

Office Memorandum • UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

TO : ASSISTANT CHIEF, PUBLIC INFORMATION DIVISION

DATE: 25 August 1955

FROM : Elizabeth A. Segedi, Photo Desk, Public Information Division

SUBJECT: Interview with Rear Admiral Harry G. Fisher, USCG (Ret), at the U. S. Public Health Service Hospital, 23 August 1955.

1. The attached seven pages contain to the best of my recollection and understanding information obtained from my visit with Rear Admiral Harry G. Fisher, USCG (Ret) about the Revenue Cutter Service as he remembered it. Admiral Fisher served from 1895 to 1940; however, this only includes the Service's history before 1915.
2. With regard to the laws referred to in this material, I have not done any research to check the accuracy.
3. I have ordered from the Depository in Alexandria Admiral Fisher's file which might reveal some other facts and dates that would add to this information.

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Encl

The following information was obtained from Rear Admiral Harry G. Fisher, USCG (Ret), who served in the Revenue Cutter Service--U. S. Coast Guard from 1895 to 1940. Interviewed at the USPHS Hospital, Baltimore, Md., on August 23, 1955.

How the Revenue Cutter Service Got Its Men

In the days of the old Revenue Cutter Service recruiting stations were unknown and something to come long after the Service became a part of the U. S. Coast Guard in 1915. Publicity campaigns for attracting men to join was an unheard of device for acquiring personnel. The Service managed to fill its small complement lists for officers and enlisted men from applications received in a natural course of events.

The attitude of officers toward any kind of publicity was generally to keep a tight lip. Not that they weren't proud of the Service, they merely shied from having their deeds embroidered on in news print. Occasionally, though, a newspaperman bore down on a captain of a cutter when in port and managed to extract from him information for his paper. Afterward, seeing the story about himself or his ship always irked the captain, especially if it portrayed him as a hero.

There was little change in the officer personnel from year to year. Officers who manned the Revenue Cutter Service entered from civilian life without special training, but were experienced sea-farers, many being Scandinavians born to the sea.

There was no retirement, and no means of getting promoted except through deaths and resignations of men on the active list. It was not unusual for an officer to stay in the Service until he died.

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Ten years after the establishment of the School of Instruction (or the first Academy) in 1877 aboard the DOBBIN, the Service had more officers than it could handle. It found no more need for cadets for several years. The Revenue Cutter Service made an arrangement with the Navy whereby it could fill vacancies, if they occurred, from the Naval Academy. By 1894, however, the Navy had grown so that it had use for practically all of its officers. The School of Instruction aboard the Cutter CHASE, which replaced the DOBBIN as the school ship in 1878, was re-established at the Yard in Baltimore, Md.

A law then existed with regard to junior officers who were 3rd Lieutenants (later designated Ensigns). Cadets could not exceed the 37-3rd Lieutenants authorized. If a 3rd Lieutenant got promoted, that automatically left a vacancy for a cadet. There were two classes of cadets, junior and senior, and instructions lasted for two years aboard the school ship. As one class left the school, the lower class advanced, and new cadets entered the junior class in accordance with the authorized number as compared with the 3rd Lieutenant list.

By 1895, the 3rd Lieutenant list fell short of its authorized number, leaving vacancies, and examinations were once again opened for cadets. Also, Congress passed a bill about this time making way for a permanent inactive waiting list. With this means, the Service was able to place some of its old men on the list, which helped create vacancies for new cadets. For this reason the class of 1895 got underway. Only about 20 men took the examination, of which 14 completed the number of cadets

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who were authorized. Rear Admiral H. G. Fisher was one of those accepted. In 1896, the junior class carried only 10 cadets.

In 1897, the Cutter CHASE suffered heavy damages in a collision with another vessel. Admiral Fisher's class was ordered from the CHASE to various cutters before completing the two-year course. The CHASE put into drydock for repairs. The incident caused the removal of cadets from the School of Instruction but this did not create vacancies for new cadets. It was not until 1898 that Admiral Fisher received a commission as junior officer because of the system of promotions.

Most jobs for enlisted ratings in the Revenue Cutter Service were filled from applications made directly to a captain of a cutter. The commanding officer of a ship had to depend solely on his own resourcefulness to get a crew of 35 enlisted men authorized him. Usually half of a complement stayed permanently, the other half came and went, by deserting. The skipper almost never had a full complement of enlisted men or officers. A full complement for officers consisted of 1 captain, 3 lieutenants, 1 Chief engineer, and 2 junior engineers. Beside himself, the Captain fared well if he had aboard his ship 1 first lieutenant, 1 chief engineer, and 1 assistant engineer. To fill openings left by the ever changing half complement of men, the Captain's only chance of getting men was when he arrived in port. There he hoped to receive applicants who would hear about the existing vacancies from the remaining members of his crew.

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Clothing the officers and enlisted men posed a great problem for both the Revenue Cutter Service and the men. Cadets and officers had to furnish their own uniforms as prescribed by the law. Regarding the enlisted men, the Service contracted with a firm in Baltimore to furnish uniforms ordered from the cutters. The ship purchased the uniforms, but the cost was deducted from the sailors' wages. There was no such thing as a clothing allowance, as men of the modern Service receive. A total cost of a uniform then cost about what a pair of pants costs today.

When an enlisted man signed onto a cutter, a Junior Officer, assigned as the clothing procurer, measured him as a tailor would and sent the measurements to a contractor in Baltimore. The contractor usually did not produce the uniform until the ship left the port, or until after the man deserted the ship at the end of a month's time. Left holding an empty uniform, the cutter had two more problems. That of getting another man signed on to fit the uniform, and to get it paid for. Seldom could the ship collect from a deserter. One consolation was that on joining a cutter, an enlisted man signed an order which if he deserted gave the Captain authority to credit the cost of the uniform against the money due him. Later, in the early 1900s, the clothing officer became a rather important person. He received permission to order uniforms to carry in stock aboard the ship, thereby doing away with the system of ordering a single one at a time.

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At the School of Instruction, cadets of the Revenue Cutter Service were taught and trained much like Naval officers. They studied gunnery and military performance, and all the subjects taught at the Naval Academy such as astronomy, navigation, law and order, and also received thorough exercises in Marlin-Spike Seamanship training, so that when cadets graduated they had a fairly broad education in the duties of a military officer.

The training of enlisted men fell to individual officers. No special schooling and training prepared a man for service in the days of the Revenue Cutter Service such as enlisted men experience today at Cape May Receiving Center and through ^(where) Groton Training Station. Training was largely the product of the commanding officer of a ship. He saw that his men were taught certain fundamental facts right aboard the ship. A 3rd Lieutenant, for instance, took charge of a certain division of duties aboard the cutter, such as gunnery, powder, or another. Cutters being organized along the order of Naval vessels, the officers of each division trained the men under them.

Designations for the enlisted men differed vastly from those of the 20th century. As compared to the 77 ratings enlisted men can strike for since World War II, only about 7 ratings existed for enlisted men aboard Revenue cutters. This allowed for very few petty officers. An example of a rating of the time was the ^{of} master of arms, who supervised the food. Under him were cooks called boys—boy, first class, boy 2nd class. The cooks fed the men three times a day. The diet was called ship's food and

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consisted of corned beef, and corned pork preserved in small sealed kegs, and the bread baked by the cooks. Once a keg was broken open, the food was quickly eaten, as there was no refrigeration. On putting into port the cutter purchased fresh food.

The administrative offices for the Service consisted of a division in the Treasury Department, Washington, D. C. Two rooms served the Chief of the Division of the Revenue Cutter Service, who was appointed from a list of captains. Under him served a personnel officer chosen by him from line officers. An Engineer-in-Chief and two junior engineer assistants occupied two other rooms in the Treasury from where they managed somehow to keep up the old square riggers.

Topographically, the Service divided areas of the country in which the cutters were assigned into divisions with a division commander at the head. Each unit was separate and practically its own boss, including each cutter. There were regulations, but even so the captain of a cutter often made his own laws. As means of communication were slow, there was no way to keep accurate^{checks}/on these units.

The cutters, nevertheless, carried out the duties charged to the Service. Several distinguished themselves in the Spanish-American War of 1898, following which they^{went}/back to routine duties. Along the Great Lakes and the East Coast, the men received what they called winter cruise orders. On the first of December, they were ordered to assist ships in distress, and were supposed to keep ready on a half-hour's notice. They were able and did respond to calls and assisted many vessels. Sometimes a ship

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ran into serious trouble and had to be towed to port. Sometimes a cutter picked up the crew and let the ship go.

One of the popular slogans of the day was "When other ships go into port, the Revenue Cutter Service goes to sea." These words truthfully described the cutters. There being no radios then, when a ship left port the only word heard of her while at sea was that which came into port from another ship that had sighted her. On such slim information the cutters set out to help a ship in distress. Thousands of small craft, of 5, 10, and 15 tons cruised the waters of the coast, all by sail and wind. These kept the cutters on a busy schedule doing assistance work, rescuing, and enforcing the laws of the sea.

Thus, from first-hand experiences in battling the sea in square riggers the men of the Revenue Cutter Service got their training.

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An experience related by Rear Admiral Fisher happened when he was assigned to the Cutter BEAR, long before her famous trip to the Arctic in 1922.[?] The BEAR set out to sea from San Francisco for patrol duty. While out only a short time, another ship hove into sight and all of a sudden headed straight for the BEAR. The vessel coming in at an angle clipped the BEAR's prow off. Just before she hit the cutter, a junior officer standing on the prow saw what was about to happen and jumped onto the other vessel to avoid getting knocked from his perch. The BEAR did not discover that an officer was missing until later. The other vessel finding itself with another's officer turned around and headed back to the BEAR to return him.

