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TRAINING MERCHANT MARINERS FOR WAR: The Role of the United States Coast Guard

By Rear Admiral Patrick M. Stillman, Assistant Commandant for Governmental and Public Affairs

Safety at Sea has always been one of the major concerns of the U. S. Coast Guard. In 1939, just a few years before World War II, the Service assumed a greater role when the U.S. Lighthouse Service was transferred to the Coast Guard. This gave the agency the tremendous responsibility for the safe navigation of all vessels in American waters. When the United States entered World War II, national exigencies created the need for other merchant marine functions to be more closely associated. Therefore, during the early months of the war, the Coast Guard was temporarily tasked to assume an even greater role in the safety of mariners at sea. February 1942 saw two important maritime agencies transferred to the Coast Guard by President Roosevelt under Executive Order 9083. The U.S. Maritime Service, a non-military merchant-marine reserve, and the marine-safety aspects of the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation (BuMIN) were transferred to the Coast Guard on February 28, 1942. The Maritime Service was later transferred to another agency but marine inspection and licensing continue to be important parts of the Coast Guard mission today.



U.S. Maritime Service

The merchant marine in the United States was in a state of decline in the mid-1930s. At that time few ships were being built, existing ships were old and inefficient, maritime unions were at war with one another, ship owners were at odds with the unions, and the crews' efficiency and morale were at an ebb. Congress took action to fix the problems in 1936. The Merchant Marine Act, approved on June 29, 1936, created the U.S. Maritime Commission "to further the development and maintenance of an adequate and well balanced American merchant marine, to promote the commerce of the United States, and to aid in the national defense."

The commission realized that a trained merchant-marine work force was vital to the national interest. At the request of Congress, the chairman of the Maritime Commission, VADM Emory S. Land worked with ADM Russell R. Waesche, Commandant of the Coast Guard, to formulate a training program for merchant-marine personnel. Called the U.S. Maritime Service, the new training program was inaugurated in 1938. It used a combination of civilian Maritime Commission and uniformed Coast Guard instructors to advance the professional training of merchant mariners.

As with the other military services, the entry of the United States into the Second World War necessitated the immediate growth of the merchant marine and the Coast Guard. The Maritime Commission spawned the War Shipping

Administration in early February 1942. This new agency received a number of functions considered vital to the war effort, including maritime training. Several weeks after the creation of the new agency, however, the Maritime Service was transferred again to the Coast Guard. The transfer allowed the War Shipping Administration to concentrate on organizing American merchant shipping, building new ships, and carrying cargoes where they were needed most. The need for administering the merchant marine during wartime was demonstrated during the First World War. Commerce warfare, carried on by submarines and merchant raiders, had a disastrous effect on the Allied merchant fleet. With the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917, U-boats sank ships faster than replacements could be built. The United States intended to meet this crisis with large numbers of mass-produced freighters and transports. When World War II loomed, the Maritime Commission began a crash shipbuilding program utilizing every available resource. The experienced shipyards built complicated vessels, such as warships. New shipyards, which opened almost overnight around the country, generally built less sophisticated ships such as the emergency construction "Liberty" ships. By 1945 the shipyards had completed more than 2,700 "Liberty" ships and hundreds of "Victory" ships, tankers and transports.

Coast Guard Trains Merchant Mariners

All of these new ships needed trained officers and crews to operate them. The Coast Guard provided much of the advanced training for merchant marine personnel to augment the training of state merchant marine academies. The Maritime Commission requested that the Coast Guard provide training in 1938 when the Maritime Service was created. Merchant sailors from around the country trained at two large training stations. On the East Coast the men trained at Fort Trumbull in New London, Connecticut, and Government Island in Alameda, California served the West Coast. In 1940 Hoffman Island in New York Harbor became the third training station for the service. After the start of the war other training stations were added in Boston, Port Hueneme, California, and St. Petersburg, Florida.

Training ships manned by the Coast Guard included the Maritime Commission steamships American Seaman, American Mariner, and American Sailor. One of these ships, the 7,000-gross-ton American Seaman, carried 250 trainees in addition to the regular crew of 18 officers and 100 enlisted men. Four complete machine shops, various lifeboats and up-to-date navigational equipment comprised the special educational equipment. In addition the Coast Guard manned the full-rigged sail training ships Tusitala and Joseph Conrad, as well as the auxiliary schooner Vema. The 261-foot Tusitala was built in Greenock, Scotland in 1883 and operated in merchant service before becoming a receiving ship in St. Petersburg in 1940. The 165-foot Joseph Conrad sailed from Jacksonville, Florida to train apprentice seamen. The training ships were important commands. These steamships were the largest ships manned by the service prior to the Coast Guard joining the Navy in World War II. CDR Alfred C. Richmond, who commanded the American Sailor, the first Maritime Service training ship, later became Commandant of the Coast Guard.

Licensed and unlicensed merchant marine personnel enrolled in the service. The ranks, grades, and ratings for the Maritime Service were based on those of the Coast Guard. Training for experienced personnel lasted three months; while inexperienced personnel trained for six months. Pay was based on the person's highest certified position in merchant service. New students received cadet wages. American citizens at least 19 years old, with one year of service on American merchant vessels of more than 500 gross tons, were eligible for enrollment. Coast Guard training of merchant mariners was vital to winning the war. Thousands of the sailors who manned the new American merchant fleet trained under the watchful eyes of the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard only continued the administration of the Maritime Service for ten months after the United States entered the war. Merchant marine training and most aspects of merchant marine activity transferred to the newly created War Shipping Administration on September 1, 1942. The transfer allowed the Coast Guard to take a more active role in the war and concentrated government administration of the merchant marine in one agency. However, Just as the transfer removed the merchant marine training role from the Coast Guard, the service assumed the role of licensing seamen and inspecting merchant vessels.

Marine Inspection

The Coast Guard continued its close cooperation with the merchant marine through the assumption of licensing and inspecting duties from BuMIN. Safety at sea had long been a concern of the Coast Guard. This is exemplified by the service's role in establishing and maintaining aids to navigation and rescuing people in distress. The new duties involved taking preventative measures to ensure that accidents did not happen due to failures in material or training. Uniform licensing and inspection guaranteed that personnel and their ships would be at peak efficiency before they entered a war zone.

Waesche considered marine inspection to be one of the service's primary missions. Following the Coast Guard assumption of BuMIN licensing and inspection duties, inspectors from the bureau received Coast Guard commissions if they requested them. The prewar head of BuMIN, Halert C. Shepherd, continued to direct the same functions within the Coast Guard as a Captain and, later, as a Rear Admiral in the Merchant Marine Safety Division of the Coast Guard. Inspectors approved both merchant vessel designs and equipment for the ships, including lifeboats, life rafts, and survival suits. Approval of new designs often involved competitive tests, which thoroughly examined the utility of various pieces of equipment. Life rafts, for example, were dropped from 45 feet, set afloat in burning oil, and strafed with machine-gun fire. Only rafts that survived all three were certified for use on board American merchant vessels.

The inspectors performed a variety of other tasks. They visited ships to monitor ship stability, hull strength, and boiler and pressure-valve safety. They ensured that the ships complied with load line, cargo loading, fire safety, and lifesaving gear regulations and requirements. Certificates were issued only when vessels passed the inspection. The Coast Guard scrutinized trained personnel carefully. Merchant marine deck and engine room personnel were examined before they were licensed or certified.

Marine Investigation

Wartime saw large numbers of merchant vessels sunk due to enemy action. The increase in sailings, use of all available tonnage, and crowded harbors also caused many more ordinary marine accidents such as groundings, collisions, and mechanical breakdowns. The Coast Guard investigated American merchant vessel casualties and sought to learn from these mishaps. The rapid expansion of the merchant marine likewise led to more personnel problems requiring disciplinary action among merchant sailors. BuMIN had procedures for review of breaches of discipline that proved too time consuming for wartime. Following an initial test period in New York, the Coast Guard established Merchant Marine Hearing Units in all major U.S. ports and many foreign ones as well. A Coast Guard officer visited each incoming American merchant vessel, interviewed its company and reviewed the log in order to determine if problems existed. The examining officer took evidence and determined whether a hearing should be called. He also served as prosecutor in these proceedings. A third officer heard the case and set the punishment, which could be as severe as revoking professional licenses and certificates. The permanent consolidation of BuMIN into the Coast Guard was not completed until July 1946. Although some individuals in both services resisted the merger, it was seen by most to be a valuable combination of duties and a necessary centralization of authority. The duties transferred to the Coast Guard have greatly increased the influence of the Coast Guard on maritime safety issues. These duties have also become one of the Service's major missions and one of the most important components of the Coast Guard's service to the nation.

Questions of Prejudice of Lower Awards for Jewish Heroes Still Persists!

By Seymour "Sy" Brody, National Editor

In the last issue of The Jewish Veteran, my column was concerned about the strong possibility that military prejudice may have denied many Jewish heroes the Congressional Medal of Honor (CMOH). In the current issue, there is a "Letter to the Editor" from Mitchell Libman, of Hollywood, FL, expressing similar thought as to why his friend, Leonard Kravitz, didn't receive the CMOH for his bravery in Korea.

Kravitz was mortally wounded holding off the enemy, which saved the lives of the men in his company. His nomination for the CMOH was approved right up the ladder to the commanding general, who downgrading the award to the Distinguished Service Cross.



Was religious prejudice the reason for downgrading Kravitz's award?

It is strange that in the Korean War there were no Jewish recipients of the CMOH. Yet, the military, correctly, saw the need to recently up grade the awards for Asian, Pacific Island and African American heroes. This upgrading of these awards were an open admission that prejudice influence the original lower awards.

In the past, as far as we know, there have been sixteen Jewish recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor. How brave they must have been the sixteen Jewish recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor. How brave they must have been to overcome any apparent religious prejudice.

There were six in the Civil War, two were Indian fighters, in the Haitian Campaign in 1915, three in World War I, two in WW II and two in the Vietnam War.

The military has to review the heroic awards of Jewish and other heroes! We have to be certain that their awards truly reflected their brave deeds and that they were not down graded because of prejudice!