



RICHARD L. BURKE:

The Coast Guard's Most Famous Forgotten Aviator

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The pantheon of famous Coast Guard aviators includes such 20th century luminaries as Elmer Stone, world's first aviator to pilot an aircraft across the Atlantic Ocean; Frank Erickson, foremost aviator in the development of the helicopter; and Donald MacDiarmid, considered the Coast Guard's ". . . *recognized authority in open sea landings and ditchings in seaplanes, and procedures for maritime aviation search, rescue and survival.*" One individual missing from the list of aviation pioneers is Richard L. Burke, who is recognized in the Coast Guard Academy's "Hall of Heroes" and Coast Guard Historian's web site but forgotten in most other respects. In his day, Burke was recognized by U.S. military leaders, prominent politicians and Coast Guard officials, including MacDiarmid, as the Coast Guard's most skillful and experienced air-sea rescue pilot.

Born in 1903, the same year as the Wright Brothers' first flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Burke heralded from San Antonio, Texas. There, he attended St. Mary's Academy, where he was captain of the varsity football team and scored solid grades. But Burke did not sweat the small stuff and was known more for his leadership ability than his academic skills. In fact, he was a runner-up for his Texas district's Academy appointment and received it after the first nominee declined to attend New London.

In 1924, Burke entered the Academy, where he held the nicknames "Cowboy," "Tex," or just Dick. He was a popular cadet whose activities not only included several competitive sports, but also orchestra in which he played the violin. His Southern gentility and "romantic ideals from Texas" entertained his classmates who marveled at his "strong will and determination." They were also astounded by his penchant for taking a cold shower every morning at six o'clock!

In 1927, Burke graduated with a class of twenty-two cadets. Afterward, he received his commission and assignment to the cutter *Modoc*. For someone born and raised in one of the most arid parts of the United States, it must have been an eye-opening experience to serve on a cutter deployed to the International Ice Patrol in the extreme North Atlantic. The assignment was an important learning experience for Burke. He worked with *Modoc*'s executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Edward H. Smith, who received a Harvard Ph.D. and the nickname "Iceberg" for his world-renowned research on Arctic ice formation. Working with Smith reinforced the fact that Burke focused on the big picture rather than the details, a trait that alienated Smith, whose ice research required attention to detail and Burke's complete focus, despite the ensign's duty to carry out orders from *Modoc*'s captain and not just Smith.

After *Modoc*, Burke received assignments on board a number of East Coast cutters. These were primarily destroyers transferred from the navy for Prohibition enforcement and maritime interdiction, such as the *Cassin*, *Ammen* and *Downes*. On board the *Downes*, Burke served again under Iceberg Smith, the cutter's commanding officer, who wrote Burke a particularly negative fitness report. In it, Smith noted, "*Burke's greatest fault is an abhorrence for painstaking details and plodding drudgery. All that stuff bores him. He wishes to settle all 'small things,' that often try one's patience, with a flourish; and wishes to see events swing merrily along in jig time. It is*

a form of carelessness of youth, but if allowed to continue uncorrected will, in later years, spoil the man.” But Smith proved one of the few acquaintances who would find fault in Burke. During his later career, Burke proved popular with both officers and enlisted personnel and he became well known by members of other military branches and federal agencies.

In 1929, after two years in the officer ranks, Burke was advanced to lieutenant junior grade. For two years, Burke had requested assignment to flight training school to become an aviator and, in the spring of 1930, Headquarters granted his wish and sent him to the Norfolk Naval Air Station for “Flight Elimination Training.” It was during this experience that Burke met Ernest J. King, commanding officer of the naval air station, later World War II admiral and chief of naval operations. The trainees who passed the training were sent to the naval air station at Pensacola, Florida, to earn their wings. Despite his passion for flying, Burke failed to achieve passing marks, but he was determined to become an aviator, sending an impassioned nine-page letter to Headquarters and campaigning for additional instruction. He got his wish, received the extra training and passed the elimination test, allowing him to proceed to Pensacola for flight school.

1931 proved a watershed year for Burke. In that year, he married Winifred McGuire, his sweetheart from New London. In addition, he advanced to the rank of lieutenant and underwent aviator training at Pensacola. At flight school, he became familiar with aviation legend Carl Christian Von Paulsen, senior officer in the Coast Guard aviator training program. Later that year, Burke earned his wings and received orders to his first assignment, Coast Guard Base Number 7, located near Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Over the next few years, Burke established a reputation as one of the service’s great rescue pilots. Honing his skills in navigating through rain, fog and heavy cloud cover and landing amphibious aircraft in treacherous seas, Burke participated in several high-profile air-sea rescues. For example, in 1933, he rescued a seriously ill sailor from the fishing vessel *Shawmut*, off the Massachusetts coast. This operation required Burke to fly through foul weather and locate the trawler on the basis of radio direction. This daring rescue earned Burke his first Distinguished Flying Cross, only the third issued to a Coast Guard aviator. Later in 1933, he was transferred to the larger Air Station Cape May, near the southern tip of New Jersey.

1934 proved another eventful year for Burke for his noteworthy performance as an aviator was rewarded by greater responsibility at Cape May. After serving under the command of Elmer Stone, arguably the most famous aviator in service history, Burke was given overall command of the air station. At the same time he took command of the air base, the Treasury Department designated him official pilot for Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., requiring Burke to fly the secretary on official trips throughout North America over the next six years. During this period, Burke also assisted with flying the First Family to travel destinations when necessary.

By 1935, Burke had a third job as assistant coordinator for all Treasury Department maritime interdiction activities in the Mid-Atlantic region. In this role, he had to help oversee the interdiction activities of five federal agencies for the states of Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey. In addition, 1935 saw the birth of Burke’s son Richard McGuire Burke.

As commander of Cape May, Burke became known as much for his leadership skills as for his flying ability. He stubbornly refused to sit behind a desk and administer operations from the ground. Instead, he led from the front, getting to know all his men and participating in as many operations as possible. During his tenure at Cape May, Burke flew numerous highly publicized search, rescue and hospitalization cases, such as the SS *Lemuel Burrows* (1934), USS *Salt Lake City* (1934), SS *Cornelia* (1935), SS *Aurora* (1937) and SS *Montanan* (1938). These cases made his name a familiar one within the Treasury and Navy departments and with newly commissioned commandant Russell Waesche, whose office wrote several commendation letters congratulating Burke on his achievements. In 1938, at the award ceremony for Burke's first Distinguished Flying Cross, Treasury Secretary Morgenthau remarked, "*I may say that while you have been awarded this coveted decoration primarily for your service in an aerial flight to rescue a seaman from the Shawmut, the official records show that you have participated in five other outstanding aerial flights involving the savings of life of injured or seriously ill persons.*"

Burke was recognized for other events while serving at Cape May. He was skilled at piloting all types of fixed-wing aircraft, from the Treasury Secretary's Lockheed Electra passenger aircraft to a variety of Coast Guard amphibians. So it was no surprise in 1935, when he set speed and altitude records for the Hall PH-2 "flying boat," a workhorse of the Coast Guard aviation branch from the 1930s through World War II. In 1937, he was on hand during the Hindenburg disaster at Lakehurst, New Jersey, and directed efforts to rescue survivors of the fire. And, Burke's support of military training activities at Cape May earned him the personal thanks and recognition of National Guard authorities, World War II Marine Corps commandant Thomas Holcomb and Navy Secretary Claude Swanson. In his letter of thanks for Burke's services, Secretary Swanson concluded, "*On behalf of the Navy Department, I wish to express my appreciation for the excellent services rendered by the Coast Guard.*"

Two other events that occurred during Burke's command at Cape May included the loss of Coast Guard aviator Charles Thrun and the September 1939 flight of Secretary Morgenthau from Canada to the U.S. Fate did not smile on Burke in the case of Thrun. In January 1935, Chief Gunner's Mate Thrun served as one of Cape May's enlisted aviators and, during test flights of the newly introduced Grumman J2F Duck amphibian, Thrun crashed in the frigid waters just offshore. Burke sped out to the overturned aircraft in one of the base crashboats along with other personnel and tried to extricate Thrun from the overturned aircraft. After repeated exposure to icy water and bone-chilling air, Burke and his crew finally extricated Thrun's body, but not in time to resuscitate him. Thrun was the first Coast Guard aviator lost in the line of duty. Burke and his men contracted hypothermia from the rescue attempt and had to be hospitalized. For their heroic efforts, the men later received the Silver Lifesaving Medal, whose write-up stated that they "*. . . exposed themselves to great danger in their heroic attempt to save the life of Chief Gunner Thrun.*"

In the Morgenthau case, Headquarters learned with little advanced notice that the secretary required air transportation home from a remote area located near St. John's, Newfoundland. With the secretary's Lockheed Electra unable to cover the distance and several Coast Guard aircraft down for repairs, Burke's mission required the support of three different aviation assets. And, in Newfoundland, he received poor navigation assistance from Canadian and U.S. authorities nearly

causing an emergency landing. However, Burke still managed to deliver the Secretary of Treasury safely to the U.S.

In 1940, after six years as the commander of Cape May, assistant coordinator for Mid-Atlantic maritime interdiction activities, and official pilot for the Secretary of Treasury, Burke received a promotion to lieutenant commander and command of Air Station Elizabeth City in North Carolina. Newly constructed to support Mid-Atlantic Coast Guard aviation operations, “E-City” was more modern than Cape May. And, as the closest air station to the North Carolina coast, termed “Torpedo Junction” in World War II, this base would prove the most active Coast Guard air base during the conflict. After learning of Burke’s reassignment, Secretary Morgenthau wrote him, “*During these six years we have flown thousands of miles together over land and sea, and often your responsibility was very great. There have been occasions that required quick thinking and resolute, clear-headed action. Your skill and sound judgment at such times and in fact whenever you were piloting me have been a source of great satisfaction to me.*”

That summer, Burke arrived at his new command and learned of his collateral duty as Assistant Captain of the Port for Hampton Roads as well as the lower Chesapeake Bay and Coastal North Carolina. However, he quickly became involved not only in Coast Guard operations, but also in community activities. He joined the local Rotary chapter and served as a member of the Chamber of Commerce. So it came as a shock to the community late in 1941, when he received transfer orders to the air station at Biloxi, Mississippi. Burke proved so popular that the community pressured Congressman Herbert Bonner to intercede on his behalf. Bonner campaigned to keep Burke in command of Elizabeth City and discussed the issue with Commandant Russell Waesche. The Elizabeth City newspaper reported, “. . . [Bonner] *succeeded in cutting through official red tape to get the transfer rescinded, and is being given an accolade by friends here for his fine work.*” In response to community pressure, Bonner had convinced Headquarters to rescind Burke’s transfer, so the aviator remained in command of the air station until 1944.

In the meantime, the U.S. had officially entered the war and German U-boats focused their efforts on the commercial shipping lanes off the coast of North Carolina. Termed the “Happy Times,” or “American shooting season” by German submariners, the year 1942 became the most active period of the war for U.S. Navy and Coast Guard operations off of the East Coast. From January through late summer of that year, Burke and his crews worked closely with army and navy units to combat German U-boat depredations against American shipping. Sometimes braving anti-aircraft fire from U-boats, Burke’s coast Guard aircraft would spot the submarines from the air and drop markers in the water to direct attacks by U.S. Navy and Coast Guard assets. Meanwhile, Burke also hosted foreign and domestic military units at the air station, receiving commendations and the personal appreciation of senior leaders in the U.S. Army Air Corps, U.S. Navy and the French Naval Mission to the United States.

Even though his support of naval and military efforts received wide praise, his aviation exploits remained his most visible achievements. In January, Burke and his pilots played an important role in an attack on the U-boat that sank the tanker *Frances E. Powell*, and they assisted in the rescue of the *Powell*’s survivors. In May, Burke and his aircraft directed navy and Coast Guard surface units in another attack on a submerged U-boat. Burke also made a treacherous heavy weather rescue to save survivors of the Panamanian freighter *Chenango*. For the *Chenango*

rescue, Burke received a letter of commendation both from Coast Guard Commandant, Russell Waesche, and from his old navy friend, Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations. Later that year, Burke performed a heavy weather landing to evacuate an enlisted man suffering from acute appendicitis on board a destroyer off the North Carolina coast and delivered him to shore-based medical facilities in time to save his life. In a personal letter of thanks to Burke, the survivor's wife wrote " . . . *thank God, in our U.S. Navy, Coast Guard, Army or Marine Corps, even for the sake of just one man, there was no risk too great for you and your crew to take to save him.*"

A rescue performed by Burke on July 9, 1942, received the most attention of all. Two days earlier, a U.S. Army Air Corps Hudson bomber attacked the German submarine *U-701*. Some of the enemy crew survived the sinking and were spotted 110 miles due east of Corolla, North Carolina. By the time Burke arrived on the scene, only seven of the seventeen survivors remained alive, but they were weak, delirious and suffering from shock and lack of food and water. Burke made a water landing near the Germans, took them on board his amphibious aircraft and flew them to the Norfolk Naval Air Station for medical attention.

The *U-701* rescue and the others listed above were just a few of Burke's numerous anti-submarine patrol, rescue and hospitalization flights during his wartime service. And, in 1944, at the end of his North Carolina tour, he received a Gold Star in lieu of a second Distinguished Flying Cross as well as the Navy Commendation Ribbon in recognition of his service and leadership as commanding officer of Air Station Elizabeth City. The citation for the DFC, commended Burke for " . . . *constantly exercising keen judgment, expert airmanship skill and great initiative under extremely adverse conditions.*"

After the war, Burke received his promotion to captain and for the next ten years served in senior leadership and oversight positions for the service's aviation branch. These assignments included senior aviation officer on the staffs of the Coast Guard's "Eastern Area" and "Western Area" and as deputy commander of Western Area, now known as Pacific Area. During these assignments, he oversaw several high-profile cases. These included the response effort in the 1946 crash of a Sabena Airlines DC-4 at Gander, Newfoundland, which served as a test case for evacuating crash victims by helicopter; and the 1955 air-sea rescue of Pan American Airlines *Clipper United States*, which ditched in the ocean off the Oregon coast.

Burke served in the Coast Guard until 1958, but instead of retiring to a warmer climate like his San Antonio home, he chose to live in the New London area, near his wife's family. During his career, Burke took part in hundreds of aerial search, rescue and hospitalization cases and he received numerous honors, awards and recognitions for his heroic feats and daring aviation exploits. Burke also devised advanced methods for seaplane landings, a unique propeller for amphibious aircraft and a "mercy bomb," designed to drop emergency supplies to drifting shipwreck survivors. Throughout his career, Burke served as a role model not only as a skilled aviator, but also as an exemplary leader. In 1979, he passed away in Connecticut and was survived by his son, Richard. The final sentence in the citation for the Gold Star in lieu of his second DFC reflected his successful leadership as a Coast Guard aviator: "*His cool courage and unswerving devotion to duty at all times as pilot in charge of aircraft constituted an inspiring example to the forces under his command.*"