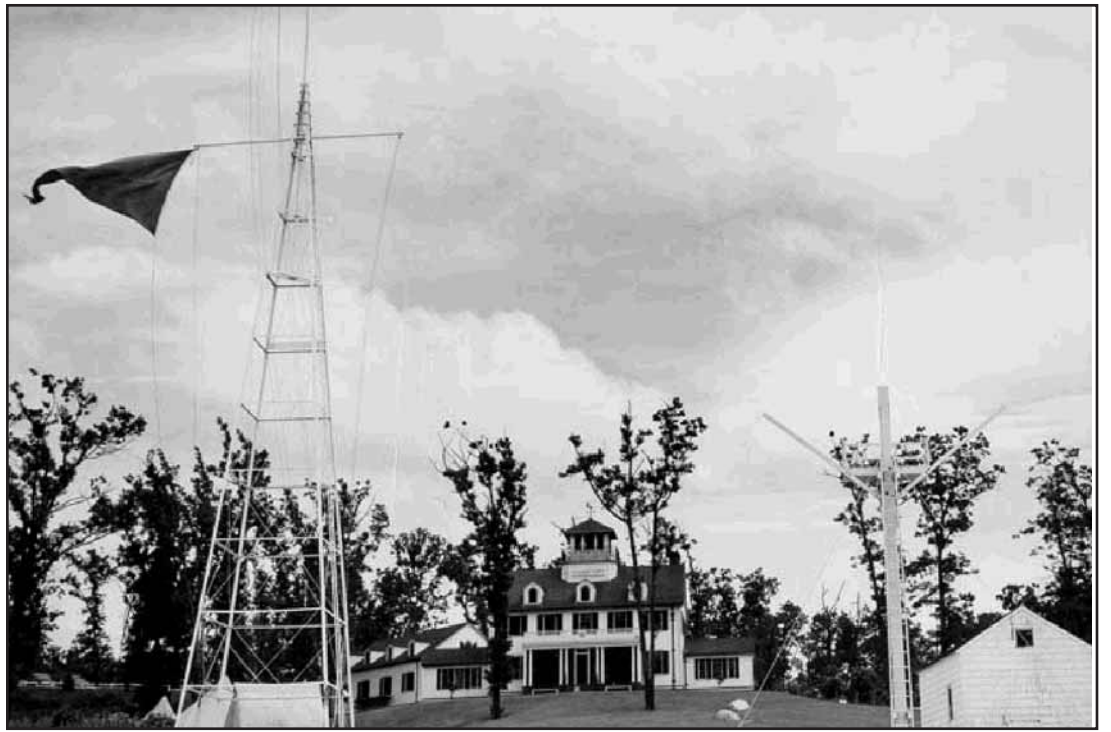


## Sentinels and Saviors of the Seas

by Adam M. Grohman

She had not seen him in more than three years. She stood before the mirror, the fifth time in as many minutes, to once again check her makeup, her hair, and her dress. Though she would be wearing a full-length coat due to the cold weather, she wanted to look her best for her returning husband. Three years, she thought. So much had changed and she couldn't believe that he was really coming home. She walked away from the mirror, satisfied with her appearance, and went into the small apartment's kitchen. On the table, she looked down at that morning's newspaper and focused in on the "Arrivals" listings. Yes, she thought, it was true. At eleven that morning, February 20, 1946, the *S.S. Cody Victory* would be arriving in New York Harbor from Bremerhaven.<sup>1</sup> Among the throng of almost one thousand troops aboard was her husband. He had left in early 1943 with his U.S. Army unit, and though letters arrived frequently, they had only been a substitute. Finally, after being separated by a war and the Atlantic Ocean, he would be home from Europe via Operation Magic Carpet.<sup>2</sup> She walked back to the mirror for one last time, again checked her makeup, her hair, and dress. Her butterflies of excitement mixed with anxiety, but she smiled, put on her winter coat, and turned for the door. Her husband, her beau, her hero, was almost in her arms again.

Thirty or so miles east of New York City, at the United States Coast Guard Station on Eatons Neck, the watch stander intently listened to the radio traffic. Though many hours had passed with only the monotonous drone of skippers chatting with other mariners filling the verbal void, the radio suddenly crackled with the sound of a distressed voice. The watch stander began conversing with the crewman and began writing down the particulars of the situation. The officer of the day, having overheard the distress call, peered at a nautical chart that hung within the radio room and picked up the phone. In the boathouse, Chief Boatswain's Mate Robert W. Joyce and two other crewmen, Machinist Mate Second Class Louis A. Fera and one of the newest crewmen to report to the station, Seaman Second Class Herbert C. Winter, were working on one of the station's small boats. The telephone rang and Chief Joyce took the call. As the chief listened to the OOD pass the information, he made a motion to the two men to start the boat. As Machinist Mate Fera had done countless times before, he went down the dock, jumped aboard the thirty-eight foot picket boat, entered into the pilothouse, and started the engine. As the engine fired over and began to rumble, Chief Joyce plugged his other ear with his finger. Seconds later he hung up the phone, raced down to the boat and jumped aboard. Issuing initial orders to



U.S.C.G. Station Eatons Neck – Circa 1941. U.S.C.G. Photograph.

Fera and Winter, the lines which kept the picket boat snugly moored to the dock were tossed off, and the *CG-38323* maneuvered away from the dock and into the deeper waters of the station's boat basin.<sup>3</sup>

Navigating out of the basin, Chief Joyce maintained an idle speed to allow the engine, a Murray and Tregurtha, Model K, 6 cylinders with 325 horsepower, to warm up. As they made their way into the open water of the Long Island Sound, Chief Joyce updated his two crewmen on the situation.

The crew aboard a two-masted fishing ves-

were also en-route to the location. However, as Chief Joyce navigated closer to Green Ledge Light near Norwalk, he noticed a problem with his engine. Machinist Mate Fera began to investigate the problem, but then something went terribly wrong. Aboard the nearing United States Coast Guard cutter, one of the crewmen saw a blinker light signal flashing from the aft deck of the *CG-38323*. The seaman reported the contact to the deck watch officer and all eyes maintained a sharp lookout on the flickering flashes. The thirty-eight-foot picket boat, in water too shallow for the cutter to enter, was reporting an engine casualty. Suddenly, the beckoning beacon was no more. The cutter's deck watch officer ordered that the location of the signals and information be passed immediately to the Connecticut State Police so that they could render assistance. Frustrated that he was unable to maneuver closer due to his cutter's draft, the deck watch officer ordered that the cutter remain in deeper water, he and his crew continuously scanning the horizon for any sight of the blinker light or the Coastguardsmen of *CG-38323*.

Soon after, a dory with several Connecticut State Troopers aboard neared the site of the diminished blinker light signal. The water was deadly calm and the troopers scanned it for any sign of the three Coastguardsmen or the picket boat. One of the troopers finally saw something protruding from the water. The men paddled the dory closer to investigate. It was the radio-aerial antenna of the picket boat. *CG-38323* had sunk to the bottom. There was no sight of the three-man crew. The



Thirty-Eight Foot U.S.C.G. Picket Boat.  
Coast Guard Photograph.

sel named *Abernacke* had radioed that they were foundering in the waters near Penfield Reef, approximately one mile off Fairfield Beach, Connecticut. The engine, satisfactorily achieving the proper temperature, began to roar louder as Chief Joyce engaged the throttle. The picket boat's bow sliced through the frigid February waters and the boat began racing at twenty or so knots across the Long Island Sound toward the site of the stranded fishing vessel. Other United States Coast Guard assets, including a larger cutter,

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realization of the situation apparent, the troopers quickly passed the disheartening information to the Coast Guard cutter that had maintained station in the deeper waters off Fairfield Beach. While other assets were diverted and rendered assistance to the foundering fishing vessel stranded off Penfield Reef, the Coast Guard began its search for three of their own.<sup>4</sup>

For the remainder of Thursday, February 20 and over the course of the following days, various assets of the United States Coast Guard, including two sixty-three-foot air/sea rescue patrol boats, one from Station Eatons Neck and one from New London, in addition to a motor lifeboat and a helicopter, searched Long Island Sound and its shorelines for any signs of the three missing Coastguardsmen.<sup>5</sup> Aboard one of the sixty-three air/sea rescue boats was Chief Joyce's brother, Allen Joyce, a fellow Coastguardsmen. The search continued in vain despite the deteriorating weather conditions on Long Island Sound. Robert W. Joyce, the oldest crewman aboard the CG-38323, had joined the United States Coast Guard in 1938 and after the completion of his first enlistment, took a position with the Brewster Aircraft Corporation. But the call to the sea compelled Joyce to return to the Coast Guard after only eight months of his civilian employment. Initially stationed at the Frontier Base in South Carolina, he requested to be transferred in October 1945 to Eatons Neck, after the death of his father. A resident of Huntington, Joyce was married and had two young daughters, Ann Marie, two and a half years old and Patricia Jane, who had been born four weeks before the events of February 20, 1946.

On Saturday, February 23, 1946, Joyce's lifeless body was found floating a mile off Crane's Neck Point, near Stony Brook and Setauket, by one of the search crews operating aboard a sixty-three foot air/sea rescue patrol boat.<sup>6</sup> Chief Joyce was wearing his lifejacket, but the breath of life had left his body. Hope diminished, but was not completely dashed by the discovery of Chief Joyce. The Coast Guard continued the search for the remaining two crewmen throughout the following day. With worsening weather conditions, air and sea units of the search were halted. The families of the other two crewmen remained hopeful, but realistic. Winters, age eighteen, had joined the United States Coast Guard the previous February. He had only been at the Eatons Neck station for six weeks when he went on the rescue call to assist the foundering *Abernackie*. His lifeless body was found on February 26 on West Meadow Beach, Smithtown Bay, by Town of Brookhaven Police



**Two U.S.C.G. 38' picket boats, in wartime paint, underway. Coast Guard Photograph.**

Department Constable George Melhman. The same day the frozen body of Machinist Mate Louis Fera was found a quarter-mile from his fellow crewman, caught in the ice. Fera, twenty-four, had been in the U.S. Coast Guard and at the Eatons Neck station for his entire enlistment. During his off-hours, Fera was a member of the station's band. Chief Joyce, positively identified the following day by family members, received a military burial by the United States Coast Guard and members of the American Legion. He was laid to rest at the National Cemetery at Pine Lawn. Machinist Mate Fera and Seaman Winters were, at the request of their families, sent to their homes of Oneida, New York and Belmont, Massachusetts, respectively, for final arrangements.

Though the Second World War in Europe had been declared over on May 8, 1945 and in the Pacific Theatre on August 15, 1945, the efforts of the United States Coast Guard, especially in home waters, continued well past the formal cessation of hostilities. The men of the United States Coast Guard, though they were no longer responding to the call to battle against the enemies of the Allied Forces, remained locked in their ever-constant challenge against the weather and the sea. The three Coastguardsmen – Chief Joyce, Machinist Mate Fera, and Seaman Winters – answered the call of distress and, unfortunately due to unknown reasons, met their fate in the frigid February waters of Long Island Sound. While thousands of other servicemen returned to their loved ones in the months after the end of the Second World War, the occupation forces spread throughout the world to maintain peace and the men of the United States Coast Guard along America's shorelines remained true to the origins and traditions of their service and exemplified, with disregard for their own lives if necessary, their commitment as sentinels and saviors of the seas.

<sup>1</sup> The *S.S. Cody Victory* was a four hundred and fifty-five foot long ship of the Victory class,

a larger, more robust version of the Liberty ship class of vessel.

The *Cody Victory* arrived on February 20, 1946 in New York with 997 troops from Bremerhaven, Germany. Hundreds of vessels inbound from ports of call throughout the world, packed tightly with veterans of the Second World War, arrived daily throughout the United States at ports such as New York, San Diego, Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. News of the vessel arrivals, including particulars of how many men of what units were aboard, was published daily.

<sup>2</sup> Operation Magic Carpet was the War Shipping Administration's effort to repatriate the millions of American service personnel during the Sec-

ond World War back to the United States. Utilizing a fleet of converted Liberty and Victory ships, in addition to a host of other vessels including troop transports and hospital ships, returning GIs were ferried to various ports of call throughout the United States. Return voyages were also utilized for the transporting of prisoners of war from both Germany and Italy. By the conclusion of the Second World War, the WSA, in addition to U.S. Army and U.S. Navy, was utilized in this important and vital mission.

<sup>3</sup> The 38-foot patrol or picket boats were commissioned between 1931 and 1943. The wooden hulled cabin-type picket boats were "tailored to meet the practical requirement of policing and patrolling harbors, shallow inlets, and protected bodies of water along the coast" and weighed 15,700 lbs., had a beam of ten feet, 4 inches, and a three foot draft. The bulk of the picket boats, all which had a 38 designator in their hull number, were decommissioned after the Second World War.

<sup>4</sup> The Salem, Massachusetts home-ported *Abernackie* was eventually refloated.

<sup>5</sup> The motor lifeboat and helicopter were added to the USCG search on Saturday, February 23, 1946.

<sup>6</sup> The 63-foot air/sea rescue patrol boats were stationed throughout the United States to provide for quick response time to stranded sailors and airmen. Powered by two Hall Scott Defender engines with 1,260 horsepower, capable of 33.5 knots (*CG 63005* was outfitted with two Packard engines capable of 2,300 horsepower), the wooden double planked v-hull bottom with square stern patrol boat was ideal for rescue operations. To assist in medically-related responses, each air-sea rescue vessel was outfitted with six hospital berths in addition to her crew spaces. Information on the 63-foot air-sea rescue patrol boat and 38-foot picket patrol boats from *U.S. Coast Guard Cutters & Craft of World War II* by Robert Scheina.