



## *U.S. Coast Guard History Program*

# "George Keyes, USCGR: Remembrances with the U.S. Coast Guard Picket Patrol [on board CGR-2543] 1942-1943"

By

John Keyes

---

This article is mostly directly from my father's notes made about his "Remembrances with the U.S. Coast Guard Picket Patrol 1942-1943" about his time aboard the CGR-2543, schooner *Mohawk*.

"Mr. Albert Sterns called me one evening in mid July 1942 and said "George, I am going to loan *Mohawk* to the U.S. Coast Guard for the duration of the war. I wonder if you would like to go with her?" I agreed to go, and then he informed me that I would have to round up a crew. I knew that yachts had been used by the Navy during WWI, but in the modern age of 1942 it was incredible that the military had any use for small sailing craft.

The impetus for the loan of *Mohawk* was based on a letter written by Admiral [Harold R.] Stark, Chief of Naval Operations on March 10, 1942, instructing all Naval district commanders to make every effort "to acquire vessels which may be useful for work against submarines, for use as rescue boats, or for use as listening posts in spots where needed... in this connection local knowledge of Coast Guard officers and officials of yacht clubs should be utilized to the limit".

In June of 1942 Congress passed a bill providing for the formation of the Coast Picket Patrol, to be administered by the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard in turn,

put the word out they were looking for civilian craft capable of going to sea in any weather, to be manned by the Coast Guard as an expansion of the Coast Guard Reserve. Most of the picket boats were sailboats since there would not be any propeller sounds for submarines to listen to while they were under sail.

The schooner *Mohawk* was built in the mid 1920s, was 60' on deck, 14' beam and 8'9" draft. She carried up to 11 sails, and did the race to Spain in 1928. Not your typical Coast Guard patrol vessel.

My father sailed on her between about 1933 to 1938 as a deck hand for her owner, making a number of cruises to Long Island, Block Island, and Nantucket. After rounding up a crew, they sailed *Mohawk* to New Bedford where *Mohawk* awaited final inspection for acceptance. Ironically, my first active duty assignment to a Coast Guard cutter was at the State Pier in New Bedford where my father reported 37 years before.

“New Bedford Coast Guard instructed us to proceed to Fairhaven Shipyard where *Mohawk* was hauled out and cooper sheathing applied to the waterline area to protect the hull from ice, and the number GGR-2543 painted on each side of the bow. While waiting for the yard work to be completed, we began to train a green crew to hand, reef, steer, pull a dory, learn how to sail, and develop the skills required of a seaman. Morse code for signaling with an Aldis lamp, or semaphore, as well as routine ship drills such as abandon ship, man overboard, fire, and general quarters had to be learned by all of us.”

“One volunteer we really needed was a cook. No one wanted the job so each seaman was gradually detailed to cook for one-week periods. The first man to complain about the cooking became the new cook. Morning chow was eggs and plenty of coffee, lunch – sandwiches and sometimes soup, and the evening meal of beans or whatever the cook could figure out with the food at hand. In rough weather it was peanut butter sandwiches for all hands. In the early days when the cook got seasick we often wondered what was in the stew, the pot was

certainly a handy receptacle.”

“Orders were issued by New Bedford Coast Guard to report to Nantucket Coast Guard. Up until then we did not have the slightest idea of where we would be based. We departed Fairhaven Mass about mid August 1942, sailed through Woods Hole, anchored off the Steamboat Wharf at Nantucket that afternoon and reported in at the Brant Point Coast Guard Station. There I received my general orders, which were to conduct anti-submarine, rescue, and observation patrols.”

“Nantucket Coast Guard was not prepared to handle vessels and crews that reported in August. Food almost became a major problem; the system was to purchase at the local grocery store, then charge the bill to the Coast Guard. Later I was informed by CG-Boston that I had overspent our ration allotment. I sent a note back stating that I had never been informed concerning the limit that I could spend each month and the food had all now been consumed. I never heard anything more of the issue. Those 18 year old boys could stow away large quantities of boiled potatoes and onions.”

“A ship to shore radio was installed, we were handed a .30-caliber Springfield rifle, an Army interceptor grid chart, and sent on patrol. We were frequently in “Irene”, SE of Nantucket; this is one we will not forget as we had to get around Nantucket Shoals to arrive at the patrol area. During the month of September 1942 the Coast Guard decided to provide us with more small arms. A deck mounted, air-cooled, .30-cal. Browning machine gun was installed just abaft the starboard shrouds; they also provided a 30-cal. Browning automatic rifle, .45-cal. Thompson submachine gun, and a .38-cal. pistol, which then became our total armament. Learning to fire, strip and clean these small arms became an interesting project as none of us ever had any instructions in the use of these weapons.”

*Mohawk* did not have any heat except for the coal-fired Shipmate Stove so the only warm spot was in the galley. When the weather really got cold we had frost

under the deck in the after cabin. We often turned in “all standing”, that is, with all our clothes on and just removing our sea boots. Finally, the Coast Guard sent us to Falmouth, Massachusetts to have a “dog house” built of the wheel to protect the helmsman, and they also installed a hot-water system with radiators which was heated by a small “bucket a day” furnace in the main cabin.”

“On [December 14], 1942 we were called in from patrol and instructed to report to the dispensary of our base, which was the in a hotel in Nantucket. We were given shots, took a test for color blindness, and told we were now in the Reserve.”

“January 1943 brought on some very cold weather. The complete Coastal Picket Fleet was frozen in the harbor at Nantucket along with the New Bedford steamer. The steamer finally broke out and we all followed. At one point the ice almost enclosed Nantucket Sound from Great Point, Nantucket, to Monomoy Point, Cape Cod. We attempted to go through a large pan of ice only to lose headway and have the ice close in behind us. We dropped the starboard anchor on the ice away from the hull. The anchor bounced when it hit the ice, hardly a dent!”

“In about February 1943 we were ordered to Newport, RI. As we neared Newport, anti-aircraft batteries were firing at targets towed by planes. That was fine except that shrapnel was falling all around us. We donned helmet to protect our heads. We passed through the mine field and submarine nets off Castle Hill, then on to the Newport Shipyard, where we hauled out to have the bottom painted.”

“We performed only one rescue while I was aboard. On one black night while off Cape Pogue we noticed lights ahead. We went to investigate and found a dragger with her deck lights on, illuminating the American flag hoisted upside down. She was disabled, so we put a hawser aboard and towed her into Edgertown. “

“On one trip, while returning to Pollock Rip, we noticed boats trolling ahead for pollock. We put out feather rigs and started to bring in fish. We were due in at Nantucket that day so we took the load of fish, some perhaps 3’ in length, and Joe Tracy, our cook, traded them in at the CG commissary for other supplies. That night we ate at the CG mess and were disgusted to find that we had to eat our own fish.”

“In November 1943 I was transferred to the Coast Guard Detachment at the Marine Base Camp LeJeune, NC, then to the U.S.S. *Cavalier*.”

Admiral Samuel E. Morison reported, “The Coastal Picket became an excellent training school in fundamental seamanship for the Coast Guard. Hundreds of Coastal Picket ‘graduates’ were detached for duty in regular cutters, transports and landing craft, to the great profit of the service. The undesigned byproduct of the patrol justified the effort and expense.” He also reported that the Coastal Pickets, “ceased to be on 1 October 1943”.

