



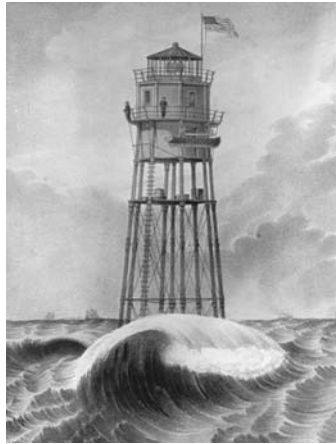
Coast Guard Heritage Museum

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

Spring 2024 Newsletter

History of Minot's Ledge Light, 173 years ago!

On Thursday, April 17, 1851, the lighthouse at Minot's Ledge collapsed into the sea a mile off the Massachusetts Coast, killing both its young keepers, Joseph Wilson an Englishman, and Joseph Antoine, a 25 year-old native of Portugal. This gale would be immortalized as the Minot's Light Storm. Located south of Boston, the failure of this brand-new lighthouse had been in the making for years. Local Native Americans believed that evil spirits inhabited Minot's Ledge and the rock outcropping roiled-up stormy seas whenever they failed to provide offerings to the spirits. European settlement of the area brought with it ships. Sea captains unfamiliar with local waters would sail too close to the uncharted rocks when approaching Boston Harbor and lose their vessels to the ledge. A vessel owned by George Minot was one of these lost ships, so the ledge took its name from the unfortunate ship owner. Over 40 vessels wrecked on the ledge before 1841 and at least 40 lives were lost prior to 1850.



Finally, in the early 1840s, the U.S. Lighthouse Service decided to erect a lighthouse on Minot's Ledge, which sits a mile offshore. All previous U.S. lighthouses had been built on dry land, so the service sent an engineer to England to research offshore lighthouses in that country. He returned and designed a structure of eight iron pilings and a central iron column supporting a 30-ton lantern room and a keeper's quarters complex. The structure was nicknamed "The Iron Lighthouse" from its construction,

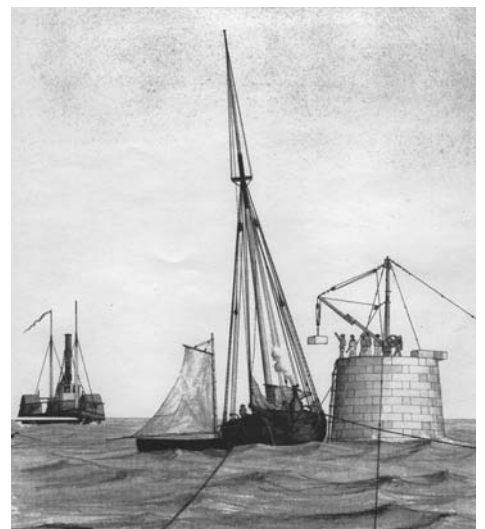


and much praise was given to its engineers. At that time, the theory behind the structure held that heavy seas would find little resistance from iron stilts, while heavy seas could collapse a monolithic tower structure.

The new Minot's Ledge Light began service on New Year's Day 1850. From the beginning, the structure showed signs of structural weakness and swayed with the action of the waves below. The iron support structure was constantly tightened and re-worked to stop the swaying, but nothing could alleviate the problem. In fear for his life, Minot's Light's first keeper resigned after 10 months and his successor tried his best to improve the structural integrity of the light.

In 1851, a mid-April storm struck the coast and continued wearing on the structure for days. Eventually, the central iron column snapped placing the load-bearing burden on the eight outer stilts. With the seas churning beneath the lighthouse, the two keepers were trapped in the swaying quarters. Within hours, the eight stilts began the sickening process of snapping one-by-one. In the early morning of April 17th, the keepers took their lives in their hands and jumped into the stormy seas as the lantern room and quarters slid into the sea. One of the men managed to swim to a nearby rock, only to die of exposure, while the other drowned in the surf and washed ashore.

In the span of a year, the lighthouse that began as the engineering marvel of its day had become one of the great technological failures in U.S. Lighthouse Service history. However, within 10 years, a new engineering marvel would spring up in its place. Between 1851 and 1860, a lightship guarded the ledge. Meanwhile, plans for a 100-foot lighthouse were drawn up by the Service and model makers built the proposed tower in miniature.



cont'd on page 2

The Lighthouse Service approved the tower design, and construction began in April 1855. The new lighthouse would be built of stone so the ledge had to be cut down to receive the foundation blocks. In June, the iron stumps of the first tower were removed, and 20-foot anchoring iron shafts were set in the holes where the old pilings had stood. The large hold left by the central column was left open to form a cavity for storing drinking water. At the same time, crews began cutting and assembling granite blocks on Government Island, near Cohasset.

In January 1857, during a severe storm, the sailing barque *New Empire* struck the construction framework demolishing the project's construction scaffolding. The builders erected a temporary cofferdam from sandbags, so the foundation blocks, laid two feet under the surface of low tide, could be cemented to the ledge.

In the Spring of 1857, the work began and the first stone was finally laid on July 9th. Seven massive blocks formed the foundation. Strap iron between each stone course kept the two-ton granite blocks apart while the cement hardened. In addition, the Service's first steam-powered vessel, Lighthouse Tender Van Santvoort, became the project's support vessel, providing reliable delivery of stones and construction materials and transportation for crews to and from the shore.

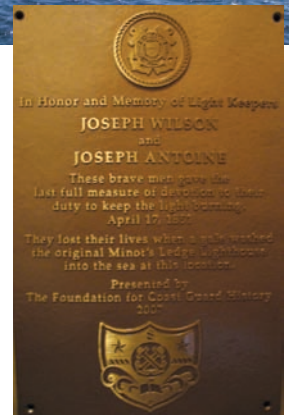
Minot's Ledge Lighthouse has withstood every subsequent gale with the largest waves causing only strong vibrations. On some occasions, the seas have actually swept over the top of the lighthouse causing leaky windows or a few cracked lens prisms. In 1894, a new flashing lantern was installed with a one-four-three flash, which spectators on shore found contained the same numeric count as the words "I love you". As a result, Minot's Ledge Light became known as the "Lover's Light". In 1947, the service automated the lighthouse and today, its 45,000 candlepower light is visible for 15 miles.



In June 2007, an expedition supported by personnel and assets from over a dozen local, municipal, state and federal agencies returned to the site of the 1851 lighthouse collapse. From the decks of Coast Guard buoy tender *Abbie Burgess*, divers surveyed the site and located artifacts left from the original structure.



In addition, the party placed a memorial plaque on the ledge honoring the two keepers who died when the iron structure sank into the sea. The devotion to duty exhibited by these two brave men, and all keepers who have died while keeping the light, remains an important chapter in the U.S. Coast Guard's long blue line.



William Thiesen, Historian Coast Guard Atlantic Area



On Monday, February 28, we were privileged to have members of the senior enlisted leadership from Base Cape Cod volunteer their time and expertise at the Museum. Organized by YNC Rebecca Davis, 14 senior petty officers from the various departments at the Base spent the better part of the day chipping, taping, painting, hammering, boxing books and fixing things us more "senior" volunteers at the Museum have difficulty accomplishing. Their time and effort are very greatly appreciated by us all at the Museum. Bravo Zulu!

President's Report

With our museum beginning its 20th year here in Barnstable Village, we are excited about many new opportunities on our plate. The American Alliance of Museums and Institute of Museum and Library Services is working with us to complete a museum assessment of the CG Heritage Museum. This program will allow us to refine our policies and long-term strategic plan, improve our fund-raising efforts, and realize positive impacts to our visitor experience.

Some of the many exciting projects on which we are currently working include the installation of a major new exhibit in our changing exhibit gallery, the commissioning of an important large painting to be permanently displayed in the Great Hall of the Massachusetts State House, and the addition of an outdoor pavilion on the museum grounds. The extraordinary piece of art for the State House will commemorate the Commonwealth as the birthplace of the United States Coast Guard and hopefully will be unveiled during a summer 2025 ceremony.

We're also moving forward with our efforts to create a National Coast Guard Museum Network, working closely with the Foundation for Coast Guard History and the National Coast Guard Museum Association.



Our new Coast Guard Arts and Entertainment exhibit will open in May, if some necessary building repairs to an exterior gallery wall are completed in time. The exhibit will explore many forms of art – from trench art to the literature of Alex Haley and Joseph C. Lincoln and from music to marlinspike seamanship.



We will be showing a continuous loop of movie trailers that feature the Coast Guard and a display of Coast Guard-themed toys and games from the 19th and 20th century.

In addition to financial support for our museum assessment initiative (funds that we have already received), we are also working on several new grants and corporate sponsorships for use on our archive upgrades, expansion of our research library, a new HVAC system, and the State House painting.

We are very happy to have three new directors on our board: Captain Clint Prindle (Commander, CG Sector SE New England), Jon Howard (Retired CG Master Chief), and Don Severy (retired CG Senior Chief).

Greg Ketchen, Captain, USCG(retired)

**Our Members-Only Night this summer
will be on Friday, August 2, 6:30 – 8 pm
(rain-date August 3)**



Painting by artist Anton Fischer, above our fireplace. His seascapes were used in recruiting for the Coast Guard during WW II.

Two Days before Christmas 1955 - V. Roulund

Two days before Christmas 1955, a helicopter rescue took place that changed the direction of Coast Guard aviation. This case firmly bonded the helicopter to the U.S. Coast Guard in the public's mind and laid the groundwork for all further aircraft acquisitions. It took only one helicopter with a hoist and four very brave crewmen to change the future of CG aviation . . .

Barret T. Beard for *Coast Guard Aviation Association*

One of Northern California's biggest flood disasters struck Yuba City with the bursting of a storm-weakened river dike on December 23, 1955. More water than cascades over Niagara Falls poured through the breach into the city. One Coast Guard helicopter, in the region with a hoist and rescue basket, hoisted 138 victims to safety within 12 hours. The first 58 in peril were born away in darkness, their rescue aided only by the beam of a hand-held searchlight.

By Christmas Eve, the Coast Guard assisted in saving over 500 stranded people by helicopters and small boats brought into the area. The floods scattered across 75,000 square miles, drove 112,000 people from their homes, injured 4,325, and killed 82.

Based at Coast Guard Air Station San Francisco, the helicopter was a newly developed HO4S-3G. It far exceeded the capabilities of Coast Guard helicopters used since World War II and could carry its crew as well as large groups of passengers in an enclosed cabin.

Standard equipment included a rescue hoist capable of lifting 400 pounds and a rescue basket. In addition, the HO4S-3G was the first Coast Guard rescue helicopter equipped for nighttime use, an essential feature for rescue operations.

Continued on page 4

The helicopter was manned by pilots LCDR George Thometz and Lt. Henry Pfeiffer, with crew members CPO Joseph Accamo and PO 2nd Class Victor Roulund. Hundreds of Yuba City flood victims looked to these men and their HO4S-3G for their salvation.



LCDR George Thometz, Lt. Henry Pfeiffer, with crew members CPO Joseph Accamo & PO 2nd Class Victor Roulund

Over a 12-hour period the aviators worked in shifts of two, one pilot and one crew member, to avoid exhaustion. Pfeiffer, the more experienced pilot and qualified for night flight, began the search operation in darkness. In his first rescue, Pfeiffer flew over a rooftop where a mother was clutching her children. He brought the helicopter in for a close hover, and Accamo lowered the basket. It was the start of a routine that repeated itself throughout the night and into the next day. During this routine the crew would fill the cabin with survivors, rush to the local airport situated on high ground, safely deposit their load of passengers and rush back to rescue the next batch of victims.

Just before daybreak, Pfeiffer took one last trip before Thometz took over. Pfeiffer had learned from a rescued man that the man's paralyzed wife was trapped in their flooded mobile home. Pfeiffer took off immediately with both Accamo and Roulund aboard, even though they had been flying with just one pilot and one crewman at a time. This trip, two crew members were needed, one on the ground to get the woman and the other in the helicopter to hoist the basket.

Pfeiffer arrived on scene and put the helicopter into a hover over the partially submerged mobile home. Accamo lowered Roulund in a basket to the roof. Using an ax, Roulund chopped a hole in the roof and found the paralyzed woman floating on a mattress in the bedroom. Roulund carried her in muddy waist-deep water through the flooded home and out the front door. He then stood in the floodwaters and signaled the helicopter with his flashlight. Accamo lowered the basket, Roulund put the woman in it, and Accamo hoisted her to safety. On another rescue, equipped with a stretcher, Accamo jumped from the helicopter to the roof of a house and brought aboard a polio-stricken woman.

With daylight, Thometz rescued 15 children from the top of a house. Later he recounted: "We just kept lowering the basket and bringing them up. Then we went back and picked up their six fathers."

The two pilots alternated pilot duties throughout the rest of the day. Working with Accamo as his hoist operator, Pfeiffer made 75 rescues. Working with Roulund as his hoist operator, Thometz made 63 rescues. Thometz later recounted his trickiest pick-up was hoisting a survivor from a stepladder.

Flying without co-pilots, Pfeiffer and Thometz grew weary from the strain of tension-filled flying and accumulated hours. When Pfeiffer landed at Air Station San Francisco on the night of the 24th, his left hand and arm were badly swollen and he limped on his left leg. The constant hand shifting of the helicopter's collective and cyclic controls and the ceaseless adjusting for helicopter torque by pushing on rudder pedals caused these ailments. Both Accamo and Roulund had knees rubbed raw from hoisting duties and lacerated hands from the constant extracting, lifting and pulling victims from the rescue basket into the helicopter cabin.

Using the HO4S-3G, the Coast Guard aviators saved 138 men, women and children, including disabled victims requiring additional assistance. Their helicopter was never shut down and had to be "hot-fueled" while the engine was running. Besides the flood's devastation, the fact that it occurred during Christmas drew the attention of a nation. The flood rescue was covered by *Look*, *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines, and it made the front page of the *New York Times* on Christmas Day.

For their expert airmanship and performance of duty, George Thometz, Henry Pfeiffer, Joseph Accamo, and Victor Roulund were each awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.



Editor's Note: *Because AD2 Roulund's actions have since been considered the first example of typical mission challenges faced by present day Coast Guard Rescue Swimmers, the Victor Roulund Rescue Swimmer Meritorious Achievement Award was established in 2015. Sponsored by the Coast Guard Aviation Association, its purpose is "to recognize individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the U.S. Coast Guard Aviation Rescue Swimmer Program through sustained superior performance, significant initiative in technology or tactics, and unique or extraordinary accomplishments in other areas associated with the Program".*

Material for this article came from sources including the Coast Guard Aviation Association's Barrett T. Beard (LCDR USCG retired); C. Douglas Kroll, Ph.D., USCG Auxiliary; John Mosley, Historian, CGAA, and the December 2023 *Soldier of Fortune Magazine*.

A Sob Story: Communicating Across the Wide Blue Yonder

This was my first polar flight. It was from London to Los Angeles. Atop the thick folder of preflight paperwork handed to me in TWA's dispatch office at Heathrow Airport was an envelope marked, "Sergeant McMillan, Sob Story."

What was this, I wondered, and asked the dispatcher what I was supposed to do with the envelope. "Oh," he replied in a Cockney accent. "You must be new. You'll be passing over a radar site called Sob Story on the Greenland ice cap. This is a note for Sergeant McMillan, who is stationed there, a message from his wife who would appreciate your reading it to him as you pass overhead."

Sob Story, I learned later, was one link in a chain of U.S. radar stations extending from the Aleutian Islands and across the top of North America to Greenland. This chain of radar sites was established early in the Cold War to detect Soviet bombers heading for America from across the roof of the world, the direct route between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. This was the Distant Early Warning Line or DEW Line.

As our Boeing 707 approached Sob Story hours later, I called the radar site on the published VHF frequency and asked for Sergeant McMillan. Looking down on the Middle of Nowhere, I could understand how this lonely outpost got its name. I read the message to him, one that he could not have been happy to receive and was too personal to reveal here. Two others on the site then asked if we would pass along messages to friends in Los Angeles, which, of course, we were pleased to do. We then exchanged a few unrepeatable jokes.

Such chatting when passing Sob Story – as well as another radar site on the ice cap, Big Gun – provided an enjoyable respite on those polar flights. Because most traffic passed well south and beyond VHF range of these radar sites, having an airline pass overhead was almost a cause for celebration on the ice below. With the later development of ICBMs and submarine-launched nuclear missiles, the DEW Line became obsolete. Sob Story was abandoned in 1988 and continues to sink slowly into the ice.

Before the advent of long-range radio aids to navigation such as Loran C, Omega, and GPS, it was difficult to get an accurate navigation fix when flying, for example, between California and Hawaii. I take that back. There was one radio aid, a low-frequency radio beacon floating halfway along the route to Hawaii. Well, it wasn't floating in the conventional sense.

The 335-kilocycle signal was transmitted from Ocean Station November, a Coast Guard cutter stationed at the midpoint of the route. Navigating to Hawaii in those days involved having only to get within ADF (automatic direction finder) and radar range of November. The cutter did not, of course, maintain a fixed position in the middle of the ocean. It was required only to stay within a 210-mile square centered 30 degrees North, 140 degrees West. The radar operator aboard the ship provided passing pilots with a position that a pilot could plot on his chart.

Remember the Coast Guard vessel rolling in heavy seas in the 1954 movie *The High and The Mighty*? That was Ocean Station November.

Following the end of World War II, the United States began to establish a global network of these ocean stations to assist in navigation and serve as weather reporting stations. Those flying across the North Atlantic, for example, used Ocean Stations Charlie and Juliet, which were stationed between Newfoundland and Ireland.

Getting a positive fix in mid-ocean was comforting, especially because it enabled us to determine actual drift and groundspeed. As with DEW Line radar sites, it was amusing to exchange off-color jokes with the Coast Guardsmen. It was also not unusual for passing pilots to be asked to relay messages to family and friends at home.

Until the program ended in 1974, ocean stations also came to the rescue of aircraft having to ditch. One such notable ditching occurred in 1956 when Pan Am Flight 6 (erroneously called Flight 943), a Boeing 377 Stratocruiser flying from Honolulu to San Francisco, lost two engines on this, the last leg of its flight around the world. The airliner had passed its point of no return and had insufficient fuel to continue to the mainland. November laid out a foam path to provide a quasi-runway. All aboard were rescued by November, and the aircraft sank 21 minutes after ditching.

If you'd like to see a video of the actual ditching and rescue, go to YouTube and search for Ready on Ocean Station November, the title of the Coast Guard production.

Editor's Note: *Barry Schiff has been an aviation media consultant and technical advisor for motion pictures for more than 40 years. He is the chairman of the AOPA Foundation Legacy Society.*



Coast Guard Heritage Museum

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

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Barry Schiff
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Visit us at www.capecodmuseumtrail.com

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PLEASE NOTE NEW MUSEUM SCHEDULE

For the 2024 Season the Coast Guard Heritage Museum hours will be:

- 2 May to Memorial Day: Thurs, Fri, Sat 10:00-3:00
- Memorial Day to Columbus Day: Tues-Sat 10:00-3:00
- Columbus Day to Veterans' Day: Thurs, Fri, Sat 10:00-3:00

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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Card Number: _____ Expiration Date: Month _____ Year _____

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.