



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

The Navy Experience of a Coast Guard Surfman

by

Gerrett Gregory, USCG (Ret.)

The following memoir is the last story written by retired Coast Guardsman Gerrett Gregory, who began his career with the Coast Guard as a surfman in 1938. He later wrote an account of his time at the station during the great Hurricane of 1938 that we have published on our website along with another article that explores his experiences during a SAR case while serving as a crewman of a Coast Guard seaplane after the war. Gerrett's writing is filled with his personal observations, thoughts, and feelings about the events he covers as well as the people he served and interacted with. His writings offer a unique historical record of what the Coast Guard was like during some important times for the Service as well as the nation.

In this article he relates his experiences while serving on board USS Alcyon before and during World War II. Prior to the United States' entrance into World War II, the Navy (and Marine Corps) recognized that they would need the capability to land troops on hostile shores. Consequently the Navy began building an amphibious fleet as well as training a cadre to man that fleet. To train a massive influx of incoming recruits, as well as to fill out crews of transports hastily put into government service, the Navy reached out to the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard had hundreds of Coast Guard small boat stations that dotted the nation's coasts and these were filled with expert small boat personnel. These experienced sailors knew how to handle lifeboats and surfboats in all surf conditions, making them an indispensable national resource at a time when the Navy had few within its ranks. We're pleased to present his article here.

Gerrett crossed the bar on 12 April 2013 and will be missed. Fair winds, Gerrett.

– Editor

Biography:

I was hired by the Coast Guard as a surfman to fill a vacancy at Ashtabula, Ohio, however, the guy I was replacing changed his mind about leaving his surfman's job. I was still hired and sent to Oswego, New York. I was initially assigned to take fingerprints for ID cards: all of those who came near the lake had to possess this card the Coast Guard issued--that was my daily task. After five p.m. I went on beach patrol as a lifeguard, as everyone came to the surf station to swim because of the security of the life guards. Remember in 1938 there were no other life guards or harbor police--the surf stations or later named lifeboat stations did all of those activities. That was the case at least, in harbors which were fortunate enough to have the so called "Surfboat Station." I was then sent to Galloo Island where a new station was being constructed. This is the station where Mr. Wilson [Warrant Boatswain (L) Alston J. Wilson, USCG] was the skipper, the guy I loved and faced the 1938 hurricane with.

I left Galloo and was assigned to the Navy and the Marines as an instructor. I was then further assigned to the USS *Alcyone* (AKA-7) where I served as Boat Division Commander--one hundred four people in the division. I instructed Marines as well as Navy personnel. My DD-214 shows combat before war started; twice after war started. I transferred from the Navy Department back to the Coast Guard. "Name my assignment," anywhere--OCS, flight school--whatever I wanted, name it. Name it I did, I wanted to go back to the security I knew before I was transferred to the Navy, I wanted to go back to Galloo, that secure place of my childhood where my roots were--it was secure. After a while, on Galloo, I was impatient to get back to more active duty. So I asked for Alaska. In Alaska I was assigned to the school for aids to navigation stations. There were five of us in the class. The major function of these aids to navigation facilities were their radio beacons, which could be heard around the world. It is understood that my classmates were all killed on their first year assignment.

After three years of remote, isolated duty, I was offered aviation school. Midway through my training there the fellow running the school was killed in an aircraft accident. I was assigned to run the school in his place. After about nine years in Air-Sea Rescue, I was assigned to Headquarters. I then retired from the Coast Guard.

I went to work for a large aerospace company and found myself assigned to production tasks. After being evaluated and taking many exams, I was assigned to engineering management. Still wanted to be a licensed professional engineer with an identification number in California. The licensing board was contacted requesting that I be able to take the written exam which was declined, because, as they stated, I had no formal engineering education. Again, their decision was challenged. Their response was the professional engineer's written examination--the written exam that would be taken after completing college. Just the opportunity that was needed; I was licensed as a Professional Engineer, Industrial Engineering # 3618 in California.

I retired from the aerospace company. I then started certifying aircraft for the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] and flying patrols for the Coast Guard Auxiliary, from the Mexican border to Santa Barbara, every weekend. I flew other assignments for the Auxiliary on weekdays. I then retired from the Auxiliary after seventeen years of service.

The following is a story by Surfman Gerrett Gregory, USCG, who was assigned to the Navy from the Treasury Department, U.S. Coast Guard, as an instructor in amphibious operations. He will relate his three years of wonderful experiences with our Navy as he remembers it--thank you dear reader.

Gerrett Gregory-

On a spring day in 1939 about six o'clock in the evening the Galloo Island Life Boat Station received a priority message to transfer Surfman Cushing and Gregory immediately to Ellis Island, New York. By 8:00 AM the next day we were at our new home [on] Ellis Island. There were about a hundred-ten of us. No one seemed to be in charge of the group so I assumed the role. The first day was nothing extra, we all were trying to find our way around including breakfast, bunks, a place to stow our gear and of course, the head.

Our assignment was to train the Navy and Marine Corps personnel how to operate the Higgins landing barges and assault boats in different situations [as Coast Guard surfmen they were familiar with handling of small boats through the surf, ideal experience for training Navy personnel on how to maneuver the "new" landing craft being produced by Higgins Industry]. The stay at Ellis Island was uneventful. My boat did not arrive. We toured the city a lot and just generally lay around waiting. Three or four times a week a Navy commander would lecture us about Hitler's activities.

We left Ellis Island [and ended] up at the Norfolk Navy Ship Yard bivouacked at the Marine Hotel on the top floor. Marine life was a little different than that which we were used to. We were still waiting for my assault boat which finally arrived. The next day we started evaluating the assault boat in different types of shoal waters and wind-created breakers and very soon it was found out they were not the best boats to be maneuvering through breaking seas. Breaking seas, in shoal waters, are created due to the fact the swell top (that tall, curly part that terrifies me) is moving faster than the bottom part which is slowed by the shoal interference to the water's flow.

The training with the new assault boat in the rough seas and the sandy beach was intensive. To get through a breaking surf line, patience is needed, waiting and waiting, which is difficult to do but you must or you may

lose your boat and your life quickly. Once you see that small sea coming wait until the last biggie has passed, then go wide open for the calm deep water that will be left for a few moments by the biggie. We got through, the assault boats check out without killing anyone or any one getting hurt. Now that you have been told how to get through large breaking seas on a sandy beach with a small boat, do not try it. For the novice it is a good way to get killed.

One night rather, early morning, around 2:00 AM, the OD woke me, saying get your crew together, your ship is in. My crewman was aroused getting his things together. I asked the OD where the ship was anchored, his reply "The only thing I know is her name and number, her name is the *Alcyone*, her number is AKA 7." My assault boat was loaded with our gear and put in the water. We headed off into the darkness, which way would we go? I saw an outline of a very large ship, so we headed for it, coming up to the quarter deck. (The "quarterdeck" generally is at the, on ship end, of the gangway. It is where the on/off foot traffic meets or leaves the ship. The correct military ship board etiquette--as understood--is first salute the ship's after-deck or the flag, salute the officer on watch, and then state your business for being on board the ship.) I shouted to the OD, asking him if he might have any information on the AKA 7, his reply "she may be anchored north of us, about four miles away. So we headed north. Chesapeake Bay is a large body of water in the daytime, at night and a very dark one, its size is infinite.

In about an hour we were at the quarter deck of AKA 7, happy day. The OD said, because of the hour we would need to leave our boat in the water until day light, he would find a place for us to put our heads down for a while. They still had their landing barges, 50 foot tank lighters, LCPs and LCVs, as they had just



returned from a cargo trip to Reykjavik, Iceland. All the boats and the CG personnel that manned the boats left in the next little while, except my Assault, number two boat and its crew of two Surfman Farrow and Murphy. There were four surfman on board. The bow hooks and the machine gunners for the two assault boats were Navy guys, from the ship's crew--six for each boat.

Yours truly, had never been on such a large ship. She was almost five hundred feet long. Prior to her take over by the Navy she belonged to the Moore McCormick Lines named SS *Mormacgull*. The entire ship's crew except the captain, the executive officer and the navigator, were from a naval reserve group in Worcester, Massachusetts. I had to feel my way around, we were assigned to the ships crew's quarters. We had our

own quarters later. I met the Captain, Daniel M. McGurl, the Executive Officer, Commander J.B. McVey and First Lieutenant Spalding. Everyone on the *Alcyone* went out of their way to help me find my way around that huge ship. When the ship was getting under way for faraway places usually my boat and crew were left in the water until the ship reached sea buoy. ("Sea buoy" is the last harbor buoy before reaching open ocean, so it is the first buoy you see when returning to the harbor, where my assault boat, once again, was put in the water.)

My first trip on the ship out of Brooklyn Navy yard was a trip to Havana, Cuba to take on a load of raw sugar which was packaged in two hundred pound heavy duty burlap bags. The stench was potent. At this time in history the country of Cuba was friendly diplomatically with the U.S. It was run by a dictator, named Batista, a retired US Marine sergeant who ran Cuba with an iron hand. The raw sugar was unloaded at a commercial pier. The stench lingered for a while.

After unloading, we returned to Brooklyn Navy ship yard for modifications, installing or modifying four, three-inch/fifties. A powder-bag five-inch/fifty-one, and installing four mounts of twin twenty millimeter anti-aircraft weapons. The radar and sonar came next. The work on the AKA-7 appeared to be done on a forty-hour-a-week basis, no extreme hurry. The eight hour work day, comment, about the *Alcyone* was used to show what was going on with the Coast Guard cutters compared to the Navy ships. The cutter, at the Naval Yard, was covered with Navy Yard employees. Welding was going on, twenty four/ seven. They were installing three-inch/fifties, depth charge roll tracks, K-guns (depth charge projection guns), sonar and radar. Then away, they would go to the shipping lanes of the North Atlantic, the most terrible shipping lanes in the world. Besides the foul very weather and cold temperature of the air and sea water, the waves were large and breaking. The Coast Guard cutters were small, the ice bergs were huge. The German submarines now were many and aggressive. I really did not understand why our Navy did not attack those subs when and where they found them but I since learned that there was a neutrality treaty that prevented our Navy from attacking the German subs unless the Navy ship had been fired upon [such as the USS *Reuben James* (DD-245) incident mentioned below].

Where the *Alcyone* was headed is lost to me now. I am unsure, where we were headed, makes no difference. While on watch on the bridge, out of the blackness a signal lantern started flashing saying "we are Coast Guard cutter so and so, you are being stalked by a hostile submarine. We will intervene." A few moments later depth charges could be heard exploding. Late one evening in the same area, I was on the bridge speaking with the executive officer and we came upon a life boat adrift, the exec was asked if he planned to stop, "no, it may be a decoy." That terrible place--the Atlantic Ocean. And then there was the *Reuben James* incident.

On the next trip to the Lesser Antilles and back to the U.S. our landing barges arrived, all seventeen of them. We have not loaded the Marine combat outfit of the 1st Marine Division yet. Our next trip to the Lesser

Antilles was to evacuate the American citizens. For this trip we took the inside passage which starts in the northern states and ended in the south land--a trip away from those terrible German subs. What a wonderful trip to the Lesser Antilles, those beautiful Islands, the first time you see them, they will take your breath away. We were evacuating the American citizens, which were torn out of their homes without notice. The trip back to the States was similar to the trip down, uneventful. Wherever you were, on the ship, you could hear the pings of the sonar and the swishing of the radar antenna as it rotated.

Most of the time no matter whether it was in the water or on the ship, I slept in my boat in my uniform. I rolled up my side arm belt, using it as a pillow. The Caribbean was so hot and the ship's sleeping quarters could not be cooled. What a beautiful deadly area. The water was so blue and so transparent. One night coming out of Port of Spain, Trinidad, there were three ships burning in our vicinity. Again, I was on watch on the bridge. The sonar long ping was giving us false confidence. The executive officer was on the bridge also. I noticed what I thought was a fish that was making a large phosphorus wake going the same way we were. So I called it to the attention of the executive officer. His response was simply: 'that is not a fish that is a torpedo.' At the same time the ping on the sonar went from the long ping to the short ping, ping echo. The torpedo missed the ship by thirty feet, maybe by twenty five. Thank goodness that we were on the "zig zag" navigational course or the torpedo would have struck the ship. Please remember my job on the ship was instructing in amphibious operations--nothing else, all the other things I did, I volunteered for the assignment.

On September 30, 1939 President Roosevelt declared "a national emergency." Things changed a little in our world, on the ship, but not much. The nation started preparing for war. After one of our trips our invasion barges arrived. Just about at the same time the Navy personnel arrived to crew the barges, all of them. I took over the boat division, what a wonderful bunch, all from the Midwest; they knew nothing about the ocean. They were very eager to run their boats and make their first beach landing. The boat crews were finally sorted out. Everyone was eager to get their boat in the water. On our first exercise, all the boats were light and bouncy entering the light windblown surf because they were empty. Hitting the breaker line was the end of their eagerness to be in the water. Those wonderful, Midwestern guys, were terrified of the breaker line. All I can say is this: running surf breakers is not my favorite past time.

After our first trip through those breaking seas, when the ship's loud speaker sounded "away all boats" there was pandemonium and chaos among my boat crews, not to get to their boats ready but to find hiding places. They hid everywhere, it seemed, under their bunks, in the twenty degree below zero refrigerators, under tables, in the magazine, in the ward room, [you] name it, they hid there also, those wonderful Midwestern guys, afraid of nothing except those terrible breakers near the beach where their landing spot had been chosen. Often I had two of my wonderful boat crew guys begging me not to make them "man their boats". My response: "I am very sorry, pull yourself together, and get ready to go as there is no one to take your place. If it will make you feel any better I will be right there in the surf with you every second until all boats are clear of the surf line."

Dear readers please do not think I condemn anyone for their fears or their actions, in any way. They were my friends every one of them and I was one of them. The executive officer asked me to muster the entire boat division, as the ship would be getting underway very soon. The watch officer was contacted to pass the word of the muster. After assembly, we had roll call, all were present or accounted for, except a wonderful young man named Beaucomb--a LCV coxswain. (The title of "coxswain" carries the same authority as a captain of a ship--when you are in his small boat, he is the boss no matter who you are).

So I started looking again, I looked every place except the deep tanks which would be filled with sea water before getting under way, to act as ballast in lieu of cargo, to give the ship stability. His next question was "you are sure you have looked in every place Gerrett?" My answer: "the only place I have not looked is the deep tanks." Now, we have to open the deep tanks, which had been secured, and were being filled in preparation to getting underway. "Call the OD and stop all preparations for getting underway." The filling of the deep tanks was stopped being about two thirds full. The members of the ship's crew were called to remove the massive lids. They started on the first tank they came to--it was about a half hour's task for two men.

The exec and I were standing by while the tank opening crew worked. Finally the last hold-down bolt was removed and the cover was lifted off with a portable hoist. The chief in charge said "you can take a look any time Commander." The exec was waiting near the tank's opening. He took his cap off and lowered his upper body into the deep tank, a flash light was in his hand, turning it on, he said very calmly "there he is, your hunt is over, Gerrett." My friend and crewman was transferred to a Navy hospital for recovery. He had major vision problems.

We went to anchorage. That afternoon, the boat division had several drills, putting all the boats in the water and retrieving them. The exercise went better than expected. This is about the time the Marine Corps combat outfit arrived. This is notable because the Marine captain in charge of the Marine outfit, Captain La Vaggie and I became friends. Executive Officer Comdr McVey called me to his office. He told me, there was a Navy Lieutenant Wilbor Lohr coming onboard, who would take over the boat division. And to work with him until he had the ability to take over.

About a week later, after my discussion with the executive officer about my relief's arrival, I was standing at the podium near the gangway, and looked down on the dock and low and behold there was my relief, Lieutenant Wilbur Lohr, U.S. Navy--straight from Kalamazoo, Michigan. He had a large suitcase under each arm and a larger one in each hand. He looked like he had put on his big brother's uniform, all I could think was "what in the world was Ichabod Crane's little brother doing in the U.S. Navy?" Everything was at least two sizes too large--officer's hat and all. My head was spinning--what in the world have they sent me. I rushed down on the dock to meet Wilber. I found out very quickly, this was one sharp guy, not at all related to

Ichabod. Navy Lieutenant Lohr, Marine Captain LaVaggie and Treasury Department Coast Guard Surfman Gregory became fast friends.

My nights were different. I laid down in my boat trying to sleep and sleep would not come. I turned and twisted. I was worrying about how I would present the surf line, near the beach to Wilbur. If I took him to a light surf line he would get a false impression the first time he had to encounter a biggie--he might become terrified. So I decided to take him to a medium surf line. Although it was not a medium surf where we got involved--they were big and they were nasty! After we beached our boat, Wilbur said "that breaker line growled at me." I am sure he has anti-freeze instead of blood in his veins. What a wonderful guy and friend. The praise I have for Wilbur is in no way meant to diminish the way I felt about Captain La Vaggie, USMC.

We made more trips to the Caribbean, the Lesser Antilles, the Windward Islands and Leeward Islands. We were just starting to enter Mona Pass when the [Japanese] bombed Pearl [Harbor]. The ship was slowed, the deck force painted the entire ship in camouflage colors while the ship was slowed, when we were through the pass the ship was sporting her camouflage paint scheme and we were back to full speed on a zig zag course. We arrived at New York, took on our cargo then headed for the South Pacific. Arriving, the ship touched at many destinations, dispensing cargo. As it is remembered, Wellington, New Zealand was our final destination. It was the poorest country I have ever seen. We offloaded our Marine outfit with my friend Captain La Vaggie. I heard he was killed at Guadalcanal. I surely hope not.

At Wellington the other assault boat crew Farrow and Murphy were transferred to the USS *Alchiba* another AKA attack cargo ship. She was torpedoed at Guadalcanal and beached. A few days later Frost--my engineman--left. I was the only Coast Guardsman left on the ship, still a surfman, for a year. Now my crew was all Navy. While tied up at Wellington, the executive officer, Commander McVey, told me the USS *Chicago* would be coming by and they needed to get a courier on her: "would I do that?" The *Courier* just happened to be a Navy captain who was one brave captain to tackle the Tasman Sea in a thirty-six foot assault boat, as well as that all Navy crew two bow hooks and two machine gunners, and an engineman. Although, we did not mount any weapons, they all went with me whatever my assignment. They were very brave and courageous guys.

Our carrier arrived, a Navy captain with his brief case attached to his wrist. He boarded our boat for a rendezvous with the *Chicago* which would meet us seaward of the sea buoy. After passing the submarine nets I was to loiter near the sea buoy--these were my instructions and was told the *Chicago* should be seen very soon. Sea buoy was not a nice place to find one's self in a small boat in the Tasman Sea--the seas were moderate to large with most of them breaking. The bilge pump was having a difficult time handling the water coming aboard. I looked at the courier he was a white as a sheet. He was doing what he had to do, he was hanging in there, a very brave man.

Then, I could see the *Chicago* coming very fast, probably flank speed or close to it. Near the time, I saw her she saw me because she started slowing. She realized my predicament, so she approached me from the stern, slowing only when she was very close because of the enemy subs in the area. However her bow wake persisted, reaching my boat and causing my boat to act like a surf board down the face of the *Chicago's* bow wave, a wild ride. Again I looked at the courier and he was still standing but was a shade or two more white, but still with us. The *Chicago*, the huge hulk was right beside us, a great big guy was dangling from the ship's safety rail, stretched as far as possible a very big hand grasped the Captain by the coat collar and our courier was gone--he was safely on the USS *Chicago*. Mission accomplished.

Now, we all wanted out of the Tasman Sea forever. Getting away from the *Chicago* was not easy--we almost rolled when the turn away was made. Now I would like to relate a story I heard about the *Chicago* when she was leaving Sydney to join the fleet. It's accuracy is questionable however this is how it was told to me. Start of story: Just before we arrived a [Japanese] one-man/ two-man submarine breached the submarine nets security and went far up in Sydney Harbor. The sub had one shot. One torpedo. As you looked from the sub's location, it appeared, if it fired a torpedo it could not miss hitting one of the huge ships, including the *Chicago*, which now was saying fond adieus to all. The [Japanese] sub lined up for a kill and fired her last torpedo. At this time the *Chicago* was busily getting ready to leave and the torpedo that was fired meanders down the harbor. It missed everything except out by the submarine nets was a floating hotel which the torpedo hit, putting everyone in the water. So the *Chicago* is delayed again. So they all say good bye one more time and she is delayed another day, so finally they are ready to go for sure. All the wives and sweet hearts have now rented a ferry which they park out by the net so they can wave "Bonne Farewell" which really sounded like a very nice idea. The captain of the *Chicago* was a gregarious fellow, he wants all of Sydney never to forget him or his ship, so he cranks up the heavy cruiser to flank speed, then makes a close "fly by" to the rented ferry, which does a "half snap roll", dumping all in the water! So the heavy cruiser does a high speed turn coming back to pluck all souls from the terrible "Tasman". As the story ends not a person was hurt seriously.

The *Alcyone* was not at Sydney during this fiasco-- I am repeating how it was told [to me]. The heavy cruiser and my assault boat crew had their encounter at a different place and time, near sea buoy at Wellington, N.Z. which was perfectly executed by the heavy cruiser the USS *Chicago*. End of Story.

While we were in Wellington vicinity Captain La Vaggie and his Marine combat outfit left the ship. That left Wilbur and I to look over the city. One night we decided to ask the most pretty girl we met to go to dinner with us. We looked for awhile finally finding her in a empty department store. We both started asking to go with us to dinner at the same time—although she probably thought "what do these two idiots really want?" She would like to go but she should stay with her parents as they just got word that her brother was dead, killed when an English carrier was sunk a few days before. There were no phone service for her and there were no parts to fix it. So the parents got word that we were coming when the extra guests for supper showed up at

the front door. These wonderful people had no food to eat. The girl and the mother did a lot of whispering and then they were gone. We found out later they were scouring the entire neighborhood to get food to feed us. There were soup bowls on the table, with a liquid in them that looked very much like dish water. After awhile the mother and daughter returned bringing with them some very old crackers another container of soup. The ladies talked happily about the sugar neighbors shared with them maybe an ounce or so. So we could have sugar for our coffee that evening. These poor people had nothing, no medical stuff what so ever. No fuel to heat their homes, no fuel for the few vehicles. The vehicles they had ran on the gas created by burning charcoal at the rear of the vehicle. No clothes, no gloves, no shoes, no raw materials needed to make things. England stripped them of everything, including the eligible men. What a famished country, you cannot believe. Many years later my wife and I visited the country again, there were still signs remaining of their struggle.



Back to the *Alcyone*, remember my only task is instructing the boat crews how to manage their landing craft in different situations. All other things that I did, like lookout, gun captain, postal censor, helping the navigator, or the OD helper, were all volunteer tasks. After my engine man Frost left the ship I was the only Coast Guardsman [aboard] for over a year. My quarters were a very small

compartment about two decks below the water line. One night I was dosing off when the side of the ship seemed to come in and I heard a depth charge explode. In one leap I was up the several steel ladders that lead to my compartment and I was on the weather deck, (The weather deck is the flat part of the ship that is exposed to the weather and large waves.) I believe there was a Navy destroyer that had dropped the depth charge as she had been in our area earlier when my boat crew were trying to recover her anchor chain and anchor.

This following event was related to me by Wilbur. He came to visit me in the morning because I was late getting up. He said I was comatose in my bunk with a very high fever and he immediately called the medics. The doctor said I was dying and immediately transferred me to the Charleston Naval Hospital and three days later I woke up. My stay in the hospital was brief and I returned to my ship. I questioned Wilbur "how did they get my body from my quarters to the ambulance?" His reply "I have no idea", for some reason, he lied to me, probably for my own well being. Years later I was getting a flight physical, the doctor was looking in my eyes he questioned me, "what the world gave you a fever that high."

I taught and we all trained together, those wonderful guys, terrified but doing what they had to do, for me, time after time. Their boat problems lingered long after the ship was behind me, Wilbur was not the first instructor they worked with—that was me. It is impossible to be a more dedicated, caring guy than Wilbur, you can bet your life on him--I did. It is difficult to relate my relationship to those wonderful brave people, constantly screaming at them in a breaker line: “Stop!” “Reverse!” “Full power!” “Watch those seas!” “Look out, here comes a biggie!” And we did not lose a single guy!

At this time (I do not remember where the ship was located, it may have been near Guadalcanal, or Savo Island), Wilbur had not taken over the division yet; it was under my direction, however this late afternoon Wilbur had a message for me. Leave the ship with the entire boat division and go to the nearest friendly forces and report for duty. We were underway for about two hours or more before we made our first stop. Then, somehow, the ship communicated with the group telling us to return.

The ship hung around the South Pacific for a while, lugging cargo from port to port then we headed for San Francisco. When we were approaching landfall the ship received a message, the Coast Guard District Commander, a Coast Guard admiral, would like to have an interview with me. As soon as we were doubled up I headed for the San Francisco Coast Guard District Office. (“Doubled up,” when referring to a ship is a nautical term meaning to replace the light handling lines with heavy lines that permanently moor the ship.)

The Admiral’s office was easily found, he was a very gracious person, putting me at ease immediately. The interview started at once, his first question: “How does the landing craft compare with the motor life boat?” I was confused, so I decided to side-step the question. He then wanted to know my duties; they were explained: I was an instructor and boat division commander. His response [was that] I should certainly be a full lieutenant; he would see that I would be promoted very soon.

I returned to the ship [and] Commander McVey wanted to know how the interview went, he was pleased, “When you get a copy of whatever the Admiral does get it to me I would like to add a few words.” Lieutenant Wilbur Lohr, USNR relieved me as boat division commander. I witnessed his smooth takeover of the division for a week or so, what a wonderful compassionate leader he was, my love for this dear guy was not unfounded. Orders came for my departure, I could not bring myself to tell Wilbur I was leaving. I had a few days; I had to endorse my travel orders about what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go. That would take a few days for my orders to make the circuit.

My three years on that wonderful ship were winding down, what a time of learning, what a wonderful ship’s company, what an experience. I had not told Wilbur that I was leaving--I decided to tell him just before departure. The day before leaving, Commander McVey called me to his office. When I entered his office he handed me my service jacket, saying “have you ever heard from the Coast Guard Admiral,” I shook my head.

“There is nothing the Navy can do for you, other than what I have written in your service jacket, you served perfectly for the three years you were with us. I noted that outstanding service by giving you perfect marks for those years. Thanks and good bye.” The next morning I would be leaving, morning came, I could think of nothing except Wilbur. He came out from the wardroom having had breakfast. I asked him if his breakfast was good, he said he had no appetite, because you are leaving today. My response “how in the [heck] did you know” [and he replied] “I have known all along just did not want to talk about it.” We hugged each other for a long time, he turned, climbing up the gangway, I climbed in my cab.

END OF STORY

A very little information about the author: I cry as I finish this story. Wonderful--everyone, from Surfman Cushing to watching Wilbur disappear up the gangway--it was such a wonderful, demanding part of my life. There are two combat stars and a bronze “A” that are worn on my campaign ribbons.

Gerrett Gregory, Coast Guard Veteran and Author, March, 2013.



Date of Original Publication: May, 2013
Edited by: S. T. Price (CG-09224)