

Human Stories of the U.S. Coast Guard

SEYMOUR WITTEK

The story of the steamship *El Estero* fire is one that has been told in the pages of such periodicals as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Reader's Digest*. But as time passes, we have fewer and fewer eyewitnesses to the event that can recount what really happened that day in April 1943.

As part of the United States Coast Guard's Explosives Loading Detail, veteran Seymour Wittek responded to the fire and provided advice and criticism for *Sea History's* article. Wittek moved to New York City as a child and grew up in the Bronx, participating in boy Scouts, sports and debate clubs and he even served as a volunteer disc jockey at local community center dances. After high school, he began training to become an electrician.

But events in 1941 changed the course of Wittek's life. First, he met his future wife, Anne Cooperman, and became involved in her uncle's trade in the fur business. Wittek would prosper in this line of work for the rest of his career. World War II also had an influence on his life as he would serve in the Coast Guard and his fiancé and mother would both serve in defense-related industries.

In October 1942, Wittek enlisted in the service and began basic training at New York's Manhattan Beach Coast Guard training center. By 1943, he began serving with the Explosives Loading Detail stationed at Jersey City, New Jersey. On that fateful day, when the call came for volunteers to fight the *El Estero* fire, he answered it along with nearly sixty other Coast Guardsmen, despite the obvious danger. After the fire, Bayonne, New Jersey, threw a citywide celebration to honor the Coast Guard, its Explosive Loading Detail and local firefighting personnel. It was only at this point that Mr. Wittek disclosed to his family the specific nature of his service and the danger inherent in it.

Today, at the age of eighty-eight, Mr. Wittek can reflect on a satisfying life, including a fifty-year career in the fur business and, together with his late wife Anne, raising a close-knit four-generation American family. Today, he remains active with his synagogue, his family and as a volunteer with organizations, such as the National Maritime Historical Society.

Mr. Wittek also remains faithful to the memory of those "subway sailors" who helped save New York Harbor from near destruction due to the *El Estero* fire. On November 11, 2008, Coast Guard Vice Admiral Robert J. Papp awarded Mr. Wittek the Coast Guard Commendation Medal. Mr. Wittek admits his pride in receiving the recognition not just for himself, but also in the memory of those Explosives Loading Detail personnel who long ago answered the call to fight the *El Estero* fire with little regard for their own safety. After the war, Wittek and the rest of the Explosives Loading Detail personnel went their separate ways, but Seymour Wittek hopes that some day he may meet members of his old unit once again.

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