the early 1960s.



## If Only the Photo Could Speak

The dark blue hat cover eventually would be joined by a white cover option, and the cap device would transition from being pinned directly on the cap to being mounted on a protrusion on the hatband, much as it is today.



Graduation photo for a training class for advancement to CPO, Long Island, NY circa 1931 (courtesy of Aaron Buda)

This photo, taken at Bayshore Studio in Bayshore Long Island, NY, is a fascinating study on the surfman uniform and the Coast Guard of the 1930s. From what I have learned, it is a graduation photo for a training class for advancement to Chief Petty Officer. It appears that most are boatswain's mates (at the time, BM was a "right arm ratings"), although it does include at least one "left arm rating," probably a motor machinist. Note the warrant officer (BOSN, W1), probably the instructor, in the center of the group behind the BM1 seated on the floor (with the "jaunty" tilt to his cover). Another interesting aspect is that the BM1 to the left of the warrant officer appears to be wearing the chief petty officer (L) cap device but has not yet sewn on his chief's "crow"; I suspect he was promoted shortly before the class. Also, the two Coasties in the naval "square rig" uniform at the back are probably cuttermen. If the photo could talk, I'm sure it would tell many interesting stories!



Crew of Station North Superior, Grand Marais, Michigan, 1935 (Cook County Historical Society photo collection)

As explained earlier, chief petty officers in the lifesaving branch transitioned to a double-breasted jacket identical to that worn by their cutter branch counterparts. However, their uniforms included the unique surfman device adorning collar and cap. This photo of the crew of Station North Superior from 1935 shows two chiefs (front row, second and third from left) in the double-breasted uniform.

Until 1940, personnel enlisting in the Coast Guard chose either the life-saving or cutter branch and there was very little transferring between branches. If a surfman did request to go afloat, he faced a possible reduction in grade because of his lack of shipboard experience and expertise. He also would transition to the naval-style uniform worn by those in the cutter branch. As the service matured, there was more blending, but the life-saving personnel remained fairly insular through and beyond WWII.

## **The Surfman Uniform becomes the basis for WWII-Era Shore Establishment Uniform**

As the Coast Guard expanded rapidly to meet the demands placed on the service during WWII, the “shore establishment” uniform came into being. It was essentially identical to the surfman uniform with the exception of the collar and cap devices. The surfman’s crossed oars and life ring insignia was replaced with the Coast Guard seal. Throughout the war, surfmen continued to wear their unique uniform. The vast majority of Coast Guard personnel serving were issued the naval “crackerjack”-style

uniform; however, tens of thousands of Coasties serving in the Temporary Reserve, as well as in other selected billets ashore, were outfitted with this new shore establishment uniform. The Coast Guard seal collar device was also used on the uniforms of the Women's Reserve, aka SPARs.



Coast Guardsman Andy Anderson, WWII (family photo courtesy of the *Ocracoke Observer* newspaper)

Inset—Shore Establishment Collar Device

This photo of WWII-era Coast Guardsman Andy Anderson is an excellent illustration of the shore establishment uniform. (That jaunty tip of the cap was apparently very popular at the time!)





Blue WWII-era Coast Guard Shore Establishment Uniform

This photo provides a clear, closeup view of the shore establishment uniform. As explained earlier, the surfman uniform was identical with the exception of the collar devices. Note the “honorable service lapel patch”—commonly known as the "Ruptured Duck" to service personnel—over the right breast pocket. It was presented to those members of the U.S. military who were honorably discharged during WWII. The insignia was meant to identify personnel who had done their duty, had been processed out, and were making their way home in uniform.



Khaki WWII-era Coast Guard Shore Establishment Uniform

Beginning in the late 1930s, there also was a khaki version of the shore establishment and surfman uniforms. Imagine how that was received in the chief's mess aboard cutters or in the local enlisted man's club! I am sure those surfmen transferring to cutters were quick to hide their khakis deep in the bottom of their sea bags...



Crew of Station Amagansett, WWII era (Amagansett US Life-Saving & Coast Guard Station Museum photo)

This photo shows the crew of Station Amagansett, NY, in surfman uniform sometime during WWII. The photo probably was taken as the crew prepared for beach patrol training. The surfmen's traditional patrol of the beaches to watch for mariners in distress took on new emphasis as the threat of landing of enemy saboteurs and spies became a real possibility.



Crew of Station Race Point (Coast Guard photo)



As more and more Coasties transitioned to the naval style uniform, the surfman uniform would begin to fade. Its derivative, the shore establishment uniform, gradually disappear after WWII. However, those entitled to wear the surfman uniform and carry the (L) behind their rating would continue do so with pride. Master Chief Bill McEachern, U.S. Coast Guard (Retired), reports that he knew a boatswain mate first class (L) and engineman first class (L) who still wore their surfman uniforms into the early 1960s. From this and other anecdotal information, it appears that the ability to “wear as long as serviceable” allowed surfman to wear their unique uniforms (carefully!) for decades.



Photo of Coast Guardsman in surfman/shore establishment uniform from Coast Guard collection dated 1960.

## **The Bender Blues**

In 1970, then Commandant Admiral Chester Bender proposed that the Coast Guard adopt a uniform distinctly different from that of the Navy. The Navy was going through uniform changes of its own and Admiral Bender believed the time was ripe for a transition to a unique Coast Guard uniform. He hoped it would solidify visually the Coast Guard’s status as a unique branch of the U.S. Armed Forces. Admiral Bender, and others, also felt that appearance-wise the enlisted naval-style uniforms visually detracted from the authority of petty officers engaged in law enforcement duties, which rapidly were becoming an increasingly important part of the Coast Guard mission set. A board established to explore

possibilities proposed a style for the new uniform—similar to that of the surfman’s uniform. A distinctive “Coast Guard Blue” color—different from that of any other military or government service—was suggested by the Army’s Natick Research Laboratory. The transition to the new uniform, while not necessarily popular, began in 1972. As they say, the rest is history.

The Coast Guard has now been in the “Bender Blues” for nearly five decades. Like many things in Coast Guard history, the surfman uniform and its role as the inspiration for the modern-day uniform has faded somewhat from our collective memory. Many Coasties serving both today and at the time of the transition have no knowledge of the connection. As those CG veterans entitled to the (L) designation and the wearing of the surfman uniform continue to fade away, this memory will only become more obscure.

I end with a photo of a WWII-era Coastie in shore establishment uniform enjoying a cigarette on a park bench somewhere. I am sure that, at first-glance, most present-day Coast Guardsmen would think it to be a photo taken recently; but the more observant might ask, “What’s up with those collar devices?”

Be proud of your uniform Coasties—it has history!



Coast Guard Surfman Robert Resnick in shore establishment uniform, circa 1941 (Coast Guard Photo)

## A note on sources

Thanks to the power of the internet, a wide and diverse array of sources were utilized to assemble this article. They included the photo files of the U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office as well as those of historical societies, libraries, and maritime museums around the country. Dates and details were garnered from tidbits of information accompanying the assorted photos. Special thanks to Master Chief Bill McEachern, U.S. Coast Guard (Retired) who provided insightful recollections of those Coast Guardsmen he met early in his career who wore the surfman uniform with pride. Other key primary sources follow.

### Sources:

Frederick Stonehouse, *Wreck Ashore, U.S. Life-Saving Service, Legendary Heroes of the Great Lakes*. (Duluth: Lake Superior Port Cities Inc., 1994)

Dana Lewis [CWO BOSN, USCG (Retired)], *U. S. Coast Guard Enlisted Ratings, Rating Specialty Marks & Distinguishing Marks, Warrant Officer & Chief Warrant Officer Specialty Devices, 1915 – 2009*. (Washington, DC, U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office, 2009)

Anastasia Devlin, Editor-in-Chief, *Reservist*, Special Uniform Issue (Washington, DC: Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard, 2019)

