

# THE DAY THE COAST GUARD HANGED A MAN

By Robert F. Barber

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It was done. For the first and only time in its long history, the Coast Guard had hanged a man. The date was August 17, 1929—the place of execution a gallows especially built inside a Coast Guard seaplane hangar at Base 6, Fort Lauderdale, FL. The prisoner, James Horace Alderman, with a long list of federal crimes on his records, had flaunted the law one time too many, had shot and killed three federal lawmen in a frenzy of hot blood on the seas between Miami and Bimini, two years earlier.

On August 7, 1927, a pleasant summer afternoon on the Gulf Stream, the 75-ft. Coast Guard patrol boat *CG-249* was en route from Fort Lauderdale to Bimini, Bahamas, with a passenger on board, Special Agent Robert K. Webster, of the Treasury Department. Webster was to investigate reports that counterfeit American currency was circulating in the British colony, presumably introduced by American rumrunners in payment for illicit cargoes of whiskey.

Skipper of the *CG-249* was Boatswain Sydney C. Sanderlin, his Engineer was Motor Machinist's Mate Victor A. Lamby. Five other enlisted men filled out the crew. At 1PM, a 40-ft. open cockpit motorboat was sighted ahead. Rumrunners often used small speedboats for dashes into U.S. ports, sometimes in daylight. As the motorboat reversed course and increased speed, Sanderlin fired a blank round from his one-pounder. Another burst of machine gun fire, not to hit the rummy, but to warn him, did the trick. The 40-footer hove to. *CG-249* came alongside. Alderman was in charge of the suspect vessel. His one crewmember, Robert E. Weech, appeared innocuous. There were no signs of any weapons on their vessel. Coast Guard crewman John Robinson jumped over onto the 40-footer and quickly located about 20 cases of liquor stacked in the engine room. He called: "It's a rummy!"

Sanderlin ordered both men to come aboard the *CG-249* and be searched. No weapons were found on them. Sanderlin then went into the pilothouse to radio Fort Lauderdale and ask for new orders. A loaded service .45 lay on the chart table beside him. Out on the deck, Alderman asked the crewmen if he could return to his boat and get a coat he had left behind. Receiving assent, he soon returned to the *CG-249* wearing a coat. Nobody knew that he now carried a pistol inside his coat. Just as Sanderlin was starting his call, Alderman stepped into the pilothouse, fired his pistol at Sanderlin's back, killing him instantly, and grabbed the .45. He whirled to face the others, a deadly weapon brandished in each hand.

Victor Lamby heard the shot and ran for the small armory where he could get another .45. Alderman fired, hitting Lamby squarely in the spine, severing his spinal cord. Lamby collapsed over the engine room hatch and fell into the room in desperate pain, unable to move his legs. Robinson grabbed a wrench and hurled it as hard as he could at Alderman, but missed. As Alderman turned to shoot him, Robinson dove overboard, escaping the bullet. Weech just stood by, gawking. Now in control, Alderman ordered the remaining five Coast Guardsmen and the Treasury Agent to board the rum boat, shouting he would kill them all and burn the *CG-249*. He ordered Weech to go into the engine room of the *CG-249* and break gasoline lines to get ready to burn the cutter. Boatswain's Mate Frank Tuten spoke up: "Wait a mine. You'd better get this boat away from the 249 before you light that gasoline, or the explosion may blow us all sky high."

Alderman said: "Shut up," but the idea sank in. The six captives were now huddled on the stern of the rum boat, with Alderman training his guns on them. Weech tried to start the rum boat's engine, but it coughed and backfired. Alderman turned to see what the trouble was.

It was now or never for the captives. Acting as one, they threw themselves at Alderman, with Agent Webster and Tuten in the lead. Alderman reacted in time to start shooting. The .45 barked first, catching Webster directly over the heart, killing him instantly. Tuten grabbed for Alderman's other arm and managed to hold that arm while Hollingsworth knocked the gun out of Alderman's hand. Firing wildly with the .45, Alderman hit tough little Jodie Hollingsworth, the bullet penetrating Jodie's left chest below the arm, continuing up through his throat and temple, and destroying his right eye. Jodie fell overboard. Luckily, the cool water revived him so that he could swim a little and save himself from drowning.

By this time, four men were on Alderman, beating him unmercifully. He fell to the deck unconscious. Tuten, Caudle and Robinson turned on Weech, who offered no resistance. Robinson threw him overboard and the wounded Jodie Hollingsworth tried to drown him by dragging him under. Robinson leaned over the side with a stout oar and swatted Weech's head. Weech went limp as a rag. He was hauled aboard the rum boat where he and Alderman were manacled, arms behind their backs.

A quiet August afternoon in the blue-green waters off Florida had exploded into a living Hell. Fear, hatred, viciousness and murder had burst upon the small Coast Guard crew with terrifying speed. Webster and Sanderlin were dead. Lamby died four days later. Hollingsworth was badly wounded.

The stage was set for a two-year drama. Would Alderman and Weech pay with their lives for their brutal rampage? Overriding all other factors were the questions in many Americans' minds as to whether the "Noble Experiment" of Prohibition was worth this bloodshed and waste of lives. After two years in jails in Miami and Jacksonville, Alderman and Weech were brought to trial in Federal Court. Weech was convicted only of violating Prohibition laws and given a year and a day. Alderman was convicted of murder and piracy and sentenced to be hanged at the Broward County Jail. Broward County officials were most reluctant to hang a murderer in its most tourism-conscious city, Fort Lauderdale. Ritter then ruled that the execution take place on the nearest Federal post—the Coast Guard Base Six in Fort Lauderdale!

Reluctantly, the Coast Guard built a gallows inside the seaplane hangar. On August 17, 1929, in the greatest of secrecy and at 5 AM, Alderman arrived at the hangar in the custody of U.S. Marshals and quickly paid the supreme penalty for murder and piracy.

*[The author is a retired USCG Captain who now lives in Melbourne, Florida]*

Courtesy of Jack's Joint via: <http://www.jacksjoint.com/hanging.htm>