



Coast Guard Heritage Museum

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

Summer 2026 Newsletter

Cape & Islands Surfmen: Courageous Heroes of the U.S. Life-Saving Service



Surfmen aboard the 36-foot *The Victory* in Provincetown. This self-bailing, self-righting motor lifeboat was the first of its kind on the East Coast.

It's just after dusk, an evening in late November, circa 1880, and the winds of a fierce nor'easter whip and howl against the drafty Red House at Cahoon Hollow Station, where three "surfmen" and the "keeper" huddle by the light of oil lamps. Two other surfmen are diving into their suppers, having just completed their patrol shifts. The remaining two men are out there now, one up in the watchtower, the other trudging up the beach

toward the Pamet River Station. Rain and spray-soaked oilskin jackets hang dripping inside the Red House. The room smells of salt, of smoke from the keeper's tobacco pipe, and of damp. The waves crash incessantly. Outside, the sky is as dark and foreboding as the depths of the Atlantic. Unspoken among the surfmen is the near certainty that this could be one of those nights.

As the first surfman walks his stretch of this beach between Wellfleet and Truro, he peers, near blind in this weather, out across the percussive waves. Rain cascades over the wide brim of his hat. Miles out in the distance, the occasional flicker of running lights from passing schooners blink into momentary focus. Some 30 minutes later, the patrol reaches his destination, the halfway house, a shack in the dunes midway between Red Houses. His counterpart from the Pamet River Station has arrived already. They greet each other in their usual fashion, exchanging their brass shields, proof of their completed patrols. They comment upon the storm and the likelihood of a wreck, then part ways and head back along their respective beach territories.

When the first surfman returns to Cahoon Hollow, he climbs the watchtower, and the second surfman begins his own patrol, walking south toward the Nauset Station. He's about one-third of the way to the halfway house when he spots the first sign of trouble – a ship's running lights that are too bright, too close to shore. Then follows the sound of sails flapping, snapping in the gusts. From inside his jacket, he withdraws a Coston flare, loaded in its wooden and brass holder. He strikes the brass plunger to fire the flare, signaling to the ship. His message should be clear: "Stay with your vessel; help is on its way." Back at the watchtower, the first surfman spots the flare and sounds the alarm, shouting to the other six men in the Red House, "Ship ashore! All hands perishing!"



Surfmen in uniform. They began wearing uniforms in 1889.

The keeper and surfmen are ready. They've run weekly practice drills, and all are veteran Life Savers. No matter how fierce the surf, no matter how wild the wind, they'll attempt to launch the station's surfboat. They roll the heavy craft down to the break and crash through the waves, oars digging into the tempestuous water. They pull. And they pull, driving through the surf, knowing they can arrive in time, hoping that no sailors aboard the schooner panic. If the sailors just stay put, if they just hold on, the surfmen can rescue them, bring them to the safety of shore, to the warmth of the Red House. The surfmen pull so hard against the raging Atlantic that they function as a single engine, a machine devoid of doubt, bound for heroism or for death.

Continued on page 2

These are the brave men of the United States Life-Saving Service (USLSS), a precursor of the U.S. Coast Guard. Established in 1871, the federal government commissioned the building of about 260 stations along the nation's coasts, including on the Great Lakes. Historian and former retired Coast Guard senior chief, Dr. Dennis L. Noble wrote that although national life-saving programs started in 1848, "they were run like a volunteer fire department, but without anyone in charge, nor any inspection system. ..." While commerce and the number of cargo ships grew, more vessels wrecked, and the programs failed to keep pace. Noble writes, "The American Civil War caused the neglect of the government's shore based lifesaving network. This neglect continued until 1870, when another vicious storm ripped into the East Coast and many lives were lost." Newspapers and public outcry created a demand for a better safety apparatus. Historian Dick Boonisar, who actually owns a former station in Plymouth, points out another driving force. "Insurance companies," he says, "started screeching and hollering," which helped accelerate reform. Under the purview of the Treasury Department, Sumner Increase Kimball, a lawyer from Maine, would take the lead in this project. In short time, its success was measurable and its reputation positive, so much so that Noble claims, "the organization that contributed the most to the U.S. Coast Guard's image as a lifesaver was the U.S. Life-Saving Service."

Not only was the life of a surfman rugged, the job carried very few benefits. The government provided station houses where the men lived, but little more. Dick Ryder of the U.S. Life-Saving Service Heritage Association relates that the pay was \$65/month for surfmen, but they received nothing during the months of June and July. Ryder explains, "The summer wasn't seen as dangerous. The water was warmer, and the days were longer." Thus, the work season for surfmen began in August and ran through May. "The beach patrol was unique to the U.S.," says Dick Boonisar. By 1872, there were nine stations called Red Houses on the Outer Cape, and by the early 1900s, there were four on Nantucket, one on Gay Head, one on Cuttyhunk, and four more on the Cape.



Ryder says, "Men got one day off a week, if the weather was okay. It was tough duty. If they were injured, they were just sent home." They had to purchase their own food and uniforms. If they needed any additional days off, they would have to hire a substitute.

Surfman wearing a cork lifebelt
photo: USLSS Heritage Assoc.

The lives of surfmen and keepers were very structured, with a number of standard procedures built into their schedules. Boonisar says, "They had a very prescribed week. They'd practice with the surfboats and the breeches buoy, conduct regular drills." The men would row and perform maneuvers in the surfboats, craft of about 25 feet with enclosed air chambers fore and aft. They would conduct capsizing drills on

Wednesdays. On Mondays and Thursdays, they would practice firing the Lyle gun, a small cannon that would shoot a weighted line up to 600 yards offshore. They used this to set up the breeches buoy, a life ring with a canvas harness shaped like a big pair of shorts, or breeches, that a sailor would sit inside. A pulley apparatus like a zipline would carry men from ship to shore. On Fridays, the men trained in first aid and resuscitation, or "restoring the apparently drowned." And, of course, they kept watch. With no retirement, no medical benefits, and little compensation for widows, they ended up forming their own insurance company. Ryder notes that nine surfmen were lost on the Cape – seven in the 1902 Monomoy Disaster, the other two in Truro. It would take until the 1915 merger of the USLSS with the Revenue Cutter Service – which formed the U.S. Coast Guard – for the surfmen to receive job security and full benefits.

The era of the USLSS spanned about 45 years, and, nationwide, its heroes would ultimately save over 177,000 lives. These numbers show both the effectiveness of the organization and the sheer volume of ships. Ryder says, "In one year, 22,000 ships were sailing past Handkerchief Shoal, off Monomoy, all with no power." Boonisar further explains, "Visualize I-95 running 20 miles offshore with schooners carrying cargo such as granite and ice from the north and lumber from the south. In the winter, the Cape is a lee shore, with the east wind. Combine this with heavily-loaded schooners..." The ships, which typically carried crews of two hands for each of its masts – often a total of only six men aboard a 100-foot vessel – would blow off course and in toward shore; there were a lot of wrecks in those days.



Surfman burning a Coston flare, used to warn ships they were too close to shore or to signal help was on the way. Martha Coston of Philadelphia developed this flare signal, which was adopted by the U.S. Navy as well as the USLSS. The composition of the Coston flare is the same as highway flares used today.

Halfway house,
between the Cahoon
Hollow and Pamet
River stations, where
surfmen would
exchange patrol checks



The Jason, off Pamet River

The completion of the Cape Cod Canal in 1914 and advances in engine technology would contribute to improvements in safety upon the seas, but the heroic efforts of the men in the U.S. Life-Saving Service had become both widely known and popular. Fiction writers spun tales of surfmen, the USLSS published annual reports that glorified their deeds, and authors wrote true-life accounts of their work, such as J.W. Dalton's 1901 book, *The Lifesavers of Cape Cod*, for which he visited every station on the Cape and devoted at least one paragraph to each surfman and keeper, including Seth Ellis, sole survivor of the Monomoy Disaster.

Milton Bradley even created a board game based upon the work of these courageous men. Women also took part in the USLSS; the Blue Anchor Society, a division within the Women's National Relief Association, provided the stations with trunks of clothing for the rescued sailors, and Martha Coston, who invented the flares the men used to signal ships, was instrumental to the program's success.

Today, the United States Coast Guard carries out the life-saving missions that were once the bailiwick of the USLSS, but the U.S. Life-Saving Service Heritage Association works to preserve the organization's stories and memories. The Old Harbor Station, now located in Provincetown, has been restored as a museum. Dick Ryder narrated a breeches buoy drill there every Thursday night in the summer, until recently. He reported, "Our group in Provincetown has been doing this

according to the book for over 40 years. There are only three places in the country that still practice the drill: one in North Carolina, one in Delaware, and our station on Cape Cod."

Dick Boonisar, who served as the Heritage Association's first president, owns a station in Plymouth, which he has pains-takingly restored. "It's set up with all the original equipment," he says. "It's taken me 40 years to collect everything. But if there's ever a schooner up on Duxbury Beach, I can send out a line and take 'em off."



A breeches buoy, which would be carried out to a ship by pulleys, enabling sailors to step into the life ring and canvas sling to be rescued.

Photo courtesy of USLSS Heritage Assoc.

Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer Motto: "So Others May Live"

Aviation Survival Technicians, better known as CG Rescue Swimmers, are the elite specialized personnel who perform high-risk maritime rescues, with roughly 350 active-duty members nationwide. ASTs are responsible for both maintaining survival equipment and acting as rescue swimmers. They endure a notoriously demanding 24-week training program with an attrition rate often exceeding 70-80%, deploying from helicopters to perform high-risk rescues including emergency medical evacuations and maritime disasters. The training school is considered one of the most physically and mentally demanding in the military. They are typically assigned to air stations nationwide, often working in specialized teams and play a key role in the roughly 5,000 lives saved annually by the Coast Guard.

During the State of the Union Address on Feb. 24, 2026, President Trump honored USCG Petty Officer Ruskan Scott

for his extraordinary heroism in saving more than 100 people during the July 2025 Texas floods, at Camp Mystic. An Aviation Survival Technician stationed at Coast Guard Air Station Corpus Christi, Ruskan was awarded the Legion of Merit medal. This was Ruskan's first official mission as a rescue swimmer.

AST 2 Tyler Jagers, Rescue Swimmer #1087 at Coast Guard Air Station Astoria, Oregon, embodied that calling, giving his life in the service of saving another. Tyler sustained injuries during a dangerous nighttime high-seas medical evacuation mission on Feb. 27, 2026 and succumbed to his injuries on March 5, 2026. Jagers was assisting a cargo ship crewmember who had suffered a stroke, about 140 miles off the coast of Washington State. He was transported to a hospital in Victoria, British Colombia. His injuries were fatal. AST Tyler Jagers was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and advanced in rank.

President's Report

Our museum began its 22nd season with a special ceremony in the Boston State House dedicating a painting depicting the "Birth of the Coast Guard" (see article on page 4). To support the State House initiative, we have added a comprehensive new exhibit at our museum that focuses on the Coast Guard's 18th century origins. If you're visiting Boston, stop by the Capitol to see the Coast Guard Memorial and/or visit us in Barnstable. I promise you'll be amazed by this extraordinary painting and the story behind it.

During our off-season this year, we significantly upgraded several of our exhibits, including the CG Air Station Cape Cod display. We've also added many new programs under the direction of our program manager, Jessica Sheppard.



RADM Michael Platt (Commander, CGNE District) viewing some of our aviation models

Our volunteers are the backbone of our organization. Their talents, enthusiasm and dedication continue to amaze me, particularly in the creation of new exhibits and enlightening our museum visitors.

Unfortunately, we occasionally lose somebody. Ed Noroian who had been a museum docent and our gift shop manager for several years "crossed the bar" in March. He certainly will be missed.

On a much brighter note, several new volunteers have joined our team. In early June, we held a well-attended cookout at the museum to kick off our 2026 season and to recognize the contributions of our many volunteers. We utilized a new picnic table built for us by new CG chief petty officers (above) this past fall who were going through their CCT Indoctrination.



USCG Painting Unveiling Ceremony at Massachusetts State House

A new, prominent painting by renowned marine artist Russ Kramer honoring Massachusetts as the birthplace of the United States Coast Guard was officially unveiled and dedicated at the Massachusetts State House in Boston April 21, 2026. The painting is a significant addition to the Capitol's Art Collection and has been permanently installed at the entrance to the Great Hall in this historic building. The memorial is a gift to the Commonwealth from our Committee on behalf of the many donors who generously supported this initiative.



Four of the 17 members of the memorial committee with the artist.
L to R: RAdm Rudy Peschel, former State Rep. Ruthie Provost, artist Russ Kramer, State House Curator Susan Greenydyke, Captain Greg Ketchen

This extraordinary piece of art pays tribute to the service, courage and sacrifice made by the men and women of the Coast Guard who have protected lives and safeguarded our shores since the 1700s.

The new nation's first armed commissioned ship, the Revenue Cutter *Massachusetts*, was built in Newburyport and homeported in Boston in 1791. Newburyport is officially recognized as the birthplace of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service.

Their maritime search and rescue efforts became a core mission of the U.S. Lifesaving Service in 1871. In 1790, the Revenue Marine was formed to perform maritime law enforcement. The new nation's first armed commissioned ship, the Revenue Cutter *Massachusetts*, was built in Newburyport and homeported in Boston in 1791. Newburyport is officially recognized as the birthplace of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service.

During the ceremony, artist Russ Kramer, from Mystic, Connecticut was awarded the Coast Guard Meritorious Service Award and Medal.

Russ Kramer receiving the award
from RADM Michael Platt



The painting is a gift to the Commonwealth from the Memorial Committee on behalf of the many donors who have supported this initiative.

These three U.S. maritime services were merged in the early 20th century to form the U. S. Coast Guard.

This Year's Annual Members Only Night

This year's event will be held on Saturday (1 Aug) at the museum from 6 to 8. Our guest speaker will be Reid Oslin speaking to us about the *Pendelton* rescue off Chatham in 1952. The rescue was the subject of the film "The Finest Hours".

USCG36500, 1952
Photo by Dick Kelsey



The evening, open to all members, staff and their families, will include refreshments, a twilight museum tour and "performance of evening colors".



2026 Sail Training Schedule for USCG *Barque Eagle* in Celebration of Our Nation's 250th Anniversary

The selected port calls include the five Sail250 ports of New Orleans, Norfolk, Baltimore, New York City, and Boston. Sail250 is a global gathering of tall ships and military ships to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the founding of the U.S. It will offer crews, cadets and visitors from all over the world an unforgettable experience and a world-class maritime celebration.

"It is an immense honor for the Coast Guard Barque *Eagle* and crew to participate in the Sail250 festivities and celebrate the 250th anniversary of our nation," said USCG Captain Kristopher Ensley, commanding officer of *Eagle*. "This voyage not only serves as a vital training experience for the next generation of Coast Guard officers but also allows us to share America's proud maritime heritage with the public. We are thrilled to visit these historic ports and to sail alongside magnificent vessels from around the world."

For the first time since 1976, *Eagle* and its sister ships, *Gorch Fock* (Germany), *Sagres* (Portugal), and *Mircea* (Romania), will be competing for the Five Sisters Trophy. The sail race begins on July 9, off the coast of New York and ends in Boston. Public tour schedules for the *Eagle* at each port will be announced closer to the event dates.

THE SUMMER SCHEDULE INCLUDES THE FOLLOWING DATES AND LOCATIONS:

June 25 – 28	Baltimore, MD
July 4 – 8	New York City, NY
July 11 – 14	Boston, MA
July 24 – 27	Portland, ME
July 31 – August 3	Newport, RI
August 7 – 10	Greenport, NY
August 14	New London, CT

For a continuous stream of information about *Eagle*, including port cities, tour schedules, current events, and active duty crewmember photographs, follow the United States Coast Guard Barque

Eagle Facebook page
or on Instagram @barqueeagle.

Happy 90th Birthday to USCGC *Eagle* ...

To commemorate its commissioning on September 17, 1936, and in anticipation of its prominent position in the 250th birthday celebration of the nation's founding, we are happy to provide some background information regarding USCGC Barque *Eagle* (WIX – 327).

Eagle commenced its existence in Weimar (Nazi) Germany as *Horst Wessel*, serving as a sail training ship for German sailors. It was the second ship of that class and was launched with much fanfare. Rudolf Hess gave the speech at the launch in the presence of Adolf Hitler, and *Horst Wessel's* mother christened the new ship. The name was given in tribute to SA leader *Horst Wessel*, who had been accorded martyr status by the Nazi Party.

Commissioned as an active Navy sail training ship, between 1942 through early 1945 the *Horst Wessel* sailed on numerous training deployments in the Baltic Sea with cadets fresh out of basic training. In April 1945, after the last German cadet had departed, it was ordered to Bremerhaven and tied up to a temporary pier, where much of its equipment was stripped.

At the end of World War II, the four extant German sailing vessels were distributed to various nations as war reparations. *Horst Wessel* was won by the United States in a drawing of lots with the Soviet and British navies, and requested by the United States Coast Guard Academy's Superintendent. The ship's masts, sails, and other equipment were stripped from the Russian sister ship, according to Command Master Chief William Bodine, Jr. who was the senior enlisted man on the voyage and in charge of rigging the ship for sail.

On 15 May, 1946, the *Horst Wessel* was commissioned by CDR Gordon McGowan into the United States Coast Guard as the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Eagle*. In June 1946, the Coast Guard crew sailed her from Bremerhaven to Orangeburg, New York – through a hurricane – assisted by a German volunteer crew. The German crew was disembarked at Camp Shanks and *Eagle* proceeded to her new home port of New London, Connecticut.





Coast Guard Heritage Museum

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COAST GUARD HERITAGE MUSEUM SCHEDULE HOURS

- Memorial Day to Columbus Day: Tuesday-Saturday, 10am-3pm
- Columbus Day to Veterans' Day: Thursday, Friday, Saturday, 10am-3pm

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.

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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.