

## *Human Stories of the U.S. Coast Guard*

### **FRANK H. NEWCOMB**



In 1940, when asked by the U.S. Navy to identify a historic Coast Guard officer who could provide the namesake for a new warship, World War II Coast Guard commandant, Admiral Russell Waesche, singled out Captain Frank Hamilton Newcomb as by far the best candidate. The navy proceeded to name its newest Fletcher-class destroyer for Newcomb.

The plucky USS Newcomb (DD-586) fought hard in World War II and was finally forced out of combat by a succession of five kamikaze suicide attacks.

The hard-charging warship exemplified the personality of its namesake whose distinguished career is largely unknown today. Born in Boston, in 1846, Frank Newcomb began working in the merchant marine as a boy and served as a Civil War officer in the Union Navy at the ripe age of seventeen. He returned to the merchant service after the war and within a few years he received a lieutenant's commission in the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service. During the 1898 Spanish-American War, President William McKinley recommended him for a specially struck congressional gold medal for commanding the Revenue Service Cutter Hudson and rescuing a U.S. Navy gunboat from the withering fire of Spanish shore batteries at Cardenas Bay, Cuba. In 1910, he retired as a captain commandant, a flag rank by today's standards.

While Newcomb distinguished himself commanding a cutter in battle, he spent much of his career working as a field officer and inspector for the United States Life-Saving Service. Throughout his career, Newcomb championed the rights of those whose efforts merited recognition and promotion. For example, when he had received the medal for his wartime exploits, he insisted that Hudson's crew receive specially struck medals as well, and the cook and stewards mate became the first African Americans to receive such recognition.

Many in the Coast Guard as well as the general public have heard the story of the service's only African American Live-Saving Service crew, which manned North Carolina's Pea Island Life-Saving Station beginning in 1880. Few may realize that it was locally assigned U.S. Life-Saving Service inspector, Lieutenant Frank Newcomb, who worked diligently behind the scenes to institute an African American crew at that station. In fact, the local community opposed the establishment of an African American manned lifesaving station and arsonists burned down the original station. Newcomb had to camp out at the remote site of the burned out Pea Island station during construction of a new building to prevent sabotage a second time. While no one should diminish the accomplishments of the Pea Island Station's courageous African American crew, it was Newcomb who risked his career and reputation to institute Pea Island's African American crew in the racially-charged South following the Civil War.

Frank H. Newcomb died in 1934 and received full military honors at his funeral at Arlington National Cemetery. His courage and determination prevailed not only in the

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field of battle, but also in the struggle with entrenched cultural and political forces in his own country. Were he alive today, Newcomb might point to his role in instituting Pea Island's African American crew as the highlight of his distinguished career.

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