

The Life and Career of Lt. Thomas James Eugene Crotty: A Coast Guard Leader, Hero and Prisoner of War

By William H. Thiesen, Ph.D.

Atlantic Area Historian, United States Coast Guard

One may become a leader in a variety of ways. Some learn the skills over the course of a lifetime, while a rare few are born with the talent to lead others. Thomas James Eugene Crotty was a natural-born leader. Near the end of his brief life, he would call on his innate leadership skills time and again in a desperate struggle against impossible odds.



Born in 1912, “Jimmy” Crotty was the youngest in a family of five boys and a girl. He grew up in the old Fifth Ward of Buffalo, New York, and devoted his childhood to playing, managing and coaching team sports in South Buffalo. He competed for three years on the American Legion junior baseball team and in 1929, his senior year in high school, he managed and coached the team to win the Legion’s junior championship. One of Crotty’s childhood friends later wrote his mother Helen and reminisced about “those wonderful days when we were boys, athletes, and friends together.”

By 1930, Crotty had graduated from Buffalo’s South Park High School and gained entrance to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. As a cadet, Crotty excelled in athletics once again, participating in basketball for three years; competing in football for four years, and serving as the team’s captain his senior year. During his time at the Academy, Crotty also served as class vice president and, during his senior year, as class president and company commander. In the 1934 Academy yearbook, Tide Rips, the editorial staff wrote: “He will be missed by all of us when we come to the temporary parting of ways, but the future will be enlightened with thoughts that we will serve with him again. Bon Voyage and Good Luck.” For most of Crotty’s friends, graduation would be the last time they would see their classmate and friend.

After graduation, Crotty had a brief but promising Coast Guard career, which hardened him into a mature leader. For six years, he served on board cutters based out of New York, Seattle, Alaska and Sault Ste. Marie. His career included duty on the cutter TAMPA, during its famous rescue of passengers from the burning liner MORRO CASTLE, and a Justice Department appointment as special deputy on the Bering Sea Patrol. Throughout these years, Crotty continued to play on and coach Coast Guard sports teams.

In the late 1930s, diplomatic tensions increased in the Pacific between the U.S. and Imperial Japan and the American military began sending additional personnel and units to overseas outposts. These tensions and military moves set Crotty on a collision course with tragic events unfolding half way around the world in the Pacific. In April 1941, Crotty received orders to undertake studies at the navy’s Mine Warfare School in Yorktown, Virginia. With additional training at the navy’s Mine Recovery Unit in Washington, D.C., Crotty became the Coast Guard’s leading expert in mine operations, demolition and the use of explosives. In the summer of 1941, he received orders to sail for the Philippines and join a navy mine recovery unit near Manila. By early fall, Crotty had departed on a one-way trip to the South Pacific.

On October 28, Lt. Crotty arrived in the Philippines during one of the darkest periods in American military history. On December 7, 1941, without declaration of war or belligerence by the U.S. military, the Imperial Japanese Navy launched a surprise attack on American military installations at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Over the course of the next few days, the Japanese also attacked U.S. bases at Wake Island, Guam and the Philippines. A few of these bases, such as Wake and the Philippines, held on in heroic Alamo-like struggles against overwhelming enemy might. During those desperate days, news reports received from army, navy and marine units fighting for survival proved too heart-wrenching to release to the American public.

The next several months of Crotty's career proved some of the most eventful and arduous ever experienced by a Coast Guard officer. Upon his arrival in the Philippines, the navy had attached Crotty to In-Shore Patrol Headquarters at the American navy yard at Cavite, located near Manila. On December 10, Japanese aircraft bombed and damaged most of the facilities at the Cavite Navy Yard and advancing enemy ground forces necessitated the movement of American units behind fortified lines on the Bataan Peninsula and onto the island fortress of Corregidor. During this evacuation, Crotty supervised the demolition of strategic civilian and military facilities to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. This equipment and material included the navy yard's ammunition magazine and the fleet submarine USS SEA LION, which the enemy damaged during the air attack. Crotty had the sub stripped of useful parts, filled it with depth charges and blew it up on Christmas Day.

The navy withdrew Crotty and its other personnel from Cavite to the Sixteenth Naval District Headquarters at Fort Mills, on Corregidor. The navy reassigned Crotty to the local guard unit, but he also participated in night raids on the mainland to demolish more American equipment and facilities before the Japanese occupied the mainland around Manila. During February and March of 1942, Crotty served as executive officer of the navy minesweeper USS QUAIL, which shot down enemy aircraft and swept American mine fields so U.S. submarines could surface at night to deliver goods and remove critical personnel. During his time as executive officer, QUAIL served as command vessel and provided shore bombardment for an offensive against Japanese landings attempting to cut off supply lines to American forces trapped on the Bataan Peninsula. The combined sea and land operation wiped out the Japanese on the beachhead. However, by the end of March, Bataan's defenders had been under siege for over five months and on April 9, the exhausted American and Filipino forces on Bataan finally surrendered.

The island defenders of Corregidor held out for another month after the Bataan surrender. Crews on board navy vessels, such as QUAIL, had cannibalized deck guns and moved them onto the island to mount a final stand against the encircling enemy forces. Crotty served up to the bitter end fighting along side the island's stubborn army, navy and marine defenders. Eye witnesses reported last seeing him commanding a force of marines and army personnel manning seventy-five millimeter beach guns firing down on enemy forces landing on Corregidor's beaches. When Japanese bombardment finally silenced Crotty's guns, Corregidor's defenders knew the island fortress would soon fall.

With Corregidor's capitulation on May 6, Crotty became the first Coast Guard prisoner of war since the War of 1812, when the British captured Revenue Cutter Service cuttermen. Like

Corregidor's other prisoners, Crotty made the arduous journey along the route of the infamous Bataan "Death March" to the prison compound at Cabanatuan in the Philippine interior. Meanwhile, the captain and many crew members from Crotty's former ship, USS QUAIL, managed to escape the encircling Japanese forces using one of the minesweeper's motorized lifeboats. They embarked on a successful 2,200 mile odyssey through enemy waters to the safety of Australia. In October 1942, a year after Lt. Crotty arrived in Manila, Coast Guard Commandant Russell R. Waesche received a letter from navy intelligence officer Lieutenant Commander Denys W. Knoll. On May 3, Knoll had boarded possibly the last submarine to leave Corregidor before the island fortress fell into enemy hands. In the letter, Knoll recounted his recollections of Crotty's service in the Philippines and concluded the letter with the following paragraph:

Lieutenant Crotty impressed us all with his fine qualities of naval leadership which were combined with a very pleasant personality and a willingness to assist everyone to the limit of his ability. He continued to remain very cheerful and retained a high morale until my departure from Fort Mills the evening of May 3rd. Lieutenant Crotty is worthy of commendation for the energetic and industrious manner in which he performed all his tasks. He continued to be an outstanding example of an officer and a gentleman to all hands and was a source of encouragement to many who did not possess his high qualities of courage and perseverance that he displayed. Having seen Lieutenant Crotty undergo all the trials during my five months in the Manila Bay area, I feel sure that the rigors and trials of a prisoner of war will produce little if any change, and I look forward to the return of Lieutenant Crotty to active duty, for I am sure he will continue to perform his duties in keeping with all the traditions of the Naval and Coast Guard Services.

Crotty's fellow prisoners at Cabanatuan knew him for his love of sports as well as his sense of humor and optimism. One of them wagered a bet with Crotty on the outcome of the 1942 World Series while another later recounted that: "The one striking thing that I remember was his continued optimism and cheerfulness under the most adverse circumstances. He was outstanding in this respect at a time when such an attitude was so necessary for general welfare." But Crotty's courage and optimism could not sustain him late in the summer of 1942 when a diphtheria epidemic swept through the camp killing forty prisoners per day. Crotty contracted the illness and, with the prison's lack of necessary medications and proper health care, he passed away only days after getting sick.

Jimmy Crotty did not merely try to achieve the Coast Guard core values of honor, respect and devotion to duty; he lived them. He served his men, his country and the Coast Guard to the best of his abilities and he remained true to the core values even under the most cruel and inhumane conditions. The U.S. Coast Guard authorizes the use of thirty-four battle streamers representing heroic service action in battle since 1790. Records indicate that Lt. Crotty was the only active duty Coast Guard personnel that participated in the defense of the Philippines, an operation that merited the authorization of a Defense of the Philippines battle streamer for the Coast Guard. In January 1945, the army's Sixth Ranger Battalion liberated Cabanatuan Prison, an event that has been dramatized in books and movies. Liberation came too late for Crotty however, whose body lies buried beside thousands of other American and Filipino heroes who perished in the insufferable conditions at Cabanatuan. Crotty received little recognition for his heroic efforts

during those desperate days of early 1942 due in part to the destruction of records and historical information and the death of so many eye witnesses. To this day, no one knows the precise day he died or the exact location of his final resting place.