



Coast Guard Heritage Museum

at the U.S. Custom House in Barnstable Village, Cape Cod, Massachusetts

Fall 2020 Newsletter

The Long Blue Line: How 80 Coast Guardsmen saved an Alaskan town during the Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1919

by BM1 William A. Bleyer, U.S.C.G.

Occasions sometimes arise ... in which the officers and crews are called upon to face situations of desperate human need which put their resourcefulness and energy, and even their courage, to the severest test.

"The Influenza at Unalaska and Dutch Harbor"
U.S.C.G. Annual Report, 1920

As the testament above indicates, the Coast Guard's response to the Spanish Flu Pandemic in Alaska would prove the ultimate test of bravery and endurance.

Pandemic, quarantines, social distancing and facemasks – too familiar today. These terms resonated with equal disquiet for Americans 100 years ago as the Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919 affected nearly every corner of the globe. It caused the deaths of between 25 and 50 million people, more than all who died in World War I. Even in regions with the most advanced medical care, Spanish Influenza killed approximately three percent of all victims.

Medical care in the remote territory of Alaska was far from advanced. When the pandemic arrived in the spring of 1919, it wiped out entire villages. At the time, Alaska was *"an American colony [which] occupied a political status somewhere between a government protectorate and an industrial resource"*¹ and the presence of Federal Government assets in this immense territory was minimal.

In late May 1919, USS *Unalga* was patrolling in Seredka Bay off Akun Island, in Alaska's Aleutian Island chain. World War I had ended just six months prior, so – like all Coast Guard-manned cutters – *Unalga* and its crew still served as part of the U.S. Navy. At 190 feet, the *Unalga's* white hull was only somewhat longer than modern Fast Response Cutters patrolling Alaska's waters today. And while *Unalga's* daily operations were fundamentally similar to today's FRCs, they were much broader. An Alaskan patrol in 1919 could consist of law enforcement boardings of fishing and sealing vessels; inspecting canneries; transporting



Coast Guard-manned USS *Unalga* underway in an Alaskan ice field (NOAA)

mail, supplies, passengers, and prisoners; rescuing shipwrecked or stranded victims; rendering medical care; acting as a floating court; and resolving labor disputes.

On May 26th, *Unalga* was resting at anchor following a routine day of seamanship and signals training. At around 4 p.m., an urgent radio message arrived. The settlement of Unalaska on nearby Unalaska Island was suffering from a severe outbreak of Spanish Influenza. The cutter's commanding officer, Captain Frederick Dodge, prepared to get the *Unalga* underway at dawn.

That night, *Unalga* received another radiogram – the region around Bristol Bay, on Alaska's southwestern mainland, needed urgent help to cope with its own outbreak. Captain Dodge faced a dilemma: the *Unalga* could not be in two places at once. He radioed his command that he was setting a course for the closer Unalaska to assess the situation.



Remote even today, in 1919 Unalaska and adjacent Dutch Harbor were tiny villages with a combined population of about 360 people, mostly of Aleut or mixed Russian-native ancestry. There was only one doctor on the entire island.

Crew members of *Unalga* burying the dead at the Russian Orthodox Cathedral. (NOAA)

continued on page 2

The Long Blue Line (cont'd from pg. 1)

After arriving, *Unalga's* crew disembarked to a horrific scene. Nearly the entire settlement was infected, including the only doctor and all but one operator at Dutch Harbor's Navy radio station. The situation was critical as historian Alfred Crosby noted in *America's Forgotten Pandemic*:

... very large proportions of isolated populations tended to contract Spanish Influenza all at once. The sick outnumbered those doing the nursing. The sick, therefore, lacked fluids, food, and proper care, which caused very high death rates... effective leadership was vital to keeping death rates down. If complacency, incompetence, sickness, or bad luck crippled the ability of the leaders to react efficiently to the pandemic, then Spanish Influenza could be as deadly as the Black Death.

It now fell to the men of the *Unalga* to provide lifesaving leadership and medical care.

Out of the *Unalga's* crew of approximately 80 men, only three had medical training: Ship's Surgeon LTJG Dr. F.H. Johnson (U.S. Public Health Service), LT E.W. Scott (U.S. Navy Dental Corps), and Pharmacist's Mate 1/class E.S. Chase. These men began coordinating the town's medical care. Together, they assembled a group of volunteers from the crew that kept growing until it included personnel drawn from every department on board the cutter.

From May 26th to June 4th, *Unalga* proved the difference between life and death for the inhabitants of Unalaska. Captain Dodge initiated feeding the town using *Unalga's* food stores. Crewmembers delivered 350 prepared meals on the first day and, by the height of the pandemic, they were delivering more than 1,000 meals per day. Villagers ranked the ship's emergency rations somewhere between awful and lousy, but they ate them.



Members of *Unalga's* crew shepherding orphan children to safety. (NOAA)

Every crewmember engaged in some aspect of relief work. Nicknamed "gobs," those not caring for the sick provided logistical support, such as keeping fires for incapacitated villagers or helping prepare or deliver food. Other crewmen took over operation of the Navy radio station in Dutch Harbor. The men even built a temporary hospital outfitted with plumbing and electrified by the cutter's generator.

Caring for the sick and burying the dead was an exhausting and emotionally challenging job. Death by "The Spanish Lady" (the disease's elegantly macabre nickname) was often horrific. Victims frequently suffered from double pneumonia



Unalga's crew wearing "Flu" masks. All the cutter's crew members involved in the humanitarian effort volunteered to help. (NOAA)

and drowned when their lungs filled with fluid, some of it oozing out of their noses and mouths when they died. The crewmembers nursed the sick with no protective equipment except cloth facemasks, exposing themselves to infection. Several men became ill, including Captain Dodge. He determined he was well enough to remain in command and later recovered. While *Unalga's* crew did their best to save lives, they ultimately had to inter 45 victims beneath white Russian Orthodox crosses in Unalaska's cemetery.

Unalga's crew also cared for the children of the deceased or incapacitated. Unlike seasonal flu, Spanish Influenza acutely affected young adults, probably because it provoked an overreaction in the victims' immune system. This had the tragic effect of creating a number of orphans. Even if not infected, these children were vulnerable to starvation, freezing, or attack by feral dogs, described by *Unalga's* men as similar to ravenous wolves. Unalaska had its own orphanage, the Jesse Lee Home, but when that filled up, a vacant house was requisitioned and named the "USS UNALGA Orphan Home." When that also filled, Captain Dodge started housing children in the town jail



under the care of the town marshal. Among these orphans was Benny Benson, who later designed the state flag of Alaska.

Orphans and a caretaker at the Unalga Orphan Home (NOAA)

Unalga's Master-at-Arms, Peter "Big Pete" Bugaras volunteered to care for the orphans. An enlisted man responsible for enforcing ship's discipline and handling prisoners, Bugaras had a reputation as "the strongest man in the Coast Guard Service," and was described as "Greek by birth, a born fighter of men, and protector of all things helpless and small." Burly and big-hearted, Bugaras took responsibility for running the *Unalga* Orphan Home.

He had his men fashion clothes for the children by tracing outlines of their bodies on bolts of cloth and cutting them out. Several women in the village were appalled to see Bugaras enthusiastically scrubbing children clean with the same vigor he used on dogs, but by all accounts the little ones loved him.

Outside help finally arrived on June 3rd, when Coast Guard Cutter *Bear* dropped anchor. Under the combined effort of the two cutter crews, many of the surviving victims began to recover and the pandemic subsided. Navy vessels also arrived. In the words of *Unalga* officer Eugene Coffin: "Navy ships and nurses were sent to Unalaska after we yelled for them." With the arrival of warships USS *Vicksburg* and USS *Marblehead* in mid-June, Captain Dodge resupplied the *Unalga* to set sail for Bristol Bay. Unalaska's last death occurred June 13th and with its departure on June 17th, the *Unalga's* relief of Unalaska officially ended.

The *Unalga's* care of Unalaska's inhabitants had been somewhat rough-hewn but effective. During the cutter's relief effort, the local mortality rate had hovered around 12 percent, while other areas in Alaska experienced up to 90 percent.

The Coast Guardsmen of the *Unalga* were far from saints, but for years later the inhabitants of Unalaska remembered them as saviors. In July 1919, Unalaska's Russian Orthodox priest, Dimitri Hotovitzky, and Aleut Chief, Alexei Yatchmeneff, co-wrote a letter to Captain Dodge stating "We feel had it not been for the prompt and efficient work of the *Unalga*, when everyone willingly and readily exposed himself to succor the sick, Unalaska's population might have been reduced to a very small number if not entirely wiped out."

While *Unalga's* performance at Unalaska drew universal acclaim, the cutter and USS *Marblehead* were criticized for arriving in the Bristol Bay region too late to make a difference.

As the disease had largely run its course, *Unalga's* crew worked with the *Marblehead's* Navy personnel to provide for the remaining medical care and relief work in the community.

When the pandemic finally released Alaska from its grip, nearly 3,000 inhabitants had died. Nearly all of the dead were Native Alaskans, an irreparable loss to the indigenous community and its culture.

Every pandemic and its tragedies are unique, but in the Coast Guard's response today we can hear echoes of 1919, when the crew of Coast Guard Cutter *Unalga* quarantined and rendered pandemic relief to the remote Alaskan settlement of Unalaska. Cutter *Unalga* and the men who sailed aboard it made history as part of the lore of Alaska and the long blue line.



Unalga's officers - Standing: Lieutenant Junior Grade Willie B. Huebner USNRF; Captain Eugene Auguste Coffin USCG; Captain Warner Keith Thompson USCG; Captain Theodore Graham Lewton USCG; Lieutenant E. W. Scott USNRF (Dental Corps); Lieutenant Junior Grade Dr. F. H. Johnson USPHS. Sitting: Lieutenant Carl E. Anderson USNRF; Senior Captain Frederick Gilbert Dodge USCG; Lieutenant Gordon Whiting MacLane USCG.

¹ Maria Gilson deValpine, "Influenza in Bristol Bay, 1919: 'The Saddest Repudiation of a Benevolent Intention,'" SAGE Open: 7.

Boatswain's Mate First Class William Bleyer joined the Coast Guard in 2007 and is currently the Executive Petty Officer of Aids to Navigation Team Philadelphia.

President's Report

As I suspect is true for many of you, we here on the Cape are suffering from isolation weariness and long for more social interaction. After complying with all mandated government restrictions and many of our own common-sense precautions, our museum opened our doors to the public in mid-July. For very good reasons, many of our volunteers did not feel comfortable serving as docents this year because of concerns interacting with a variety of visitors during the pandemic. We have gotten by with a skeleton crew at our front desk and have managed to welcome visitors for at least three days each week. This summer, we did manage to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the CG Air Station's move to Cape Cod by participating in two down-sized events. Many of the festivities have been postponed now until 2021.

Earlier this month, we received a greatly appreciated donation (\$9,854) from the *Southwind* Association. It has been nearly 50 years since the icebreaker *Southwind* was decommissioned and the association of former crew members has dwindled as many have now "crossed the bar". Our museum will now take further steps to ensure this historic ship and its crew are remembered.



Greg Ketchen

Doug McQuaid (right) from the *Southwind* Association presenting a donation check to members of the CGHM staff

Photo: N.V. Shoemaker

Consolidation to Cape Cod

Continuing to chronicle the history of Air Station Cape Cod . . .

On 29 August, 1970 the Coast Guard combined its Salem, MA and Quonset Point, RI air operation assets to the grounds of the Massachusetts Military Reservation on Cape Cod. Otis Air Force Base had started as a landing field for Army Camp Edwards. It was named after Massachusetts Air National Guard Lt. Frank "Jesse" Otis, a pilot, flight surgeon and eminent Boston City Hospital surgeon who had been killed on January 11, 1937 when his Douglas O-64A crashed while on a cross country training mission. Built in 1938, during the Depression and covering 200,000 acres, until 1973, Otis was the largest Aerospace Defense Command base in the world, and is the only base to be named for a doctor. A reconfiguration of boundaries in 1977 established the Coast Guard Air Station as a separate entity from Camp Edwards and Otis Air National Guard Base.

Original Coast Guard base assets consisted of HH-3F *Pelicans* and HU-16E *Albatrosses*, as well as HH-52A *Sea Guard* helicopters. HH-52s were removed in the early 1980s, leaving only the HH-3F helos. They were replaced in the early '90s by the HH-60Js (*Jayhawks*). During the station's first 20 years of operation, crews from Air Station Cape Cod saved approximately 2,400 lives, including 37 from the sinking Russian ship *Komsomolets Kirgizii* in March 1987. For their heroics, the crews of the three helicopters were invited to the White House for a Rose Garden ceremony where they were personally thanked by President Ronald Reagan.



The Sikorsky HH-3F *Pelican* entered service in 1967. Its twin turbine (max speed 142 knots) medium range (650 NM) amphibious specifications extended CG offshore search and rescue capabilities. This helicopter type was transferred from Salem to Cape Cod in 1970.



Photo: coastguard.dodive.mil

As the only CG air station in the northeast, and with a very large area of responsibility (from the Canadian border



U.S. Coast Guard Cape Cod Air Station, Praeger-Kavanaugh Waterbury engineering/architects drawings, dated 1966, artist unknown

to the north to New Jersey to the south) Air Station Cape Cod performs search and rescue operations at a greater rate than average. With its proximity to Stellwagen and George's Banks, its mission includes ensuring the safety of marine animals as well as the fishermen who make their livelihood at sea.

Coast Guard environmental responsibilities were tested on December 15, 1976 when the Liberian oil tanker *Argo Merchant* grounded off Nantucket carrying 7.3 million gallons of fuel oil. Four Coast Guard cutters were on scene, but deteriorating weather and heavy seas prevented removal of the cargo before the hull began to buckle. Two Air Station Cape Cod HH-3F helicopters were sent on-scene to monitor the situation, and watched as the tanker was wrenched in two causing the largest oil spill in American waters up to that time. The *Argo* accident and 14 more tanker accidents in or near American waters over the next 10 weeks caused great concern about tanker construction, leading to a large tanker safety movement.

On February 18, 1979, HH-3F *Pelican* #1432 crashed at sea while engaged in a medical evacuation of an injured 47 year old seaman from a Japanese fishing vessel *Kaisei Maeu #18* located 180 miles southeast of Cape Cod. The helicopter performed an emergency landing on the water but was quickly swamped by the high seas. Those killed in the accident: LCDR James Stiles (Aircraft commander); Capt. G. Richard Burge (Canadian Forces Exchange Co-Pilot); Petty Officer 2nd Class John Tait (Avionics/Navigator) and Petty Officer 2nd Class Bruce Kaehler (Hospital Corpsman). One crew-member survived the rollover. This has been the only aviation fatality experienced by Air Station Cape Cod during its 50 years of existence.



Photo: commons.wikimedia.org

HH-25 *Guardians* (aka *The Falcon*) reached the base in 1982, which resulted in retirement for the much-loved HU-16 *Albatross* (aka *The Goat*). The last one, CG-7250 was noted as the last fixed-wing amphibious aircraft in U.S. inventory when it was retired on March 10, 1983. Today it is proudly on display at the entrance to the Air Station. On September 23, 2014, the Falcon was retired as well, and added to the entrance display. Both aircraft serve as reminders of countless hours on various Coast Guard missions.

On February 13, 1991, in response to oil rigs purposely set on fire during the first Persian Gulf War, two Falcon (HU-25A) crews from Air Station Cape Cod, equipped with AIREYE technology, were sent to Saudi Arabia to track and map the resulting massive oil spill, logging 314 hours on 80 missions in the war zone. They were accompanied in flight by two C-130 aircraft from Air Station Clearwater carrying spare parts and deployment packages.

On October 31, 1991 during an extremely severe winter storm, USCGC *Tamaroa* rescued four of five Air National Guard crewmen from an ANG H-60 that had ditched south of Long Island due to fuel exhaustion (the fifth crewman, a pararescue jumper, was never found). *Tamaroa* had been attempting to rescue the crew of the sailing vessel *Satori* the previous day when the cutter was diverted to assist the Air National Guard aircrew. *Tamaroa* was awarded the Coast Guard Unit Commendation and the events were chronicled in the book and movie *The Perfect Storm*.



Former Commanding Officers of Air Station Cape Cod

Taken at an Air Station Reunion in early 1990s. Left to right: ADM Louis Zumstein (USCG Ret); CAPT Paul Garrity (USCG Ret); CAPT Charles Mayes (USCG Ret); CAPT Willie Clark (USCG Ret); CAPT Richard Buttrick (USCG Ret); CAPT Robert Powers (USCG Ret); CAPT George Seamans (USCG Ret).

Note: CAPT Charles Mayes was the first Commanding Officer of the new Air Station Cape Cod after it moved from Salem.

Air Station Cape Cod had grown from the amphibious capabilities of the HU-16E *Albatross* (*The Goat*), the HH-3F *Pelican* and the HH-52A *Guardian* (all now retired). On May 6, 1994, the last HH-3F in Coast Guard service was retired, ending the CG 'Amphibious Era' since no aviation asset left in service was capable of making water landings.

Guarding the entrance to Air Station Cape Cod are the last operational HU-16 (#7250) and a retired HU-25. The HU-16 had an incredible potential range of 2100 miles and 14 hours flight time, due to main tank fuel capacity and



Photo: N. V. Shoemaker

additional 295 gallon wing float drop tanks. It was unquestionably an excellent search vehicle, and resulted in many times when 'possible' was re-defined.

On October 31, 1999, Egypt Air Flight 990 crashed about 60 miles southeast of Nantucket. Coast Guard units, including CGCs *Monomoy*, *Spencer*, *Reliance*, *Bainbridge Island*, *Juniper*, *Point Highland*, *Hammerhead*, a HC-130 from Air Station Elizabeth City, and an HH-60 (*Jayhawk*) from Air Station Cape Cod searched unsuccessfully for any survivors. All 217 persons on board were killed in the crash. Coast Guard units then assisted in the recovery effort.

In the late 90s, the Air Station transitioned to the MH-60 that are still in use today. Currently, the full aircraft complement includes three EADS HC-144A *Ocean Sentry*, fixed wing aircraft for medium range surveillance missions, and three Sikorsky MH-60 *Jayhawks*, medium range multi-mission, twin-engine helicopters used for search and rescue, law enforcement and marine protection missions. As the only Coast Guard Aviation facility in the Northeast, its responsibilities extend from waters off New Jersey to the Canadian border. Currently, there are about 187 personnel attached to the base.

The physical entity of what was originally known as Otis Air Force Base has evolved over time to its current designation as Joint Base Cape Cod which encompasses all resident commands and federal entities on the Base. Those commands include, but are not limited to: USCG Base Cape Cod; USCG Electronic Support Detachment; USCG Maritime Safety and Security Team Cape Cod; USCG Northeast Regional Fisheries Training Center; USCG Air Station Cape Cod; USCG Port Security Unit 301 Cape Cod; MA ANG 102nd Intelligence Wing; MA ARNG HQ Camp Edwards; MA ARNG Regional Training Institute.

Other organizations located on the base property include CG Auxiliary Cape Cod; Barnstable County Sheriff's Office, and the Joint Base Cape Cod Fire Department.

Aircraft currently assigned to Air Station Cape Cod



HC-144A EADS *Ocean Sentry*



MH-60 Sikorsky *Jayhawk*



Coast Guard Heritage Museum

P.O. Box 161 • 3353 Main Street, Barnstable, MA 02630
508-362-8521 • email: cgheritage@comcast.net • www.cgheritage.org

CGHM Officers

President: Greg Ketchen, CAPT, USCG (ret) • Vice President: H. F. "Buck" Baley, CAPT, USCG (ret)
2nd Vice President: Patricia Garrity • Clerk/Secretary: Peter Eleftherakis
Interim Treasurer: H. F. "Buck" Baley, CAPT, USCG (ret)

Newsletter Staff & Contributors

Pat Garrity, *Editor*
"Buck" Baley
BM1 William Bleyer, Greg Ketchen
Nancy Viall Shoemaker



Visit us at www.capecodmuseumtrail.com

CGHM Board of Directors

Stuart Bornstein; Peter Brady, CAPT, USCG (ret);
Bill Collette, Past President, MKCS, USCG (ret); James Ellis, USAF Veteran;
Richard Fichter, MKCS, USCG (ret); George Howe, CDR, USCG (ret);
Nancy Shoemaker, USCGR Veteran; Mark Toomey, CWO4, (ret); Victor Viola, BMC, USCGR (ret)

Would you like to publish an article in our newsletter? Contact us at 508-362-8521.

Newsletter graphic design by West Barnstable Press



Robert O'Brien, CAPT, USCG (ret), left this harbor for another on September 25, 2020.

Bob served as a USCG Seaman in WWII, then studied at Boston College. In 1951 he rejoined the U.S. Coast Guard, earning the rank of Captain in his 30 years of service. Bob was Deputy Commander of the USCG's First District in Boston. After his last assignment (Comptroller of the Coast Guard!), he retired to start a second career in his chosen home town, Barnstable.

Bob served as the Town of Barnstable's Department of Public Works Superintendent and, later, as Special Assistant to the Town Manager, overseeing the Town's budget along with other advisory counsel. His membership on public boards is a long list that includes boards of the Barnstable Municipal Airport and the Steamship Authority.

Bob O'Brien helped make the lives of all Barnstable residents safer. Bob and his wife, Susie taught Safe Boating classes with the USCG Auxiliary in the 1980s, performing Auxiliary boating patrols in Barnstable Harbor and along the Barnstable shores of Cape Cod Bay. Respected and loved by all who had the good fortune to know him, Bob was a man of wisdom and quiet strength.



Did you know . . .

On October 6, 1990, NASA Astronaut and Coast Guard Commander Bruce Melnick made his first space flight when he served as a Mission Specialist aboard the space shuttle *Discovery* on Space Shuttle Mission STS-41, which flew from October 6-10, 1990. *Discovery* deployed the Ulysses spacecraft for its five-year mission to explore the polar regions of the sun. CDR Melnick was the first Coast Guardsman selected by NASA for astronaut training.

On May 7, 1992, Melnick made his second space flight, serving as a Mission Specialist aboard the space shuttle *Endeavor*, on her maiden flight, Space Shuttle Mission STS-49, May 7-16, 1992. During this mission, astronauts rescued and repaired the Intelsat VI satellite. Melnick, by this point, logged more than 300 hours in space.

CDR Melnick had been stationed at Air Station Cape Cod as a helicopter pilot earlier in his career.

Melnick (center) enjoyed a visit to the Museum in 2018, shown here with Greg Ketchen, Bill Collette, "Buck" Baley, and fellow astronaut Dan Burbank.

