

# Romance and Story of Pea Island Station

## The History of the Coast Guard's Only All-Colored Life Saving Crew Which has Performed Fine Service on Coast.

By RODNEY J. BENSON

IN 1862, the blockade runner S. S. Oriental grounded on the dreaded beach of the Carolina Banks, eight miles below Oregon Inlet. Offshore stood a Yankee gunboat, well satisfied that she had run the sidewheeler with her cargo of munitions and 300 head of horses to certain destruction. The Civil War was on, and rather than surrender his ship and her valuable cargo to the "damned Yankees" the Confederate commander preferred the breakers.

Strange enough, the Oriental, though she went to her doom, did not immediately break up. In fact after more than 68 years exposure to the Atlantic in all its moods, the heavy beams and boiler of the blockade runner stands to this very day in the spot where she went ashore. During high water, only her boiler and part of her funnel show.

### Ruined Corrals

The horses were all taken off without injury, and the ruins of the corrals in which they were kept still remain near the old Pea Island Station.

This was one of the contributing factors in placing a Life Saving Station at this point. In 1870, the same year the famous Cape Hatteras Lighthouse was reared, the sills of a station were laid. It was one of those windowless type, wherein a temporary crew took time off every half hour to climb through a trap door to a platform on the roof to scan the seas. The first crew were all white men.

### BE REAL

By B. F. Jenness

**D**ON'T be a dud in your service career;  
Start off with a bang, for a thundering noise  
Is better in life than a sulk or a sneer—  
Explode when you're fired—be one of the boys.  
The dud in the outfit is the guy with a grouch,  
Suspecting his shipmates of shirking their jobs.  
From "turn to" to "taps" he goes round with a slouch,  
And an air of contempt for the hard working gobs.  
Whenever there's volunteer work to be done  
The dud is at sick call, or forward, or aft;  
When ratings are given the dud is the one  
Who says that high ratings are matters of graft.  
Don't ship in the Coast Guard and lay on the job.  
In work or in fight try to draw the first blood.  
Stand up to the brunt like a real Coast Guard gob;  
Explode when you're fired, and don't be a dud.

In 1878, the crew was "checkerboarded"; mixed white and black, but in 1879 they were again all white. Today we might not have a colored crew in the Coast Guard were it not for a tragedy that placed a blot on the records of the Life Saving Service. In 1880, the British bark M. & S. Henderson waged a losing battle with the winds, and brought up on the beach near the station. Seventeen of her crew perished in the breakers. The remaining half made their way to the life saving station to tell of the disaster. Soon after the entire crew of the station were court-martialed and dismissed from the service for "negligence in the performance of their duty."

The crew was replaced by an entirely colored personnel with its first officer in charge being a highly respected colored man, Keeper Richard Etheridge. Etheridge was part Indian.

On the last day of December, 1880, the station building was mysteriously destroyed by fire. It was still smoldering in 1881. A board determined that the fire resulted from "unknown causes" and pointed a suspicious finger at no one. However, a strict guard was kept over new lumber until another station was built.

### Bowser Takes Charge

When Etheridge left the Service, Keeper Benjamin J. Bowser, a mulatto, took charge. May I mention now that Pea Island never had a pure strain negro keeper, white or Indian blood having blended with the African strain.

The third officer in charge, Keeper Lewis S. Westcott, retired is still living on Roanoke Island. He is 81 years and takes an active interest in the Coast Guard. The great-grandfather of John M. Westcott, officer in charge of Oregon Inlet Station, owned the mother of Lewis S. Westcott, hence the taking of the family name.

The fourth keeper was Boatswain (L) William H. Irving, who was retired in 1922, and who is now a resident of Washington, D. C.

The fifth keeper is the one in charge now, C.B.M. (L) George E. Pruden. Pruden, a father of eleven children, takes an avid interest in his work, and the service. Equal with any other keeper in the Coast Guard he is sensitive of the honor of being officer in charge of a station. His crew of nine, lately increased with the transfer of C.Q.M. Samuels, formerly quartermaster aboard the Argus, base ship of the Desfor at New London. Samuels is a native of Panama.

The new Pea Island Station is a one-story frame building with all modern improvements, located near what was once known as New Inlet. It was previously known as Loggerhead Inlet. The State of North Carolina spent over \$200,000 to open the inlet which was one hundred yards wide and fourteen feet deep. Three months after it was formally opened to the public, Surfman Claude Williams from Oregon Inlet Station drove completely over it in a Ford. That happened in 1923 during a stiff northeaster. In the spring of 1924, the dredge Federal returned to open it. A storm sanded her in and it required wrecking tugs to get her out. Since then no attempt has been made to open the inlet. The vivid scar still shows across the island.

According to District Commander Littlefield now at Headquarters, the

## THE UNIFORM

By Minna Irving

**I**T'S not the oath a fellow takes  
To serve his native land,  
Although it is a sacred thing  
I'd have you understand;  
Nor yet the ship to which he sticks  
In battle or in storm,  
Nor yet the flag for which he dies—  
It is the uniform.

Blue cloth, with maybe something red  
Embroidered on the sleeve,  
A flat-topped cap you sport a-tilt  
Pugnaciously on leave,  
A ribbon lettered with the ship  
That feeds and keeps you warm,  
A knotted black and silk neckerchief,  
And that's the uniform.

When I was last on liberty  
I met a flashy guy,  
He asked me to a poker game  
With crooks upon the sly,  
I turned him down although his name  
Was Percival Delarme;  
Such gazaboos are not the pals  
For gobs in uniform.

The navy blue is not a hue  
To drabble or demean.  
It's up to every honest tar  
To keep his jacket clean.  
It stands for grit around the world  
In sunshine and in storm,  
A sailor never should forget  
He wears the uniform.

station derived its name from a small island in the sound, but according to old charts Oregon Inlet had a sister inlet eight miles south known as Brant Inlet. This made that particular stretch of beach a small island. Also there is some confiction on whether the name came from a plant known as the "sea pea." This plant which is now nearly extinct along the banks, grows a very hard seed, which is comparable to lignum vitae in toughness.

### Many Wrecks

Pea Island Station has participated in the rescue of many noted wrecks. Out of 609 aboard wrecked vessels contacted by the station's equipment, only three persons were lost. For a beach front station only a few others have given the Coast Guard such favorable publicity. The press does not fail to headline a rescue, especially when they learn that the crew is made up entirely of colored men. Bundles of newspapers in the possession of Pruden vouch for this statement, among them being many well-known papers of the South, such as the Virginian-Pilot, Elizabeth City Independent, and the Raleigh Observer. It appears that the colored masses of the United States look to this station as a signal of the democracy of the Republic.

The color line is still drawn tightly in the Seventh District, but it is generally admitted by the warrant personnel of that area that one colored life saving crew in the Coast Guard is an important factor in the public's eyes and that its present site is as good as any other in the country.

Note in log at Pea Island for day of July 24, 1930: "I have greatly enjoyed my visit to this station today. A well-kept station and a fine looking, snappy and alert crew."—Signed F. C. Billard, Rear Admiral, U.S.C.G., Commandant.