

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 & devotion to duty to maintain their vigil - *Semper Paratus*.



A 83' cutter in pre-war configuration. Courtesy U.S. Coast Guard.

The bow of the *U.S.S. Corry* sliced through the cold and choppy waters of the English Channel heading toward the coastline of France. Lt. Commander George Dewey Hoffman, after determining that the ship had reached her holding position or "channel," ordered the vessel to maintain station.¹ Throughout the destroyer, men manned their battle stations and anxiously awaited H-Hour.² It was 0140 and as Hoffman paced the bridge of the pitching vessel, his orders replayed over and over in his mind. Under the dim red light of the bridge, he scanned over the invasion charts, each pillbox and machine gun emplacement a separate target that required silencing, and continued to commit to near memory the sights that he would see in the coming hours.³ Before him in the shadowing distance were the heavily fortified bluffs of the French coastline. Laying heavily on his mind was the unequally uncertain future. The darkness of night would, in the coming hours, disappear and his vessel along with the rest of the armada would be visible to the shore batteries positioned along Hitler's Atlantic Wall. At 0505, shore batteries sent their first shots through the air and the *U.S.S. Corry* and her sister ships hunkered down for the fight. At 0535, on orders from Admiral Morton L. Deyo, commander of the Bombardment Group, the *U.S.S. Corry* and the rest of the destroyers trained their five inch guns on their targets. Gun crews unleashed countless barrages on the enemy held coastline.⁴ Moments later, a flight of support aircraft zoomed overhead. The allied aircraft had a very important task – lay a thick smoke screen between the vast armada and the German gunners. Unfortunately, the aircraft assigned to lay the smokescreen in the *U.S.S. Corry's* "channel" had been shot down by enemy flak. Unable to clearly identify other vessels, German shore batteries trained their guns on the unshielded outline of the destroyer. As shots rained down on the *U.S.S. Corry* from the undamaged shore batteries, Hoffman ordered the vessel to take evasive action. The destroyer began its dashing dance of death amidst the cascade of enemy shells.

With his guns firing at their assigned targets and as expended shell casings bounced along the decks, Hoffman attempted to navigate the destroyer through the heavily restrictive waters. Due to the logistics of the invasion, Hoffman had to maintain station and was limited in his ability to navigate freely to avoid the "salvo of shells" splashing around the destroyer. Suddenly, there was a massive explosion. The *U.S.S. Corry*, had struck an underwater mine, and the damage was catastrophic.⁵ The cold water of the English Channel began pouring into the fire rooms and the forward engine room. Hoffman ordered the destroyer seaward, but after only four minutes, the ship had lost all power. A second explosion sent a death blow through the ship. Broken nearly in two, Hoffman realized he had only

one option. At 0641, as the ship continued to settle beneath the waves, he ordered his crew to abandon ship.⁶ The destroyer's own smoke screen generator, hit by an enemy shell began to cough its smoky coverage around the stricken vessel.⁷ As Hoffman oversaw the operation and as the darkened and damaged destroyer settled into the murky waters of the English Channel, the Allied invasion of Fortress Europe continued in earnest.⁸

Thousands of vessels of all varieties had converged from multiple ports in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944 off of the Normandy coastline.⁹ Large naval warships to small Higgins landing craft dotted the English Channel as far as the eye could see. Amidst the orchestrated confusion was a small contingent of U.S. Coast Guard vessels that had been charged with a very specific and important mission – rescue. The men of the Coast Guard Rescue Flotilla One would prove through their daring actions that they were an integral component that quickly asserted their abilities and displayed their determination to continue to live up to their service's storied legacy.

The decision to provide a designated flotilla to provide rescue duty during Operation Neptune had been made during the final planning stages. With only weeks to prepare, Lieutenant Commander Perry H. Simpson, U.S.C.G.R., amassed sixty 83' foot anti-submarine cutters from various continental United States stations. Ferried across the Atlantic Ocean aboard larger transport vessels with only skeleton crews, the cutters were then delivered to Poole, England. The skeleton crews, now joined by the rest of the ship's complement, began the arduous tasking of preparing the crafts for their vital role in the pending invasion. The cutters, which had been designed and previously utilized for anti-submarine duties, were stripped of all unnecessary gear and retrofitted for their new primary mission. Anti-submarine armament was removed, scramble nets were placed fore and aft along the hull, heavy iron davits were added, and a host of rescue gear was stored aboard including rafts, blankets, stretchers, and first aid kits. To ensure the mechanical ability of the cutters, a team of motor machinists "tuned the engines to top efficiency and checked the hulls." To ease communications during the invasion, the cutters received new hull identification numbers.¹⁰

Squaring away the 83' cutters was only half of the pre-invasion preparation process. The crews of the cutters, consisting of one officer and thirteen enlisted men (approximately) underwent rigorous training in the specific requirements of the invasion and in first aid. Under the tutelage of two U.S. Public Health Service officers, the crews of the flotilla attended classes held "morning, noon, and night" to ensure that every

man "would thoroughly know all phases of first aid." On June 5th, 1944, the officers and enlisted men of the Coast Guard Rescue Flotilla One received word to cast off lines and head to their rally points. The flotilla was organized into two groups – thirty assigned to British invasion points Sword, Juno, Gold and thirty to the American invasion points of Omaha and Utah. The sixty-cutter-strong rescue flotilla, after rendezvousing with their assigned groups, navigated across the rough English Channel toward Normandy.

As the shroud of night was replaced by the light of morning, the men of Coast Guard Rescue Flotilla

One quickly sprang into action. Only minutes after H-Hour, *CG-1*, under the command of Ensign Bernard B. Wood, sped within 2,000 yards of the beach to pull soldiers and sailors from the heavily shelled and machine gun swept waters. Wood and his crew quickly plucked forty-seven men from the cold waters and saved them from almost certain death either from drowning or enemy fire. The efforts of *CG-1* was quickly mirrored by the fifty-nine other cutters. As the assault waves continued toward shore, the men of Coast Guard Rescue Flotilla One continued their missions of mercy amidst the carnage of the invasion.

The crew of *CG-2*, under the command of Ensign O.T. Meekings, spotted several swamped DUKWS with soldiers in desperate need of assistance. "Although the surf was running, and there was great danger of the rescue craft hitting underwater obstacles," *CG-2* was able to pull several unconscious soldiers from the crimson waters. *CG-3*, with Lt. (jg) William J. Starrett at the helm, maneuvered into the shallows to rescue a crew of tankers whose armored leviathan had sunk like a stone. After successfully saving the men, Starrett effectively took several disabled landing craft in tow and then navigated them into shallow water so that their cargo of men and material could land on the beachhead. Lt. (jg) James F. Smith took on a similar duty taking several disabled landing craft loaded down with field pieces in tow toward the shore. After landing the craft and permitting her cargo to be placed ashore, *CG-4* returned to her rescue duties pulling twenty-four men over the course of the first few hours of the invasion.

Lt. (jg) R.V. McPhail, in command of *CG-16*, maneuvered his cutter amidst the confusion along the beachhead to rescue men who had been thrown into the water after their ack-ack craft had been struck by enemy fire. "As the last survivor was picked up, a nearby PC was struck by a shell or mine and disintegrated completely. Men and debris were scattered over a wide area. The living survivors were picked up, and all 90" were transferred from the cutter for additional medical attention. Quickly returning to the beachhead area, McPhail spotted an LCT taking heavy fire from several German machine gun emplacements. As he pulled alongside to offer assistance and rescue the crew, McPhail was informed that not only was the craft carrying a cargo of ammunition, but that it is was on fire. McPhail's crew pulled the survivors from the LCT and as he was heading away from the burning craft, he was informed that one of the crew was trapped aboard in one of the LCT's gun tubs. McPhail, not wanting to leave the man stranded, returned alongside. Volunteers

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