

The Coast Guard Captain of the Port then and now

Coast Guard Captains of the Port are responsible for protecting our nation's ports, facilities, and waterways, all of which are vital to our security and prosperity. The title "Captain of the Port" commands great respect within the Coast Guard and across the maritime industry. The regulations in 33 CFR Part 6 ("Super 6") and elsewhere give Captains of the Port extraordinary authorities over vessels, facilities, cargo operations, and the people that work on vessels and the waterfront.

Captain of the Port authority can be tied to the Espionage Act, passed by Congress on June 15, 1917, shortly after our entry into WW I. Less than a year earlier a fire followed by a series of devastating explosions had destroyed the munitions facility on Black Tom's Island in New Jersey. Authorities correctly suspected German saboteurs. The Act authorized the President (delegated to the CG) the authority to control ports, the movements of vessels, establish anchorages and restricted areas, and supervise the handling and storage of explosive cargos. Commodore Bertholf appointed Captain Godfrey L. Carden in New York the first Coast Guard Captain of the Port, with other Coast Guard personnel assuming that same title in 9 other major port areas. Captain Carden's command became the single largest Coast Guard command in the war, including over 1,400 personnel, 4 Army Corps of Engineers tugs and 5 cutters.



Captain Godfrey Carden

Some COTP related authorities and activities ended with the Armistice, but others continued, and in the lead up to WWII, the Coast Guard resumed many of its previous port security functions. Coast Guard COTP responsibilities during the war included nearly all of the port safety and security functions that Coast Guard personnel perform today, including a requirement for Port Security identification cards (with fingerprints) for vessel crew and longshoremen. Fire safety and explosive handling were particularly important, with the Coast Guard overseeing the safe storage and transfer of untold tons of munitions. COTPs required and reported the movement of foreign and domestic ships in U.S. ports, required guards on vessels, and established security guidelines for facilities. Active duty men and SPARS, civilians, reserve, and Auxiliary personnel contributed to WW II port security operations

With the Cold War concerns of the 1950s came the Magnuson Act and an Executive Order by President Truman. The Port and Waterways Safety Act, the Port and Tanker Safety Act, OPA 90 and the Maritime Transportation Security Act brought additional responsibilities and authorities, defining our current maritime safety and security regime. Most recently, the Coast Guard corrected a long overdue oversight and changed the definition of a Captain of the Port in 33 CFR 6.01 to be gender neutral.

The Coast Guard can take pride in the fact that the American people have, over generations, entrusted us with these tremendous authorities. To continue to serve our country we must employ them with honor, respect, devotion to duty, and the discretion, judgment, and restraint that Alexander Hamilton gave us concerning our conduct towards our fellow Americans.