

U.S. Coast Guard Series

Sentinels and Saviors of the Seas

by Adam M. Grohman

Each month, an interesting aspect of the world's oldest continuous maritime service will be highlighted. The men and women of the United States Coast Guard follow in the fine tradition of the brave mariners who have served before them. As sentinels and saviors of the seas, the United States Coast Guard proudly continues its commitment to honor, respect and devotion to duty to maintain their vigil - *Semper Paratus*.

The bows of the U.S. Coast Guard cutters *Cedar* and *Clover* sliced through the icy water. As the helmsmen maintained their headings, lookouts on the bridge scanned the horizon. Subsequent waves of 50 to 100 feet had been reported. The cutters continued toward the Isle of Lost Ships hoping that they could offer assistance to the native population that had been effected by the seismic activity. Little word had been passed as to the fate of their coastguardsmen brethren - the lonely sentinels stationed at Scotch Cap Light - and no radio communications could be established. The lonely outpost station, through various incarnations, had withstood nature's wrath on the outskirts of the Aleutians for almost 43 years. As the cutters drew closer to where the station sat high above the rocky shoreline of Unimak Island, no one could believe what they saw...or did not see.

On June 18, 1903, situated on the bluff above the rocky coast of the southwest corner of Unimak Island on the eastside of Unimak Pass, the Scotch Cap Light became fully operational. The first lighthouse station on the outside coast of Alaska, it was hoped that its light would assist in lowering the staggering number of maritime disasters of vessels navigating into the Bering Sea from the Pacific Ocean through the pass, and as a larger concentrated effort by the U.S. Lighthouse Service to provide the necessary aids to navigation in Alaskan waters.¹ Built at a cost of \$76,571.00 by laborers hired by the Lighthouse Board, the original third-order-fixed light stood 45 feet above the bluff (90 feet above the water) on a wooden tower atop an octagonal-shaped wooden building. Despite its remote location, the men stationed at Scotch Cap Light knew the importance of maintaining their vigil as set by the high standards established by their service. At sea, mariners were depending on both the station's mighty blasts from her fog horn and the glowing

beam from the top of the station to guide them through the passage. Scotch Cap Light was a vital beacon to survival.²

Throughout the years, the men stationed at Scotch Cap Light rendered assistance to vessels in distress in addition to maintaining the aid to navigation equipment. The keepers of the light conducted various rescues over the years providing relief to the crews of the wrecks of the *Columbia* in 1909, the *Koshun Maru* in 1930 - which came ashore in the winter swell three hundred yards from the station - and the *Turksib*, a Russian freighter, in 1942. Throughout the years, the light shone through the darkness high atop the craggy bluff, as wave after wave crashed at the shoreline below. During the 1920s and 1930s, the station received several upgrades, but was ultimately replaced by a concrete-reinforced structure and separate radio-beacon building in 1940. The new light continued the proud tradition set forth by her 1903 sibling for the next six years. On April Fools' Day 1946 however, all of that would change in a devastating sequence of seismic activity.



The USCGC Anthony Petit used as a coastal buoy tender.

On April 1, 1946, Chief Boatswain's Mate Anthony Petit and four fellow coastguardsmen were aboard the Scotch Cap Light when approximately 90 miles away at the bottom of the seafloor, there was a violent seismic anomaly. It was in the early morning hours and the men were not specifically alarmed at the rumbling as they were well aware of the seismic activity in the region. The "undersea earthquake on the steep slopes of a bottomless fissure" off of Unimak Island rumbled and groaned. Spewing from the eruption was an unimaginable force of nature in the form of a giant wave. The mighty mass of icy saltwater raced toward the shoreline of Unimak Island. Another aftershock was felt by the men at the station. The wall of water continued on its course. Though situated over 100 feet above sea level, the Scotch Cap Light was in the direct path of the wall of water. Though still miles away, the towering tidal wave began pulling water from the shoreline of Unimak to feed its fluid fury. With rocks, reefs, and the shoreline completely exposed by the seismic suction, the disclosed bottom would be a temporary precursor of the wave's arrival. Less than an hour



Scotch Cap Lighthouse 1940.

after the initial reverberation had been felt at the station, the watery apparition suddenly reared its face. Racing toward the shoreline with speeds estimated at 140 miles per hour, the wave of destruction "roaring and hissing like a million monsters rearing up from the depths," slammed into the shoreline and lighthouse. The force of the wave ripped through the concrete structure as easily as if it had been made of tissue paper. Situated above the light, the manned radio beacon dwelling was also hit, but not with as much force. The coastguardsmen and the lighthouse were annihilated in a thunderous torrent of torture. Seconds later, nothing remained. The entire lighthouse and its crew had been pulled from its lofty perch into the bowels of the deep.³

The seismic activity that had obliterated Scotch Cap Light would affect various parts of the Pacific. Tidal activity sent waves across the Pacific. "Seismologist and specialists claimed that the pulse of the waves was felt as far into the southern hemisphere as Valparaiso, Chili, 8066 miles from the epicenter, a distance covered by the waves in about 18 hours. The death toll was in the hundreds, damage was in the millions, and nature once again reminded man of its might. As in the formation of the International Ice Patrol after the terrible loss of life when the *R.M.S. Titanic* struck an iceberg and sank beneath the waves of the icy North Atlantic, it would once again take a tragedy to instill change. As a result of the destruction caused by the tidal waves of April 1, 1946, the Seismic Sea-Wave Warning System was established in Ewa Beach near Honolulu, Hawaii in 1948.⁴

Scotch Cap Lighthouse, in operation since June of 1903, despite the terrible tragedy of April 1st, 1946 was soon replaced with a temporary building that provided a 300,000 candlepower light and a radio beacon. In 1950, the temporary light and radio beacon were replaced with a new station that utilized an 800,000 candlepower light, a fog signal, and a radio beacon. In 1971, the manned outpost at the southwest edge of Unimak Island was replaced with an automated beacon. The only reminder of the service's long tradition is a skeletal tower stretching into the heavens. The vigil, though unmanned, still remains an important navigational beacon for the mariners transiting the region's rocky shoreline.

Continued on page 13



After the destructive wave struck Scotch Cap.

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Continued from page 12

The coastguardsmen lost on April 1, 1946 exemplified the self-sacrificing and dangerous duty of those men who served as solitary sentinels at the service's beacons throughout the nation and its territories.⁵ The men lost at Scotch Cap Lighthouse will forever remain on an eternal watch...maintaining their vigil for the mariners who brave the treacherous waters of the Bering Sea and Pacific Ocean. Their sacrifice will act as a reminder of the longstanding tradition set forth by the forefathers of the service. It is a tradition of sacrifice that requires those who follow as coastguardsmen and women, to strive to maintain the highest standards of the service. The five coastguardsmen lost at Scotch Cap Light and the men and women who have followed as keepers of the light, exemplify the proud tradition of "Semper Paratus" in their solitary service as sentinels and saviors of the seas.

¹ "Between 1875 and 1917...500 ships had been wrecked in Alaskan waters, representing a value of more than \$20,000,000.00." In addition, over 100 had been seriously damaged and that in twenty of the major wrecks, "862 lives had been sacrificed." (Gibbs, 207)

² Cape Sarichef Light would join Scotch Cap Light on Unimak Island beginning operation on July 1st, 1904. Cape Sarichef Light provided guid-



The Scotch Cap Lighthouse 1950.

ance through the western passage of Unimak Pass. The two stations were separated by seventeen miles of some of the most treacherous landscape in the region. One keeper, as recollected in James A Gibbs' *Sentinels of the Northern Pacific*, decided to visit a friend at Scotch Cap Light. He set out on the trip and "after nine miles of difficult hiking he came to a swollen stream." Knowing he would have to traverse the swiftly running icy waters, stripped down, wrapped up his clothes and tossed

them to the other side. Unfortunately, his heave was not effective enough to land the dry bundle along the shoreline and they splashed into the stream. "Plunging in, he dived for his garments until the blood froze in his veins, but to no avail." He exited the stream and ran the remaining way to Scotch Cap Light where his blue naked body presented a strange sight to the men standing watch at the light. It would be twenty four hours before the naked visitor's normal body color returned and "even longer before he could talk without his teeth chattering." (Gibbs, 215-216)

³ Only one of the coastguardsmen was identified after the incident. The bodies of the remaining crewmen had been disfigured and dismembered not permitting any positive identification. All of the remains were buried near the station.

⁴ The Seismic Sea-Wave Warning System later changed its name to the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC).

⁵ In addition to Boatswain's Mate Chief Anthony Petit, the following coastguardsmen lost their lives: Leonard Pickering, Jack Colvin, Dewey Dykstra and Paul James Ness. In 1999, the U.S. Coast Guard launched the WLM 558 - *Anthony Petit*. The Cutter *Anthony Petit*, a 175 foot Keeper Class Coastal Buoy Tender, is stationed at Ketchikan, Alaska.

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