



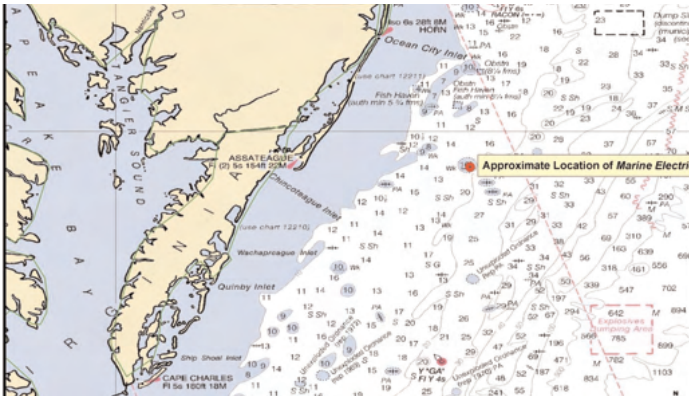
# Coast Guard Heritage Museum

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

## Fall 2022 Newsletter

## SS *Marine Electric*: The Shipwreck that Changed the Coast Guard

USCG Petty Officer Second Class Corrine Zilicki



NOAA Chart

When the clock tolled 12 a.m. on Feb. 12, 1983, the 605-foot cargo ship *Marine Electric* trekked northward 30 miles off Virginia's Eastern Shore, plowing slowly through the gale-force winds and waves stirred up by a winter storm.

An able-bodied seaman relieved the watch and peered forward, noticing for the first time that the ship's bow seemed to be riding unusually low in the water.

Over the next two hours, the waves intruded with increasing vigor. The entire foredeck was swallowed in 6 feet of water. The main deck was completely awash.

At 2:51 a.m., the captain made the first radio distress call to the Coast Guard.

"I seem to be taking on water forward," he said. "We need someone to come out and give us some assistance, if possible."

By the time assistance arrived, the *Marine Electric* had listed, rolled violently to starboard, and capsized, hurling most of its 34 crew into the 37° water. Chaos ensued.

Chief mate Cusick surfaced with a gasp, managed to get his bearings, and spotted a partially-submerged lifeboat nearby. After swimming through towering waves for 30 minutes, he pulled himself into the swamped boat and started thrashing his legs to stay warm.

The Coast Guard had long since dispatched an HH-3F Pelican helicopter crew from Air Station Elizabeth City, North Carolina, and directed the crews of several cutters to the *Marine Electric's* position, but the tumultuous weather conditions slowed the rescuers' progress.

Naval Air Station Oceana had to recall available personnel before launching a helicopter crew, including rescue swimmer Petty Officer 2nd Class James McCann. At 5:20 a.m., the Coast Guard helicopter crew was the first to arrive on scene. They had expected to find the *Marine Electric's* sailors tucked into lifeboats and rafts, but instead, they found a blinking sea of strobe lights, empty lifeboats, and bodies strewn below.

The Coast Guard crew scoured the southern end of the search area and discovered one man, Paul Dewey, alone in a life raft. They dropped the rescue basket so he could clamber inside, then hoisted him into the helicopter. About 30 yards away, they spotted Eugene Kelly, the ship's third mate, clinging to a life ring, and lowered the basket to retrieve him.

Cusick remained huddled in his lifeboat until the sailors aboard the *Berganger*, a Norwegian merchant vessel whose crew was helping search the area, sighted him and notified the Coast Guard. The helicopter crew retrieved him in the rescue basket, then took off for Salisbury, Maryland, to bring the three survivors to Peninsula Regional Medical Center.

Coast Guard Capt. Mont Smith, the Operations Officer at Air Station Elizabeth City, had piloted a second Pelican helicopter through turbulent headwinds for over an hour in order to reach the site of the distress.

He and his crew scanned the debris field below for signs of life. The people they saw were motionless, and it was difficult to determine whether they were simply too hypothermic to move, or deceased.

Cont'd on page 2

## SS *Marine Electric* (cont'd from pg. 1)



USCG Photo

Smith spotted one man and hovered over him, squinting through the whipping snow, trying to decide what to do.

“We all felt helpless,” Smith said. “There was no way to know if the man was dead or alive. We had to try something.”

Petty Officer 2nd Class Greg Pesch, the avionics electrical technician aboard the helicopter, volunteered to go down on the hoist cable. After some deliberation, Smith agreed.

Pesch’s descent in the rescue basket was a harrowing one.

“The whole world seemed to be churning,” Smith said. “I struggled to maintain a smooth hoist, but I know it was erratic.”

Once in the water, Pesch grappled with the basket, trying to hold it steady as he guided the unresponsive man inside. It took several attempts, and then he scrambled into the basket himself and ascended back to the helicopter alongside the victim.

The aircrew spotted another potential survivor, and although Pesch attempted to descend again, the hoist cable spooled back on itself on the drum. The crew was forced to abort their mission and departed for nearby Salisbury Airport, where the man they had pulled from the water was pronounced dead on arrival by paramedics.

Dewey, Kelly and Cusick were the only men pulled from the ocean alive that morning. Their 31 shipmates had either succumbed to hypothermia or drowned.

All told, Coast Guard, Navy, and merchant vessel crews recovered 24 bodies from the scene of the capsizing. Seven were never found. It is likely the ship’s engineers were trapped belowdecks when the vessel capsized.

“Throughout Coast Guard history, the missions of the service have been written in blood,” said Dr. William Thiesen, historian, Coast Guard Atlantic Area. “Such was the case with the loss of the *Marine Electric*. This

tragic event led to stricter marine safety regulations and the establishment of the Coast Guard’s premiere rescue swimmer program.”

While the incident itself served as the catalyst for the major changes to the Coast Guard and maritime community at large, the rigorous efforts of Coast Guard Capt. Domenic Calicchio brought the necessity for such changes into sharper focus.

The investigation revealed that although the *Marine Electric* had been recently inspected several times by both the American Bureau of Shipping and the Coast Guard, marine inspectors had failed to note several discrepancies or recommend needed repairs. Investigators concluded that the casualty had most likely been caused by inadequate cargo hatches and deck plating, which allowed the crashing waves to flood the vessel’s forward spaces.

Calicchio felt the Coast Guard needed to revamp its marine safety procedures and demand more of maritime companies, but more importantly, that the Coast Guard needed to demand more of itself.

His push for reform resulted in several additions to the Coast Guard’s marine safety protocol, including guidance on hatch cover inspections, and new requirements for enclosed lifeboats and their launching systems, for ships’ owners to provide crews with cold water survival suits, and for flooding alarms to be installed in unmanned spaces on vessels.

The Coast Guard also tightened its inspections of 20-year or older ships, which led to the near-immediate scrapping of 70 similar WWII-era vessels.

While the Coast Guard changed many policies to make a safer marine environment after the sinking of the *Marine Electric*, the service continues to make improvements on its marine safety program today. By 2025, it is estimated that the demand for waterborne commerce worldwide will more than double. The Coast Guard has published its Maritime Commerce Strategic Outlook in preparation for the increasing demand.

The *Marine Electric* shipwreck also served as the genesis of another crucial development: the Coast Guard rescue swimmer program, which was established in 1984. The program’s physical fitness standards, training and organizational structure were developed over a five-year implementation period, and in March of 1985, Air Station Elizabeth City became the first unit to receive rescue swimmers.

The first life was saved two months later.

Article originally published by the U.S. Coast Guard 5th District Mid-Atlantic

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## President's Report

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Volunteering here at the museum is a privilege for me. The experience continuously offers unexpected rewards. Located in the 18th century birthplace of the Coast Guard, we are surrounded by our service's rich history. There are endless opportunities here on Cape Cod to celebrate that history with on-location events. These recently included the 100th anniversary of the first Trans-Atlantic flight which departed from Cape Cod piloted by CG Lieutenant Stone, the 50th anniversary of the move of the CG Air Station to Cape Cod (it is the oldest continuously operated CG air station dating back to its 1925 origin in Gloucester), and the 70th anniversary of the *Pendleton* rescue (2016 Disney film "The Finest Hours"), to name a few!

Our collection of artifacts is extraordinary and continues to grow. Nearly every month, people generously donate items. Each tell a unique story. For example, additions just in the past few months include a brass hand-held telescope used by a USLHS lightkeeper on Martha's Vineyard to identify ships passing his lights (a required task), a line-throwing cannon with its original unused old Plymouth Cordage Company line bucket, and a late 19th century USLHE buoy bell recently recovered by a dragger fishing off Nauset. Incredibly historic and significant items have been coming in to us for over 18 years! This winter, we will be tackling the daunting task of reorganizing our archive to ensure all artifacts are properly stored and protected, attempt to more completely determine the provenance of each item, and update the metadata in our Pastperfect Museum Software. We will continue our initiative with the Boston Public Library to create digital image files of most of our old documents, publications and images.

A Celebration of Life gathering was held at the museum in September. Several of our museum founders "Crossed the Bar" this year including John Manning (our first president), Rev. Dan Davidson, and Mo Gibbs.



This summer, our newest exhibit on Coast Guard Oceanography opened with a public ribbon cutting. It incorporated many new acquisitions including photographs and instruments. The exhibit highlights our early international leadership in this new science and our close, century-long, working relationship with Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. The Coast Guard Oceanographic Unit was located in Woods Hole for over three decades. The subject of our next major exhibit will focus on icebreakers including the new 460-foot Polar Security Cutter, the first of three due to be operational by early 2025.

Telling the Coast Guard story to museum visitors is a task enjoyed by our many outstanding docents. Their dedication and knowledge are impressive and I feel very fortunate to serve with these men and women. New volunteers are always welcome. If you have the time and interest, please consider joining our museum family, whether it's just once a year, every week or whatever you feel comfortable contributing.

As our 2022 season comes to a close, we invite you to make one last visit and take advantage of our End of Season Sale with 25% off all items in the Gift Shop from Nov. 8 - 11th.

At our annual Members-Only Night in August, CGHM President (CAPT Greg Ketchen USCG retired) and one of our newest members (VADM Sandy Stosz USCG retired) cut a cake celebrating the 232nd birthday of the Coast Guard.



CG 36500 made the trip over to Barnstable Harbor for this event.



*Greg Ketchen*



Our Volunteer Appreciation gathering was held in October with about two thirds of our volunteers in attendance.

# Moments in Coast Guard History

**December 15, 1976:**

The Liberian tanker *Argo Merchant* grounded off Nantucket carrying 7.3 million gallons of fuel oil. Cutters *Sherman*, *Vigilant*, *Spar* and *Bittersweet* were on scene, but deteriorating weather and heavy seas, prevented removal of its cargo before the hull began to buckle. The bow was wrenched from the hull causing the largest oil spill in American waters at that time. The *Argo Merchant* 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.



*Argo Merchant* foundering off the coast of Nantucket, December 1976. Picture courtesy of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute

**September 27, 1942:**

Signalman First Class Douglas A. Munro was killed in action and posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at the Matanikau River, Guadalcanal. As coxswain of a 36-foot Higgins boat, Munro took charge of the dozen craft which helped evacuate the surrounded elements of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller. After the last Marine was evacuated, Munro was shot and killed by enemy fire. He is the only Coast Guardsman to receive the Medal of Honor. He is the only non-Marine to have his name enshrined on the Wall of Heroes of the National Museum of the Marine Corps.



Douglas Munro  
Died on Sept. 27, 1942

## Save the Date

This year's Veteran's Day Flags for Vets is scheduled to take place on Saturday, November 5, 2022 at 10 a.m. at the Massachusetts National Cemetery on Connery Avenue in Bourne, MA. It takes about 45 minutes for the task to be completed, and those helping are asked to bring a long shanked flat screw driver to 'start' the hole for placement at each grave. As of 2021, there are over 78,000 graves to be marked and the completed scene is a beautiful and moving sight to behold. The flags are provided through the SFC Jared C. Monti Charitable Foundation which was founded in 2006 by Paul Monti as a way to honor his son Jared, who was killed in action in Afghanistan, and all other veterans.



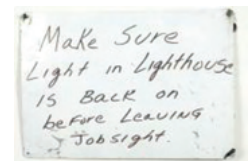
Flag placement: November 5, 2022 at 10:00 a.m.  
Massachusetts National Cemetery  
at Connery Avenue, Bourne, MA



## Quality Assurance 101

Nantucket Museum curator, Jeremy Slavitz, found this reminder in the Historical Association Collection of the Sankaty Head Light:

"Make sure light in Lighthouse is back on before leaving job sight (sic)."



# Origins of USCG Trivia Question . . .

## Who said, “You have to go out, but you don’t have to come back?”

A letter to the editor of the old *Coast Guard Magazine*, written by CBM Clarence P. Brady, USCG (Ret.), published in the March 1954 issue (page 2), stated that the first person to make this remark was Keeper Patrick Etheridge. Brady knew him when both were stationed at the Cape Hatteras LSS. Brady tells the story as follows:

“A ship was stranded off Cape Hatteras on the Diamond Shoals and one of the life saving crew reported the fact that this ship had run ashore on the dangerous shoals. The old skipper gave the command to man the lifeboat and one of the men shouted out that they might make it out to the wreck but would never make it back. The old skipper looked around and said, ‘The Blue Book says we’ve got to go out and it doesn’t say a damn thing about having to come back.’”

Etheridge was not exaggerating. The Regulations of the Life-Saving Service of 1899, Article VI. “Action at Wrecks”, section 252, page 58, states that:

“In attempting a rescue, the keeper will select either the boat, breeches buoy, or life car, as in his judgement is best suited to effectively cope with the existing conditions.

If the device first selected fails after such a trial as satisfies him that no further attempt with it is feasible, he will resort to one of the others, and if it fails, then to the remaining one, and he will not desist from his efforts until by actual trial the impossibility of effecting a rescue is demonstrated. The statement of the keeper that he did not try to use the boat because the sea surf was too heavy will not be accepted unless attempts to launch it were actually made and failed, or unless the conformation of the coast – as bluffs, precipitous banks, etc. – is such as to unquestionably preclude the use of a boat.”

This section of the Regulations remained in force after the creation of the Coast Guard in 1915. The new Instructions for United States Coast Guard Stations, 1934 edition, copied Section 252 word for word as it appeared in 1899. [1934 Instructions for United States Coast Guard Stations, Paragraph 28, page 4].

By Retired U.S. Naval Reserve Cmdr. Timothy Dring,  
Member, U.S. Life-Saving Service Heritage Assn.



## Words to Lead by

### From an article in the latest issue of the U.S. Naval Institute’s *Proceedings – The Coast Guard Issue: August, 2022*

A nameplate on the desk of a superior officer had quite an impact on a midgrade commander more than 10 years ago, and it continues to guide his leadership philosophy to this day. USCG Vice Admiral William “Dean” Lee invited then-Commander Samson Stevens, to read his nameplate and tell him what it said.

“Admiral, it says, ‘William Dean Lee’.”

“That’s right,” he replied. “I’ve had that nameplate for many years, and it’s always been important to me that people see my name. Just my name, not a title like Admiral or a position like District Commander, but just the person. Now, Sam, please come behind my desk, and tell me what’s written on the back.”

I got up and walked around, and read what was inscribed on the back: “Serve First; Lead Second; Be Humble.”

“Sam, that’s the real reason I’ve kept that on my desk for so many years, as a constant reminder of why I do what I do,” the Admiral explained.

CAPT Stevens USCG stated “Trust in and public expectations for the armed forces remain higher than for most any other organization in the country. But the “manners” of our profession will continue to be tested and strained in today’s challenging times, by both external threats to our country and divisions within our society.”

Captain Stevens is the Chief of Atlantic Area Intelligence with more than 27 years of experience in operational, intelligence, joint service and staff assignments. Vice Admiral Dean Lee retired as the Atlantic Area Commander in June, 2016 after a 35-year career and remains committed to these principles to this day.



# Coast Guard Heritage Museum

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Visit us at [www.capecodmuseumtrail.com](http://www.capecodmuseumtrail.com)

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

Newsletter graphic design by --West Barnstable Press

**The Coast Guard Heritage Museum is open through Veterans Day, November 11, 2022.**  
*We look forward to the 2023 season!*

## BECOME A COAST GUARD HERITAGE MUSEUM MEMBER!

**Individual** - \$25 Single membership: attending annual meeting with no voting privilege, individual admission to the museum, and a 10% gift shop discount.

**Family** - \$40 Same as Individual, but with additional admissions to the museum for immediate family. One person may attend annual meeting with no voting privilege.

**Supporting Member** - \$100 Unlimited museum admission & 10% discount. This is for those who want to support museum but not actively participate.

**Sustaining Member** - \$250 For those who want to show a greater level of support for the museum. Unlimited admission and 10% discount apply.

**Guardian:** three donor levels – Guardians receive all benefits of membership. The Guardian category includes individual recognition at the museum. The three categories are: **Captain's Circle** - \$500+; **Admiral's Circle** - \$1,000+; **Commandant's Circle** - \$2,500+

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We are a 501(c)(3) organization. Our mission is to preserve and share the story of the U.S. Coast Guard in the former U.S. Custom House, Barnstable, MA.