



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

Lieutenant Herbert F. Collins, USCG (Ret.)



Herbert Collins was born in Manteo, North Carolina on 1 January 1921. He enlisted in the Coast Guard in 1939 at Elizabeth City, North Carolina and after boot camp was assigned to the cutter *Tallapoosa* as a Mess Attendant. He saw service out of Georgia and Fort Pierce, Florida before he joined one of the most historic stations in Coast Guard history: Station Pea Island, North Carolina.

He was transferred to Station Pea Island during World War II and served there throughout the war. He participated in the closing of the station in 1947 and actually turned the lock on the station's main door.

After closing Pea Island, he served in numerous capacities ashore and afloat, including tours aboard the CGC *Tamaroa* out of St. George, New York, CGC *Ironwood* out of Honolulu, Hawaii, the Coast Guard Yard in Baltimore, Maryland, District Five Headquarters in Portsmouth, Virginia, and Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, D.C. He transitioned to Boatswain's Mate while at Pea Island and rose steadily through the ranks during his distinguished career. He earned his appointment as a Warrant Officer in 1959, rising to W-4 in 1968. He was promoted to the

commissioned ranks as a Lieutenant in 1969 while stationed at Coast Guard Headquarters. He then saw duty in Long Beach, California and again in Portsmouth before retiring on 1 August 1973.

At the time of his retirement, the Collins family held the record for longest continuous service in the Coast Guard, dating back to 1880.

A 2006 article about an appearance LT Collins made at ISU Honolulu that year to commemorate Black History Month related:

Feb. 10 [2006], at the Integrated Support Unit, Sand Island, Honolulu, we celebrated the career of Lt. Herbert Collins, one of two surviving members of the all black Coast Guard Station, Pea Island.

"Collins' life story and career is what people write movies about; his character should be the standard for all who aspire greatness, but most importantly, his experiences must be honored and never forgotten," said Petty Officer 1st Class Geoicondar Morse, 14th district, co-organizer of the event.

Collins served aboard the Coast Guard Cutter Mendota in Norfolk, Va., as a mess attendant, where Alex Haley, the author of the book "Roots," was also stationed at the time. Six months later, he transferred back to Pea Island and remained there throughout World War II. Collins was a member of the crew that rescued a ship that had been hit by a torpedo between the Chicamacomico and Pea Island Coast Guard Stations. In 1947, Collins decommissioned the all-black personnel Pea Island Station. His famous family has the record for the longest continuous service in the Coast Guard, beginning in 1880 with his grandfather, Joseph H. Berry.

The Black History Month event at Sand Island highlighted a beautiful Hawaiian day, and was held for a packed crowd at the ISC gymnasium. "This year's theme: 'Celebrating Community: A Tribute to Black Fraternal, Social, and Civic Institutions,' was clearly demonstrated in the event. Station Pea Island was an all black fraternal institution that was committed to their work," said Petty Officer 1st Class A.J. Melendez, ISC Honolulu, co-organizer of the event.

Collins was escorted by Rear Adm. Stephen Rochon, Asst. Commandant for Personnel Management at Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Rochon was instrumental in the posthumous recognition of the all-black crew of the Pea Island Lifesaving Station, N. C., for their dramatic through-the-surf rescue of nine crewmembers and passengers of the Schooner E.S. Newman in 1896.

Collins told stories about spending much of his enlisted career

as a mess attendant.

“Collins survived an unfortunate era in the Coast Guard where the rules were different. The color of one’s skin alone determined the job a black man could get in the military,” said Morse. “As he told these stories you could feel a sigh amongst the crowd. Just thinking that a man with this much talent and love for the Coast Guard could be held to cleaning dishes and scraping pots like some kind of servant.”

“I found it very humbling when he talked about joining the Coast Guard as a mess attendant, since at that time, a mess attendant was all a black man could be. You don't hear about that sort of thing in this day and age,” said Petty Officer 2nd Class Erin Lucas, ISC Honolulu, co-organizer of the event.

During the event the facilitators debuted the Pea Island movie. The documentary was narrated by the famous voice of James Earl Jones. Many who saw the movie were moved to tears.

“How heroic and committed the members were to save lives. You hear the same heroism during times of war with soldiers in movies, rarely about the Coast Guard and our dedication. This movie really sank deep one of our core values ‘Devotion to duty,’” said Melendez.

At the end of the event everyone had the opportunity to meet and greet Collins and almost everyone took advantage. Just being in the presence of such Coast Guard history and charisma was very humbling. “His presence alone was significant and I got his autograph because he is famous. He reminded me that I am not just a number in the Coast Guard but I also represent a proud service,” said Melendez.

Collins still is making ground breaking achievements to this day. He has a current commercial multi-engine pilot’s license, and recently taught at the Naval Academy Flying Club in Annapolis, Md., as a certified flight instructor. He visits Coast Guard bases regularly. With each visit he leaves a deep impression in the hearts and minds of the people he reaches.

At the time of segregation in the military few have prospered as much as Collins. Despite all the social and economic disadvantages Collins shined, and his long established career is testimony for his accomplishments. He has shown courage, commitment and dedication when at times not reciprocated by the Coast Guard. By his actions he has proved that honor, respect and devotion to duty were his core values long before the Coast Guard adopted them.

“Collins is living proof that it's definitely not about the color of your skin, but the content of your character which defines you as a person,” said Lucas.

Collins currently resides with his lovely wife in Olney, Md., they have one adult son and two daughters.

