

The Inauguration of the Coast Guard's Only Air-Land Rescue Unit at CGAS Port Angeles: The Rescue of the Crew of a Navy Bomber

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It was a cold Tuesday afternoon in January 1945. The radio cackled at Coast Guard Air Station Port Angeles, Washington. A Navy bomber on a training flight from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island had become lost in heavy fog and crashed in dense forest. Would the Coast Guard assist in locating the wreckage and survivors, if any? Within five minutes, Coast Guard planes were airborne, and it quickly turned into the inaugural search and rescue for the station's new Air-Land Rescue Unit.



CGAS Port Angeles in 1945

CGAS Port Angeles was commissioned in August 1935, the first of three Coast Guard air stations on the Pacific coast. The station operated primarily as a seaplane unit until the fall of 1938, when a hard surface landing runway was constructed. With the outbreak of World War II, CGAS Port Angeles was put in a strategic position for the defense of the Pacific Northwest. The Navy constructed a thousand-foot pier in cooperation with the Coast Guard, and the base was under the command of the Navy's Western Sea Frontier. CGAS Port Angeles also served as headquarters of the Navy's Air Sea Rescue System for the Northwest Sea Frontier Area. By early 1942, inshore plane patrols were a regular activity at CGAS Port Angeles. Navy planes made practice landings on the base's runway, preparing pilots for landings aboard aircraft carriers. Planes searched for enemy submarines and escorted ships through offshore waters. Other planes towed practice targets for the station's naval gunnery school, where some 85 to 100 student pilots were trained each week. CGAS Port Angeles was also home to the Coast Guard's only Air-Land Rescue Unit, who searched for naval planes that crashed into the surrounding mountains. The station was fully responsible for all Coast Guard anti-submarine and rescue activities down to the California border by 1943. On 15 March 1944, the Air Sea Rescue System was established for the Navy's Northwest Sea Frontier. That September, the station became officially known as Coast Guard Group Port Angeles, which operated as an Air-Sea Task unit for the Navy's Northwest Sea Frontier. By the end of the year, CGAS Port Angeles was home to 29 planes, its all time high.

NAS Whidbey Island was commissioned on 21 September 1942 as a temporary base for seaplane patrol operations in defense of Puget Sound. Patrol planes flew long-range navigation training missions over the North Pacific. Fighters and bombers made bombing, rocket, and machine gun attacks on targets in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The station began an extensive training program in coordinated rescue operations in the summer of 1944. This opportunity allowed the Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and Forest Service to train together. A unique feature of the training program was the creation of an air-land rescue ski squad, which was trained by the Port Angeles chapter of the National Ski Patrol. However, the new Air-Search Rescue Unit did not hamper regular station duties. Plane activity during this time included administrative, assistance, and survey flights.

Later that year, the first PV-1 Ventura planes arrived at the base. PV-1 planes often led B-24 bomber formations because they were equipped with radar. One PV-1 squadron, VPB-199, was established at NAS Whidbey Island on 1 October 1944 as an operational training unit under the command of the Navy's Fleet Air Wing Six. According to an Army dispatch dated September 1944, VPB-199 was "...to provide fleet training under ComFair, West Coast in order that qualified replacement crews will be available to support the present policy of non-rotation for VPB squadrons." During its 13 months of operation, the squadron's mission was to train and supply pilots and crews for all operational squadrons in the Pacific. VPB-199 was demobilized in November 1945.

In 1933, the Coast Guard acquired specialized communications trucks, which served as emergency radio stations, primarily for flood relief. They received their first big test during 1943 floods in the Pacific Northwest. Not only did they serve as a communications hub in emergencies, they were also used as ambulances - assisting in local rescue work, transporting supplies, including field land telephone sets, and additional personnel to remote areas. Four to six men comprised each truck's crew. In the summer of 1944, communications trucks were transferred to the new Air-Sea Rescue Unit at CGAS Port Angeles. They carried test equipment, tools, spare parts, weather equipment, camping gear, maps, medical kits, office equipment, and a 10-day supply of rations. Truck #2307, acquired by the Coast Guard in the fall of 1943, was used as a communications base during the search for the Navy bomber in January 1945.

Early in 1942, there were joint Army, Navy, and Coast Guard meetings to discuss increasing demands on their communications systems, how best to increase capacity, and how to manage the larger system. The Navy had begun turning over communications functions, gear, and facilities to the Coast Guard in 1942 to free up Navy personnel for other assignments. For the duration of World War II, the Coast Guard was under the wing of the Navy, thus allowing the Navy to delegate certain responsibilities to the Coast Guard.

On 10 September 1944, an intensive training workshop was conducted for 26 men at CGAS Port Angeles for six days. This would eventually evolve into the station's Air-

Land Rescue Unit. The men spent two days hiking and testing their rescue equipment for practicability and utility. Actual map and compass exercises were carried out.

On 14 January 1945, six men stationed at NAS Whidbey Island boarded plane #33380 for a routine training flight. LT Harry Taber, 26, from North Twin Falls, ID, was the pilot. ENS Bruce Mayper, 24, from Douglaston, NY, was the co-pilot. AOM 2/c Daniel Smotherman, 20, of Chicago, IL; ENS Rine Kruger, Jr, 23, of Gallion, OH; ARM 3/c Arthur Utecht, 19, of Munsing, MI, and ARM 3/c Philip Bauer, 34, of West Hartford, CT comprised the remainder of the crew. As they flew over the snow-covered Mount Baker National Forest – now the North Cascade Mountains - near Seattle, the crew quickly realized the flight was anything but ordinary. Rain and heavy fog made it nearly impossible to navigate over the mountains, and they were running low on fuel. They realized they would have to turn back to base, but they had no idea where they were because of the fog. A quick check of the radio equipment revealed that it was dead. Parachutes were soon strapped on and they bailed out of the plane at 1:30 that afternoon in single file.

The North Cascade Mountains in January has only about three hours of sunlight and temperatures hover into single digits, sometimes less, at night. Kindy Creek, where the men were found, is an incredibly wild and rugged area that has no trails, making travel extremely difficult in the summer and virtually impassible in the winter. In the case of this particular rescue, there was rain and snow for two straight days and one camp was made in 18 inches of snow. Part of the search crew camped without shelter, other than sleeping bags, for four nights.



The North Cascade Mountains, January 1945

Back at NAS Whidbey Island, personnel grew increasingly worried when they failed to make contact with #33380. The first indication that something was wrong was received via the plane's IFF equipment. The plane was followed on a radar screen until it disappeared, presumably at the moment it crashed.

By joint Army-Navy agreement, the Army was responsible for all air-land rescue operations. However, due to the extreme ruggedness of the area, the Navy couldn't

perform the search and rescue operation on its own. It soon became a joint effort between the Navy, the Coast Guard, the Forest Service, the Army, and the National Ski Patrol. LT (jg) John W. Jay was the Air-Land Rescue Team's lead officer at CGAS Port Angeles. Thirty-seven Navy men from VPB-199 participated in the ground search, along with thirteen men from the Coast Guard and ten rangers from the Forest Service. Additional men from the Army and the National Ski Patrol also assisted with the search. With the Coast Guard group was a photographer and a War Diary writer. This rescue quickly turned into the inaugural incident for the Coast Guard's only Air-Land Rescue Unit.

Sunday, 14 January 1945:

A Navy PV plane on a routine training gunnery flight from NAS Whidbey Island – crashes into Mount Baker National Forest.

1330: The crew bails out of the plane by parachute in single file.

Monday, 15 January 1945:

No activity.

Tuesday, 16 January 1945:

1030: Forest Service personnel from Marblemount Ranger Station pick up two fliers – Kruger and Utecht - on Cascade Highway. This is the first time anyone has learned of the crash. The precise location of bailment is determined.

1400: The 13th Coast Guard District Office receives the first report of the crash when the Commander, Northwestern Sector, Western Sea Frontier, of the Navy asks the Coast Guard for the services of a search and rescue crew. The Army contacts the Emergency Rescue Officer at Paine Field for his instructions for the Coast Guard search party. The Emergency Rescue Officer has already begun the process of organizing a search party and asks the Coast Guard to join it that afternoon.

1628: CGAS Port Angeles sends eleven men to Paine Field. This is the Air-Land Rescue Crew, comprising of ten enlisted men and the Air-Land Rescue Officer for the State of Washington, LT (jg) John W. Jay.

1700: The eleven men arrive at Paine Field and assist the Army in preparing food and equipment.

- 1915: The search party departs Paine Field for Marblemount Ranger Station.
- 2200: The Navy crew arrives at Marblemount Ranger Station. The thirty-eight men, all enlisted personnel from the VPB-199 squadron at NAS Whidbey Island, include five officers, one doctor and two pharmacist's mates. They bring one bus, one 1 ½ ton truck, one ambulance, and down-filled sleeping bags for each man. The Communications Truck has gone as far as the road will allow it and sets up its equipment at the Cascade Road Guard Station, the main base camp. It proves invaluable to the search. Each truck has six men who are on a 24-hour watch at all times. They rig up an electric lighting system from the truck to the shack, as well as telephone service. They also serve as cooks. Despite experiencing extreme difficulty in reaching Marblemount Ranger Station at times due to its location and lack of radio coverage, fifty official radio dispatches are sent. Twenty-two messages are received from the Coast Guard District Office. These do not include messages from the planes. The Communications Truck carries seven frequencies – one with Army planes, one with NAS Whidbey Island, two with the Forest Service, and four with the Coast Guard – simultaneously.



The CG Communications Truck and its crew at work inside

Wednesday, 17 January 1945:

Today is the first full day of search. It has been raining for fourteen straight days and there is major flooding. It is still pouring when the search begins that morning.

- 1300: The search party arrives at Marblemount Ranger Station. It includes five men from the medical corps, two Air Corps administrative officers, and one doctor. Supplies brought by the Army include an ambulance with crash equipment, two jeeps, and two 1 ½ ton trucks.
- 1500: The District Ranger's party – comprising of the Forest Service and the Navy – leave the shack to establish an advanced camp halfway up Kindy Creek. On their way to the camp, they meet another crew that is returning and begin crossing their way on ice-covered, felled trees that forms a bridge on the river. Since it is already dark, this is no easy feat.

1700: The Army, Navy, and Coast Guard search crews, under the guidance of the Forest Service, leave Marblemount Ranger Station for an old aircraft warning shack, some fifteen miles away. Upon arrival, the men divide themselves into several search parties. The Forest Service and the Navy break up into eight search parties, each comprising one Forest Service man and three Navy men. The Army and the Coast Guard divide into three search parties.

Thursday, 18 January 1945:

Morning: The mouths of all the tributaries to the Cascade River is searched. The Coast Guard and the Army search the lower end of Kindy Creek, where it enters the Cascade River. They carry almost full packs on their backs and have walkie-talkies. The Coast Guard carries K and C rations, machetes, and compasses in a single pack.

During the early morning hours, two men – the Coast Guard War Diary correspondent and the Coast Guard photographer – become separated from the main search crews. They are on a narrow dirt road overlooking the Cascade River when they spot a man appear from the brush and undergrowth near Marble Creek. It is Bauer.



Philip Bauer, left, receives his first hot meal after being rescued

“I never was so glad to see the Coast Guard. Gee, I love you Coast Guards!” are the first words out of Bauer’s mouth. His parachute is wrapped around his neck and his pants are torn to ribbons. He is soaking wet from the pouring rain. Bauer is quickly taken to the aircraft warning shack, where a Navy doctor takes over.

1200: By this time, three men, including Bauer, have been found in an area four or five miles northeast of Snow King Mountain in the vicinity of Kindy Creek.

Afternoon: The Army officer in charge sends three Coast Guardsmen and one Army sergeant into Camp Pow-Wow (the advanced camp set up a few days before) to relieve Navy and Forest Service personnel there. Shortly after this crew left, word is received at the shack that Taber is found in Downey Creek. Taber was the last one to jump, so this confirms that all six men jumped out of the plane safely.

2200: All search parties return to the shack.

Friday, 19 January 1945:

???: The Coast Guard, Navy, and Army are given orders to rest for the day. The Army later packs up and heads home. The Coast Guard is in the best shape of all; only some sore muscles and blisters, whereas the others are completely exhausted. They do not have the proper foul-weather gear and wear galoshes. The Coast Guard wears waterproof, caulked boots.

The Navy decides to send all but eleven men back to NAS Whidbey Island.

Evening: The Navy, Coast Guard, and Forest Service meet in the office of the Ranger at Marblemount Ranger Station to make further plans for the search. Everyone in the room agrees there is clear disorganization on the part of the Army's Emergency Rescue Officer due to a complete lack of expertise.

The barometer rises sharply that evening, indicating fair weather the next day. This is the first opportunity of such weather since the search begins. Plans are made for one final search by the Forest Service and the Coast Guard.

Saturday, 20 January 1945:

0600: The Coast Guard search party is ready to depart from Marblemount Ranger Station when the telephone rings. It is the Coast Guard District Office with orders that the crew remain until there is no possible chance of finding the last two men. This boosts the morale of the men in the search party and plans are made for a more advanced base camp farther up toward the headwaters of Kindy Creek.

Two Coast Guardsmen, a Forest Service ranger, and a native trapper are sent into the mountains to mark a clearing where supplies are to be

dropped by parachute with a red cloth. They are also ordered to set up a new camp and wait for a new Coast Guard crew to arrive the next day. They carry a Forest Service radio capable of communicating with the Coast Guard communications truck.

Afternoon: An air search is conducted while crews are on standby at the aircraft warning shack. A Coast Guard communications truck has been stationed on the road near the shack since day one; the crew of that truck directs the air search from the ground through radio frequencies. The Army can only work one frequency, but the Coast Guard handles all of the planes on various frequencies without any trouble.

2200: Word is received at Marblemount Ranger Station that Smotherman and Mayer have been found. The entire search party packs up and leaves the shack for the upper base camp.

Sunday, 21 January 1945:

Afternoon: The Coast Guard District Coastal Lookout Officer and his assistant arrive at Marblemount Ranger Station to discuss plans for further search. The Coastal Lookout Officer asks that dogs stationed at Quillayute, Washington be sent in.

After the clearing is marked for the supply drop, the search party waits for the drop. As the drop occurs, a man suddenly appears out of the thicket and frantically tries to open a bundle. It is Smotherman.



Daniel Smotherman after being found by rescuers

Sometime in the afternoon, the body of Mayer is discovered by the Forest Service ranger and the trapper, who had probably gone ahead to clear the trail. Mayer landed on the topmost ridge at the upper end of Kindy Creek and evidently fell. The official cause of death was a combination of his injuries and exposure to the elements. From the

measurement of snowfall, it is determined that Mayper died Tuesday evening, 16 January. His body is transported back to NAS Whidbey.

Monday, 22 January 1945

0530: The District Ranger and other men arrive at the upper base camp.

0700: The search party leaves the camp carrying Smotherman on a stretcher. Smotherman's feet are frozen solid and he has broken ribs. He had spent six days descending from the rugged pinnacles of Snow King Mountain and had seen all of the planes in the past week. The Navy doctor warns the stretcher bearers not to move Smotherman at all – no jarring, bumping, or dropping – or it could result in the loss of his feet. The stretcher load is not light; the 20-year-old Smotherman is six feet tall and 180 pounds. Sixteen men carry the stretcher; every 100 yards, a relief crew takes over. They are mostly Coast Guard, supplemented by Navy personnel and one Army sergeant.



Carrying Smotherman down the trail

The trip down Kindy Creek is a treacherous one. For the first three or four miles, the trail is packed with snow and ice. From that point to the aircraft warning shack, the ground is frozen solid. Temperatures at night and in early morning hours never rise any more than 20 degrees.

1800: The search party arrives at the shack with Smotherman, who is immediately taken to NAS Whidbey Island. He is then transferred to a Seattle naval hospital, where he dies the next day.

Following the rescue of the six Navy aviators, the impact of the efficiency of air-land rescue was felt immediately among the Navy and the Coast Guard.

In LT Jay's words from the official report:

“...that a great deal more interest will be taken in air-land rescue as a result of the experience gained on this problem than has been taken before. This statement applies to particularly to the Army and Navy and to a lesser degree to the Coast Guard. An organization had been set up and the functions and responsibility of each service outlined and published, but the test of various services in action never came until they were suddenly called upon. It is only natural that the results were far from being perfect and left no doubt but a lot of work is yet to be done to have a smooth and efficient air-land rescue organization.”

And much work was done :

On 6 February 1945, LT Jay attended a meeting of the Port Angeles chapter of the National Ski Patrol. They requested permission to accompany Air-Land hiking crews from CGAS Port Angeles on their trips. An official from Olympic National Park attended this meeting and promised full cooperation. Five days later, on 11 February, ten men from CGAS Port Angeles hiked above the Olympic Hot Springs for general conditioning and training purposes. A member of the National Ski Patrol accompanied them.

In the meantime, Air-Land search agreements were solicited from the National Park Service, National Ski Patrol, Olympic National Forest, Civil Air Patrol, Washington State Patrol, and the State Forest Fire Service.

On 17 February 1945, nine members of Air-Land Rescue went skiing at Deer Park in Olympic National Park. Two members of the National Ski Patrol accompanied the group and assisted in teaching them how to ski. In the event of a plane crash in the Olympic Mountains or other snow-covered areas, the rescue crew would have to travel on skis. Thus ski lessons became an integral part of Air-Land Rescue training.

On 14 March 1945, an Air-Land Rescue crew, along with an Army lieutenant from Paine Field and a search dog, searched for a Japanese paper balloon seen floating the previous day. Army personnel did not have any results, but Air-Land Rescue located the balloon at 1430 that afternoon.

By April 1945, a regular training program in Air-Land Search and Rescue was established at CGAS Port Angeles. Classes, training films, field trips (both on foot and skis), testing/improving equipment, coordinating search and rescue activities between air and land crews, and practicing equipment/supply plane drops were incorporated.

A conference of all Navy Emergency Rescue Officers was held at the Naval Air Station, Sand Point, Seattle, on 9-11 April. The Navy recognized the Coast Guard's expertise at the conference by appointing Coast Guard officers as emergency rescue officers. These teams were basic operational units supported by personnel attached to various Coast Guard stations trained for that purpose. Coast Guard Air-Sea Rescue and Air-Land rescue officers were assigned to act as instructors at naval air stations at the request of the 13th Naval District. The preparations made, the appointment of emergency rescue officers,

and the conference were proof that the Navy intended to organize air-land rescue teams at the expense of the Coast Guard. The general instructions issued indicate that the Coast Guard would definitely be called out each time there was a distress case. With this in mind, it is regrettable to realize that Coast Guard personnel were probably displaced as organized teams. In other words, the Navy Air-Land Rescue Teams received the credit, but the Coast Guard did the work.

Today, CGAS Port Angeles assists with logging and other inland accidents. Its current duties include search and rescue, law enforcement, aids to navigation, marine environmental protection, and enforcement of laws and treaties. Resources include three Sikorsky HH-52 A helicopters and a 41' utility boat. If CGAS Port Angeles had not played a small but crucial role in Navy history, the station would likely have a different future. As such, it holds the distinction of being home to the Coast Guard's only Air-Land Rescue Unit.