

Memorandum

DATE: 22 AUG 1975

SUBJECT: The position and title of "Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard";
historical research concerning

FROM : G-A

TO : G-C

1. The title "Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard", dates from the Act of January 12, 1923 (42 Stat. L., 1130) -- An Act to distribute the commissioned line and engineer officers of the Coast Guard in grades, and for other purposes, as amended February 28, 1927 (44 Stat. L., 1261) "Section 2. That the title of captain commandant in the Coast Guard is hereby changed to commandant Hereafter....the commandant shall have, while serving as commandant, the rank, pay and allowances of a rear admiral (lower half) of the Navy"
2. Previous to this act the rank and title of the head of the Coast Guard was, "captain commandant." This was established in this Act of January 28, 1915 (38 Stat. L., 800), the organic act establishing the Coast Guard. It stated, "Section 2. That in the Coast Guard there shall be a captain commandant ... corresponding to the present office(s) of the Revenue Cutter Service, which (is) transferred to the Coast Guard, and ... the present incumbent (is) also transferred to (the) corresponding position in the Coast Guard"
3. The rank "captain commandant" was first established in the Revenue Cutter Service by the Act of April 16, 1908 (35 Stat. L., 61), "[Section 1], That on and after the passage of this Act the President be, and is hereby, authorized to appoint in the Revenue Cutter Service, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, one captain commandant for a period of four years who may be reappointed for further periods of four years each ...". This appears to be the first usage of the term "commandant" in any form in the history of both the Coast Guard and Revenue Cutter Service. The "Register of Officers and Vessels of the Revenue Cutter Service of the United States dated July 1, 1908 lists the name of Worth G. Ross preceded by the rank of "Captain Commandant" and opposite the title, "Chief of Division of Revenue Cutter Service". (In the register from 1907, the year before the legislation, he is listed simply as "Captain"). This information is listed in precisely the same manner on the organization page of all registers from 1908 to 1914, with the name of Ellsworth P. Bertholf replacing that of Ross in 1911.

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4. Prior to 1908 and beginning in 1894, captains of the Revenue Cutter Service served with unbroken continuity as Chief, Division of Revenue Cutter Service. The first of these was Captain Leonard G. Shepard. Shepard was detailed in 1889 to be Chief of the "Revenue Marine Division". However, it was not until the act of July 31, 1894 (28 Stats. L. 162, 171) that there was a legislative fiat directing, "That the Secretary of the Treasury shall detail a captain of the Revenue Cutter Service, who shall be chief of the division of Revenue Cutter Service....." The 1894 law is of major significance in our history. It was the first statutory definition of the revenue cutter system as organized and distinct "service". Also, there had never previously been a statutory requirement that the chief of the service be a uniformed officer from its own ranks. Leonard Shepard had been an officer in the Revenue Marine from the age of 19. As Evans said in his book, ⁽¹⁾ "Shepard and his successors were career men. They were trained leaders, holding their posts by merit and ability alone." From Shepard to the present day there has been an unbroken continuity of career officers as chief of the service.

5. Mention should be made of Captain Alexander Fraser. Secretary of the Treasury Spencer detailed Fraser in 1843 to be in charge of what was called a Revenue Marine Bureau in the Treasury. However, Fraser's role and that of Evans, his brief successor, in the period 1843 to 1849, was administrative. Fraser was not a career officer in the Revenue Marine. Statutorily there was no such organization and Fraser's position was an administrative detail. After Spencer and Fraser-Evans the so-called Bureau collapsed and control of the cutters reverted to the collectors of customs as they had done from 1790. It remained so for 22 years until Secretary Boutwell appointed Sumner J. Kimball, whose appointment as chief was given a statutory basis in the Act of March 3, 1875 (18 Stat. L., 371, 396)

6. From the foregoing discussion several options emerge for determining the lineage of the Coast Guard Commandancy. The pros and cons of each are discussed below.

a. 1923 -- RADM William E. Reynolds. Statutorily, Reynolds was clearly the first officer to have the precise title "Commandant". It appears likely that Reynolds himself was the person who gave primary impetus to the legislative change that dropped the word "captain" from his title and obtained the rank of rear admiral for the commandant. Even before the legislative change in title, Reynolds dropped the word "captain"

(1) Captain Stephen H. Evans, USCG, The United States Coast Guard 1790-1915: A Definitive History, (Annapolis, Maryland: U.S. Naval Institute, 1949), page 153.

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from his title. In the first register and the annual report (1920) following his appointment he signs himself and is listed on the organization page simply as "Commandant". Apparently he was prompted to do so because he had received a temporary promotion to commodore under provisions of the Coast Guard's service with the Navy in World War I. There does not seem to have been any earlier customary usage or popular tendency to drop the word "captain" and simply refer to the chief as "Commandant". Later, however, authors such as Kaplan-Hunt, writers in the old Coast Guard magazine and public affairs officers from RADM Reed-Hill in World War II to the present have popularly referred to chiefs all the way back to Shepard, and in some cases even Fraser, as "commandants". More than any of these, however, Evans in his "definitive history" fixed the latter day popular usage of the title "commandant" for the earlier military chiefs of the service. In a precise legalistic context, it would only be correct to refer to Reynolds as the first "commandant" and incorrect to apply this title to any earlier chiefs. However, this would be in the face of customary and popular usage of the title for all of the uniformed chiefs from Shepard on, that goes back at least 42 years to an article, "U.S. Coast Guard Commandants, 1889 to 1933" in the old U.S. Coast Guard magazine (April 1933, Vol. 6, No. 6).

b. 1915 -- Captain Commandant Ellsworth P. Bertholf. Bertholf was the first officer to head the U.S. Coast Guard. His title and rank incorporated the term Commandant. Since he was the first chief and his title was simply modified later by dropping the word "captain", Bertholf could be characterized perhaps, with even more legitimacy than Reynolds, as the first "Coast Guard" commandant. However, it is clear that he was not the first "commandant" of the corps that became the military nucleus of the new Coast Guard. Bertholf had been Captain Commandant of the Division of Revenue Cutter Service. By statute his office in the Coast Guard corresponded to his office in the Revenue Cutter Service. Thus, Bertholf embodied a statutory continuity of office from the old Revenue Cutter Service to the new Coast Guard; the same man, the same office, the same title: but now with added duties, responsibilities and authority.

c. 1908 - Captain Commandant Worth G. Ross. Bertholf's predecessor in the Revenue Cutter Service was Ross. He was the first officer to bear the rank of "Captain Commandant." While "Captain Commandant" was both rank and title in the early Coast Guard, in the Revenue Cutter Service it was essentially a rank, the title being Chief, Division of Revenue Cutter Service. (A few senior officers who had never been chief of the service were "tombstoned" to the rank of "Captain Commandant" by the same 1908 law that gave Ross the new rank). There is no evidence that

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the term "Commandant" was used either officially or by popular custom or tradition of the times, in connection with any head of the service before Ross. If we reject Bertholf because of the statutory continuity of his office, we could accept Ross because he was the first to have the term "Commandant" associated with his position as military chief of the service. Also of significance with Ross is the fact that he was the first chief appointed by the President for a fixed term of four years as is done down through the present day. However, in their scholarly monograph on the Coast Guard, Smith and Powell point out that the change mandated by the Act of 1908, "was primarily a personnel measure, and the change in title, rank, and method of selection carried with it no change in authority or responsibility." (2) With both Ross and Bertholf the continuity is maintained; each officer carrying through the moment of change the essence of his previous position

d. 1894 - Captain Leonard G. Shepard. From Ross back to Shepard there is no change in the role, title or rank of the Chief, Division of Revenue Cutter Service. Shepard was, as previously discussed, the first uniformed, career officer appointed chief by law of the organized service. Before Shepard the chiefs were civilians. The Division, while grounded in statute from 1873, was an administrative entity but had not yet been defined as a "service." There is a strong fiber of continuity traceable in the role and position of the Commandant today, back to Captain Shepard. But, it must also be admitted that the latter was never known in his own time as "Commandant" and it would be 20 years after his time before the name Coast Guard appeared in history.

7. A decision should be made by the Commandant in this matter so that it may be considered permanently resolved. From Reynolds, the incumbent is the 11th Commandant; from Bertholf the 12th; from Ross the 13th; from Shepard the 15th.

8. It is recommended that Captain Shepard be considered the first "Commandant". The following points support this recommendation:

a. He was a career officer.

b. He was the first officer appointed under an express statutory provision.

c. He was the first to be chief of a statutorily defined service.

(2) Darrell Hevenor Smith and Fred William Powell, The Coast Guard, Its History, Activities and Organization (Washington; The Brookings Institution, 1929), page 22.

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d. There is an unbroken continuity of uniformed career
officers from Shepard to the present Commandant.

e. The essence of Shepard's role and position as chief of
the service is continuous despite the changes of 1908, 1915 and
1923, through which both the name "Coast Guard" and title
"Commandant" evolved.

f. Application of the title "Commandant" to Shepard has
become an established and accepted custom over many years.

S. A. WALLACE

DISAPPROVED

APPROVED:

SHEPARD

ROSS

BERTHOLF

REYNOLDS