
SCENE

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CG CUTTER *WACHUSETT*—1960-1961 (WEATHER PATROL)

As I have mentioned before, most of my PCS Orders were long hauls. Those are not easy; however, they offered a unique opportunity to see much of our country. Our whole family (Mom & Dad plus four children plus dogs) has gone coast-to-coast on the northern U.S. Route 10, the southern U.S. Route 90, and zigzagged up the middle on the famous U.S. Route 66, among others.

Now, resting in Seattle after the end of the Bering Sea Patrol, I received orders to take command of the 255-foot **Coast Guard cutter *Wachusett*** (WPG-44), also based in Seattle. This change of command was executed with the standard ceremony—All Hands on the quarterdeck in Service Dress Blues. Officers with white gloves and swords. I tagged along as the District Commander, an Admiral, inspected the crew. Then I read my orders and I turned to the outgoing Commanding Officer, saluted, and said, “I am ready to relieve you, sir.” He returned my salute and said, “Sir, I stand relieved.”

The ship was in the shipyard and ready to leave. We would have to back into the channel and turn ninety degrees to port to depart. The *Wachusett* is a single-screw vessel which makes it hard to turn. Knowing this, I gave the conn to the Executive Officer who was familiar with the ship’s characteristics. We backed away from the yard and started our turn. About halfway through, the XO could see he wasn’t going to make it. He called for “all engines back one-third.” The ship leaped forward. He called for “back full.” The ship vibrated violently and stopped its forward motion very close to penetrating broadside a moored ship!!

I came very close to losing my newly earned fourth stripe of a Captain right then and there. This is known as the “**Hazards of Command.**” I had watched the XO and saw no mistake. But the black gang stuck together, and I was happy we could *not* find who it was that turned the wrong valve.

*So stick to your desk and never go to sea,
And you may soon make Admiral in the USCG!*

Here is another example: I believed in helping junior officers learn through hands-on experiences. We had time to spare between Weather Patrols, so I scheduled little cruises around Puget Sound where they could learn to “read” lighthouses and buoys, keep running fixes by plotting bearings of fixed aids-to-navigation, etc.



I had command of the 255-foot CGC *Wachusett*. Based in Seattle, the *Wachusett* was assigned to Weather Patrol in the Pacific, halfway between San Francisco and Hawaii

We were cruising up a channel used by San Juan Islands ferries just outside Anacortes. Approaching a turn near a point of land on a small island, the Ensign Officer-of-the-Deck gave an incorrect command to the helmsman, namely, “Right three degrees!” The helmsman acknowledged, “Right three degrees,” and put the rudder three degrees to the right. The Ensign went to the bridge repeater compass and bent over it to take a bearing. The ship turned to the right and continued turning, heading for the rocky island. I saw what was happening and, with my authority, counter-commanded the Ensign’s order with, “As you were. Steady as you go.” This gave us time to forget plotting and visually steer a safe course. What should the Ensign have said? Either: (1) “Right three degree rudder” (in which case he would expect the ship to keep turning until he gave a

heading), or (2) "Come right three degrees" (which would be a small course correction by the steering compass).

I was lucky to be on the bridge and to catch that mistake. "The buck stops...with the Commanding Officer."

My first **Weather Patrol** in CGC *Wachusett* was to **Weather Station November**, halfway between San Francisco and Honolulu. I was given the date to relieve the **Coast Guard cutter *Klamath*** (WPG-66). Together with the XO and Navigation Officer, we decided to leave Seattle at night in order to arrive a little before schedule.

On the main channel just north of Seattle, the engine shut down without permission from or notice to the bridge. I was alarmed as I could see another ship standing out astern of us. I ordered the Quartermaster to turn on the breakdown lights and flash the searchlight aft and on our stern without shining on the following ship. This gave us time to find out what was going on. The engineering office came on the phone and reported the major circuit breaker kicked off without notice, and he was too busy supervising to call the bridge. We would be back to normal immediately. (And we were. But, obviously, the black gang needed more training.)

It was a beautiful clear night and interesting to identify the many lights of red, green, and white everywhere. Offshore there was a big, black Pacific Ocean ahead of us. My Night Orders directed the Officer-of-the-Deck to call me if any ships were sighted. None were.

The next night we were rolling gently with an ocean swell on our beam and a starry sky overhead. I was in my cabin when the messenger reported that the wing lookout had seen a rocket to starboard. Oh, my gosh! As a Coast Guard duty as well as a rule-of-the-sea, I would have to go and investigate. That would take time and I would be late relieving the *Klamath*. If it is a false alarm, they will be mad for having to stay overtime on station.

The Coast Guard quite often receives reports of flares from well meaning beachgoers that turn out to be false, and I suspected this might be the case. I summoned the XO and Navigator, and we broke out the star-finder chart. I thought we should look for a planet in that general direction. There was none, but we did find the constellation Orion in that direction. And in that constellation is Sirius, the brightest star in the heavens. THAT'S IT! The lookout must have seen Sirius!

I went to the wing of the bridge and stood beside the young seaman on lookout. As the ship gently but deeply rolled, I located Sirius and watched it appear to shoot straight up into the sky between scattered clouds. "Is that what you saw?" I asked the lookout, and he replied, "Yes, sir!" "That is Sirius," I told him. To which he replied, "Yes, sir. I'm *serious*."

We arrived at Weather Station November midmorning with beautiful sunny skies and calm seas. The *Klamath* lifeboat was alongside with a stack of official messages. Their CO got me on the radio and explained what was going on—President Eisenhower was

on a diplomatic trip to Japan. He flew to Tokyo in Air Force One by the shorter northern route over Alaska and was returning direct to San Francisco over us.

The Navy stationed destroyers along the route which passed over our station. The first vessel in line would turn on its radio beacon at a given time and turn it off when **Air Force One** passed overhead. The next ship in line would listen and turn its beacon on when that ship turned its beacon off. The *Klamath* CO offered to remain on station until Air Force One passed over us as it was due soon. That was a *very* nice gesture, but I said we could handle it. He and his crew happily left for Seattle.

The specific instructions were carried out. When our turn came, our beacon was turned on. When Air Force One passed overhead we received this voice message: "Air Force One...Out." We were not to reply or acknowledge.

Our time on station was pleasant. We played volleyball with a fish line attached to the ball (to retrieve it if it went over the side). We held swim call. We played with the gooney birds that landed on deck and couldn't take off. We had pulling-boat races around the ship between the deck force and the black gang. On "Hump Day" (halfway through the on-station time), we had barbecued chicken and two beers each on deck and entertainment by a musical combo (guitar, trumpet, improvised drum, and timpani consisting of two GI-Can lids which ended each rendition with a bang and flair).

The **Coast Guard cutter *Winona*** (WPG-65) relieved us on schedule. We performed a risky transfer-at-sea drill, using a dummy. Had either helmsman gotten careless while we were underway close aboard, we could have had a serious collision. However, all went well, and we took departure for home.

Almost immediately an officer came down with **appendicitis**. We radioed the district to get us advice from the Public Health Hospital. As best I remember, they told our corpsman to use ice packs and penicillin, and to get him to a hospital as soon as possible.

Our choice was to cross the Columbia River bar (dangerous) and have the patient taken off at Astoria, or continue to the Juan de Fuca Strait and have the patient taken off at Neah Bay by CGAS Port Angeles. I chose the latter. My choice worked. The patient's appendix did not burst, although it was close to doing so.

Back in Seattle, after a reasonable rest period and time to catch up on mail and paperwork, we were given an assignment to take a **Reserve unit** for a week's cruise to meet their drill requirements. The District Commander gave me a choice of where to go. I chose the Inside Passage of southeast Alaska. And, as a perk, the CO may have a **Cabin Guest**. I selected my son, Terry. He slept in the Chiefs' quarters but took his meals with me in the cabin.

Halfway to Skagway, we ducked into an isolated little anchorage and repeated our on-deck barbecue routine. I granted liberty in Skagway.

After about a month in home port, I attended the District Commander's staff meeting of the Commanding Officers of his units. At the end of the meeting, the Chief-of-Staff called me into his office and said, "Your orders have just arrived." "Where am I going?" I asked. "To Tokyo!" was his reply. "What is the Coast Guard doing there?" I asked. He said, "It says here that you will be the Commanding Officer of the **Far East Section of the Coast Guard.**" **WOW!!**

However, I had first to make another Weather Patrol. It afforded me a great time to read up about Japanese. I got an audiocassette made for our Occupation Forces that taught common phrases, a novel about a Japanese Inn, and a book titled "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword" on Japanese culture. My cabin was a great place to study in preparation for my forthcoming unique assignment.

I am not going to report on the second patrol because it was very similar to the first. But there was one interesting difference—the **Gemini** astronauts were dropping in near our line of ships, but not near us. It made interesting radio listening and made one wonder if we were ready for a pickup.

This was my last seagoing assignment by the Coast Guard. But before I say goodbye to the *Wachusett*, I would like use her to further illustrate **R.H.I.P.** (Rank Hath Its Privileges). But, don't forget, the saying is not complete until you add: "and its responsibilities." I believe the latter has been illustrated above, so let's look now at the privileges.

The CO is treated nicely by the crew. At the movies, the best seat is reserved for the Captain. On the bridge, you don't sit in the Captain's chair. When he enters "your space" you rise, and, if covered, you salute. On boarding the shore boat, an airplane, or an official car, the juniors board first and the ranking officer boards last. And it follows



Unlike the *Northwind*, the *Wachusett* was a spit 'n' polish operation

that disembarking the senior get off first. The junior officer walks on the left of the senior. These privileges are just protocol. And don't mean much. Well, how about the Captain rating a private cabin? Isn't that a super privilege? The answer is "yes" but often not as good as it sounds.

Remember how the ship rolled deeply when the lookout reported a flare? The crew in their fore-and-aft-bunks down at water level had only to stick out a knee to stop the little rolling

in their bunks. What was I doing in the cabin? In my fore-and-aft bunk, I was not just rolling. I was sailing through space on the end of a thirty-five-foot imaginary wand from thirty degrees one side to thirty degrees the other.

Ah, but the ship designers took care of that. They installed a settee mounted athwartship for such an occasion. Now, with your head to starboard, when the ship rolls to starboard you get artificial respiration as your guts press the air out of your lungs; and on the roll to port your reversed gut-pressure sucks in air. All you have to do is *relax*.

Well, the time has come. Goodbye, *Wachusett*. It was a wonderful tour and my last operational type. From here to retirement, it will be senior officer staff billets.

Cleaning out my “treasure drawer,” among old ribbons, CG buttons, name tags, patches, shoulder boards, a fifty-year medallion, aviator’s wings, and my Boy Scout Eagle badge, I found some certificates for some of my outstanding operational achievements. (Joke) What better place than here to brag about them?

Crossing Equator: Pollywog to Shellback, 1936, CGC *Bibb*

Crossing Arctic Circle: 66-33n/52-00w, 1942, CGC *Mohawk*

Honorary Submariner: Dunking, 9-11-50, USS *Sennet*

Coast Guard Aviator No. 179, December 7, 1943

Instrument Flying Qualification, CGAS St. Petersburg, 29 March 1944

Commercial Pilot, CAA, December 17, 1945

Member, International Ice Patrol, 1953

OMIAS, USNAS Olathe, KS, 48,000 ft, March 1, 1959

Qualified BOOMER, JTTU, Olathe, **smashed Sonic Barrier in F9F-8T**