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Remarks by Vice Admiral Merlin O'Neill at decoration of 21 Coast Guardsmen for rescue of 70 men at sea.

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Mr. Secretary...distinguished guests....ladies and gentlemen:

February 18 and 19 always will be remembered in Coast Guard history. On those two days a nor'easter swept New England. It was bitter cold... with snow and sleet and howling winds.

East of Cape Cod 70-knot winds and 60-foot seas battered merchant vessels which had not been able to make port.

This was the setting for the Coast Guard drama which we review here today.

Two large tankers appeared on the scene---the SS FORT MERCER and the SS PENDLETON. Forty miles apart, they met the full and awful force of the storm. They broke in two on the morning of February 18...and the four separate hulks were swept along at the mercy of the sea.

Survivors were marooned on each hulk....a total of 84 half-frozen men whose chances for rescue seemed impossible.

The story of how 70 of these men were snatched from the elements and delivered safely ashore made headline news for several days.

We have gathered here today to honor some of the men who took part in the FORT MERCER-PENDLETON rescue operations.

(more)

I say some of these men because their individual exploits were outstanding. But we should not forget the much larger number of their shipmates whose skill, courage and devotion to duty went unnoticed in the over-all operation.

I am proud to say that it was the teamwork of all Coast Guard units involved that made possible the exceptional exploits that we note here today. As to individual exploits, you will hear the citations read shortly.

In reality, these 21 men faced four separate rescue operations. Each operation offered special problems. But each held the same danger from hulks that tossed like corks in the towering waves. These men went about their duties drenched by icy water, without food for hours at a time... and with death riding on every wave.

The operations were unique in Coast Guard history, and called for the skillful use of all types of rescue equipment....of cutters and small lifeboats, of an airplane, a sea-going tug; of rubber life rafts, radar, scramble nets and exposure suits.

But most of all, the situation called for raw courage and skill of the highest order---backed by true Coast Guard teamwork!

To you men here, and to your shipmates, let me say that the entire Coast Guard is very, very proud of you.