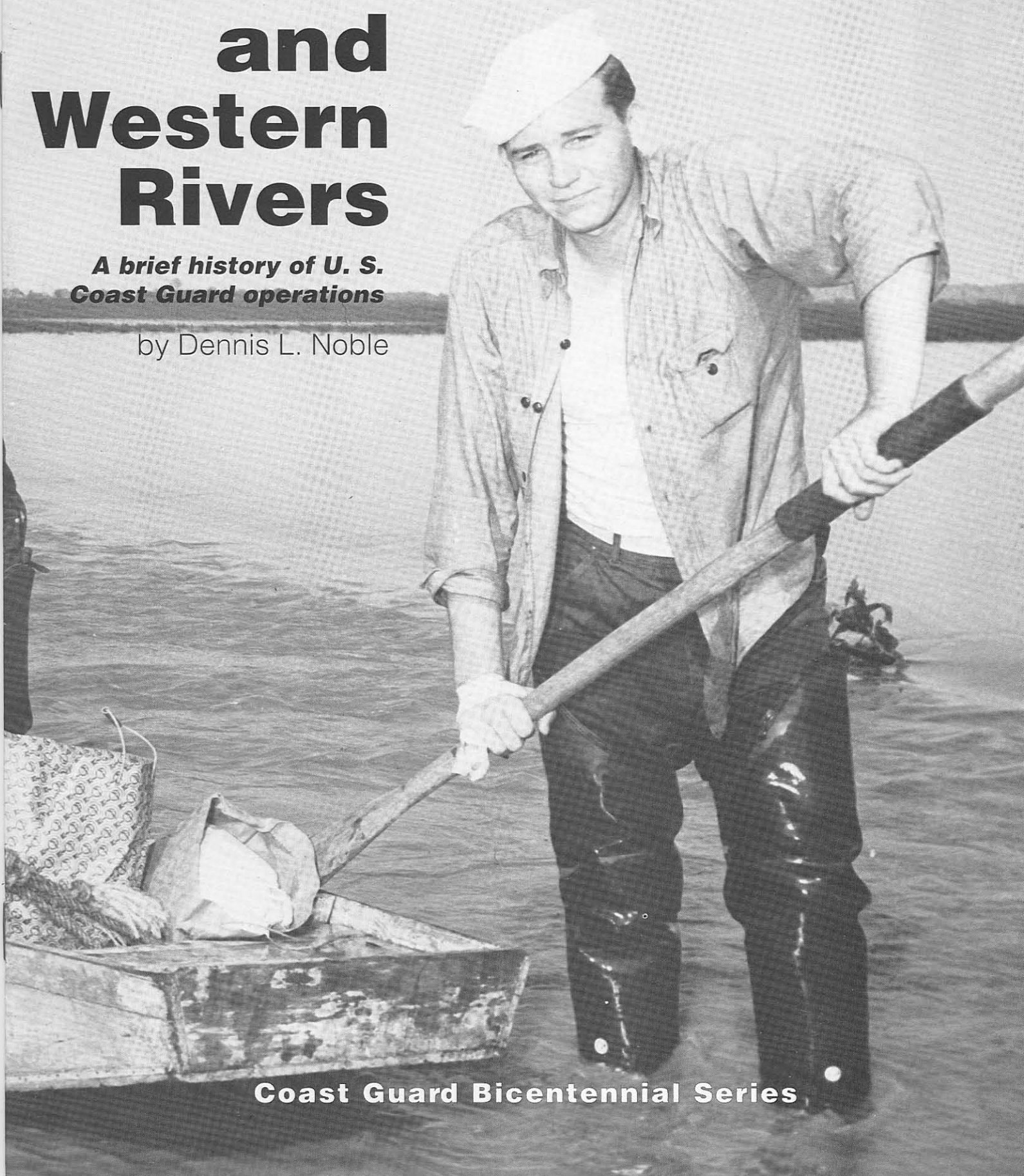


Gulf Coast and Western Rivers

*A brief history of U. S.
Coast Guard operations*

by Dennis L. Noble



Coast Guard Bicentennial Series

I

n the nineteenth century the United States government had four small maritime organizations that assisted in saving lives, enforcing federal maritime

laws, guiding mariners safely to their destinations, and inspecting ships to insure the safety of passengers. In time, these organizations were amalgamated to form the modern day U. S. Coast Guard. The history of the U. S. Coast Guard along the swampy Gulf Coast, Florida's beach-swept Atlantic Coast and the nation's heavily commerce traveled Western Rivers provides an insight into the development of this multifaceted Service.



Coast Guard motor boats from various stations provide



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flood relief by transporting supplies in the saturated streets of Evansville, Ind., 1937.



Gilbert's Bar house of Refuge, 1930. These stations, located only in warm regions, provided shelter for shipwrecked sailors.

In order to grow, the fledgling United States needed a strong maritime trade business. The combination of stormy weather, hazardous coastlines and poor navigational tools made maritime trade a risky business. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first lighthouse in North America was established in the busy harbor of Boston, on Little Brewster Island, in 1791. Thereafter, lighthouses spread slowly along the coastlines as the country grew.

The first federal sea coast lighthouse on the Gulf Coast was begun in 1818 at Frank's Island, La., but never put into operation due to an inadequate foundation. It was rebuilt in 1823 and remained in operation until 1856, when it was replaced by the Pass a l'Outre Lighthouse.

The topography of the southern coastal region dictated the type of light structure to be erected. In areas of low sandy beaches, tall towers were built so

that mariners could see the light at a greater distance out to sea. The light at Pensacola, Fla., for example, established in 1824, could be seen for 21 miles off-shore. Bays and sounds with soft muddy bottoms were unable to support the weight of a tall tower. For those areas, a protected screw-pile light was built, such as at Redfish Bar, Galveston, Texas, first lit in 1854. These structures had metal legs with screw-like flange tips on their ends. The legs turned instead of being pounded into the bottom. Atop the legs, the main building was a wooden house. This type of light weight structure could easily be carried by the muddy bottom. In exposed areas, such as Ship Shoal, La., there was also another type of screw-pile light. These differed from the protected types in that the light was tall, with an iron skeleton tower. Added to some of the screw-type flanges were large, iron-foot plates to diffuse the pressure of the

tower. A good example of this structure is at Fowey Rocks, Fla., established in 1878.

Along the Western Rivers there was one lighthouse at Natchez, Miss., but the U.S. Lighthouse Service maintained buoys and river lights. Prior to 1874, traffic on the Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio Rivers was usually restricted to daylight hours. The twisting rivers, snags, and sandbars made night navigation almost impossible. A demand by the river transportation companies made Congress authorize a study for lighting the rivers.

The lighting devices used on the rivers were simply lanterns hung from posts, known as post lights. One keeper would oversee a number of these lights, which were designed for easy maintenance. By 1890, over 1,500 post lights were helping navigation over 1,500 miles on eighteen rivers and Puget Sound. By 1917, there were 1,798 lights and 861 buoys and bea-



New Orleans Lightship. Lightship duty was often lonely and monotonous, plus dangerous due to collisions and hurricanes.

cons marking 4,226 miles of the Mississippi, Ohio, and other tributaries.

Contrary to popular opinion, the life of a lighthouse keeper was anything but romantic. The technology of the nineteenth century ensured a life of monotony and loneliness. Fuel to light the beacons throughout the century ranged from whale oil, lard oil, rapeseed oil, and, finally, petroleum products. The main lighting device was a lamp and a wick. The best light was produced from a well trimmed wick, so keepers spent an inordinate amount of time trimming. The constant attention to this chore led all lighthouse keepers to quickly earn the name "wickie."

There are, of course, always exceptions to any type of life. On September 27, 1906, for example, a hurricane swept the state of Mississippi's coastline. The storm

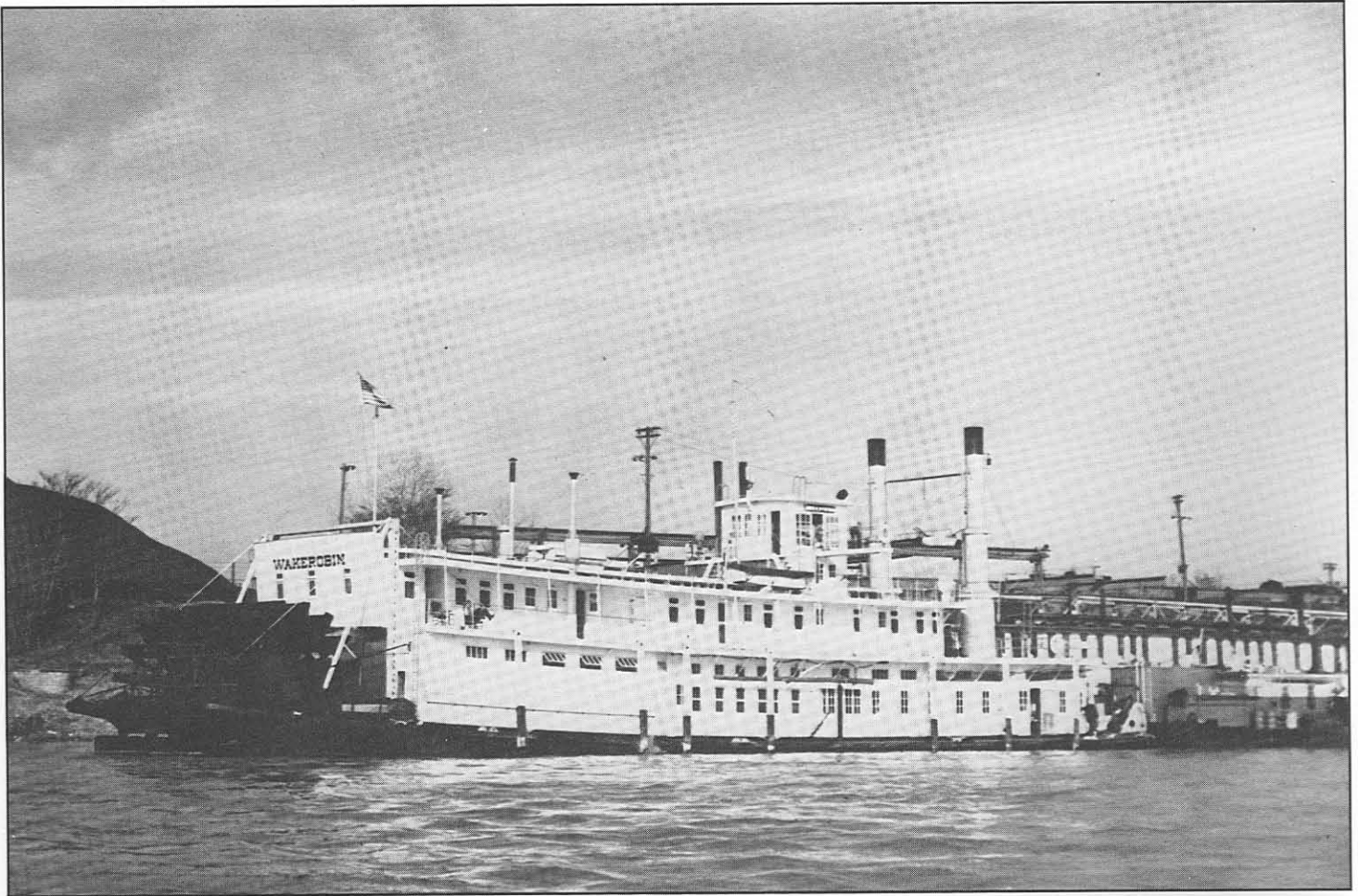
completely crushed the Horn Island Lighthouse, killing the keeper, his wife, and daughter. Three more people were killed at Sand Island, La. After the hurricane, the local inspector sent the following telegram, "Sand Island Light out. Island washed away. Keepers not to be found."

Duty aboard lightships was also both lonely and dangerous. Lightships were placed at locations where the technology of the day could not erect a light structure. Sailors aboard these vessels faced danger from a gale blowing them off station and onto the beach, or capsizing them. Lying in the path of hurricanes, this was a constant threat. On September 16, 1875, for example, the Galveston Lightship broke its moorings and ran aground on Pelican Island and, again, in 1900, she was driven off station. Another risk was the possible collision with a ship making its way through foul weather.

No matter how lonely or dangerous, lighthouse employees in the southern coastal region and along the Western Rivers were dedicated and brave. The annual reports of the Lighthouse Service are replete with reports of rescues undertaken at great risk. In the hurricane of 1906, 23 lights were damaged, but an inspector wrote that he had "heard stories of gallant actions" and had personally "witnessed the uncomplaining manner" in which keepers had taken their losses and "their cheerfulness in beginning all over again." The attendants along rivers were no less brave.

Light attendants on the Western Rivers were constantly having to replace lights destroyed by floods and assisting those in distress due to the high waters.

By the 1930s, the U.S. Lighthouse Service was well established along the southern coastal region and the Western Rivers. The service claimed



The early rivertender *Wakerobin* illustrates the old U.S. Lighthouse Service's shallow draft stern wheelers used on inland rivers.

67 lighthouses along the east coast of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, lightships, hundreds of minor aids to navigation, river lights, and a fleet of ships, called tenders. Tenders were used to service buoys and lighthouses.

Another early federal organization that played an important role in the maritime affairs of the southern coastal region came about due to smuggling. Prior to the American Revolution, some colonists, in order to escape what they felt were oppressive taxes, resorted to smuggling. The war with England made these smugglers something akin to heroes, as they robbed King George for needed revenue. The new United States, however, soon found that they badly needed revenue and one way to obtain it was placing tariffs on imported goods. The smugglers saw very little difference between taxes imposed by the King of England or the United States' new Congress and continued

their illegal trade. Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury, sought to curb the loss of taxes by establishing a maritime police force. He requested Congress to authorize the building of ten small boats, to patrol along the Atlantic coastline to stop the smugglers. In 1790, this force was established and the cutters were very successful in their work. While they could not completely stop the illegal activities, they made it very unprofitable and helped recover needed revenue.

Having proved their worth, the small ships were soon assigned other duties. In the Quasi-War with France (1798-1800) the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service assumed the role as a military organization. The U.S. Navy was disbanded after the Revolution and, when the difficulties flared up with France, the small cutters were the only federal sea-going organization capable of battle. In general, the Service acquitted itself well. Of the 20 ships captured

during the war flying the French flag, 16 were taken by the revenue cutters unaided and they assisted in the capture of two more.

The Revenue Cutter Service was soon busily engaged in the southern coastal region. In the early nineteenth century pirates operated throughout the Gulf of Mexico. The notorious Jean Laffitte, for example, operated out of New Orleans. The Florida Keys was another favorite area for buccaneers. Pirates, of course, interfered with U.S. trade and revenue, so it was natural that the Revenue Cutter Service would be given the job of combating this loss of revenue. In 1819 the Service gained 2 new cutters to confront the freebooters, the *Alabama* and *Louisiana*. Each was constructed 57 feet in length, 17 feet in beam, and with a shallow draft of 6 feet, and upon completion ordered to take station in New Orleans.

On their maiden voyage south, on August 31, 1819, the cutters fought it out with the *Bravo*, commanded by Jean Lafarge, one of Lafitte's lieutenants. A volley of musketry wounded the first officer and three men aboard the *Louisiana*. Captain Jarvis Loomis, ordered boarders to take the *Bravo*. The cuttermen sank the pirate ship *Bravo* with cannon fire. Later, in 1820, the *Louisiana* and *Alabama* still working together, raided Patterson's Town on Brenton Island, where the pirates rested from their pillage. Twenty-five "well armed" cuttermen landed at one end of the island and quietly made their way to the stronghold, where they attacked and destroyed the hideout. This effectively crushed and subdued the pirates in the Gulf of Mexico, although some pirateering continued. In 1822, for example, the *Louisiana* captured five pirate ships and the *Alabama* seized three slavers.

No sooner was the war against the pirates finished than the Revenue Cutter Service found itself embroiled in the Seminole War of 1836. Much of this conflict took place in swamps and close in to beaches, which prompted the Army and Navy to request the services of eight small cutters. The ships carried dispatches, supplies, and troops. The small boats from the cutters provided transportation for soldiers and marines into Florida's inland waters. At times, the cuttermen moved "through the sand-burrs and palmetoes" in pursuit of the elusive Seminoles. So effective was the Revenue Cutter Service that Congress raised the pay of crewmen and Florida rewarded the cutter crews with homesteads.

The Service returned to normal operations, but once again was interrupted by war. The Mexican War (1845-1848) engaged 10 cutters in gunfire support for amphibious landings, blockade duty, scouting duty, and transportation of troops and supplies.

In addition to military duties, the Revenue Cutter Service also had a humanitarian role. In 1832, the cutters were ordered to undertake "winter cruising" in the North Atlantic. This provided a service in the stormy months when sailing ships were most likely to need assis-

Early nineteenth century pirates ran rampant throughout the Gulf of Mexico and the Florida Keys, plundering cargo-laden trade ships and savagely murdering crewmen.

tance. The humanitarian efforts of the Service are well illustrated by Second Assistant Engineer Charles S. Root, stationed aboard the cutter *Galveston* at Galveston during the hurricane of September 8, 1900. Root asked for volunteers to assist him in taking a small boat to those stranded throughout the city. At the time, the lower portions of the city were flooded to a depth of 4 to 5 feet, and rising. As night rapidly approached, the boat crew was pounded by winds of 84 to 100 miles per hour, "while buildings of the most substantial character were toppling over, and the air was filled with flying debris of all sorts ..."

The boat crew rowed, at times leaping overboard to push the boat through swirling waters while dodging debris blown by the strong winds. Seaman James Bierman periodically

swam from point to point hauling the boat with a rope, "thus exposing himself to much additional danger." Root and his crew of volunteers managed to rescue 21 people. For their work, Second Assistant Engineer Root and Seaman Bierman each received the Gold Life Saving Medal, the highest medal for lifesaving bestowed by the Treasury Department, while the remaining seven crewmen won the Silver Life Saving Medal, the second highest award.

By the middle of the second decade in the Twentieth Century, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service was well established along the southern coastal region of the United States. It had proven itself capable of enforcing the maritime laws of the United States, responding to military needs, and providing a rescue service for those in peril upon the sea.

The U.S. Coast Guard commands a well deserved reputation as a lifesaver. The U.S. Life-Saving Service laid the foundations for this enduring service to preserve life and property. In the days of sail, ships stranded near the beach could expect very little help from other craft, for they also stood an excellent chance of being forced ashore if caught in a sudden on-shore squall. The best chance for rescue came from small shore-based boats. The first small boat rescue stations in this country were due to the efforts of volunteer organizations, such as the Massachusetts Humane Society. The stations established, however, were only in areas of high shipping, which left much of the coastline unprotected. In 1848, the federal government entered the shore-based lifesaving business. It suffered many organizational problems until 1871, when Sumner Increase Kimball was appointed to head the Treasury Department's Revenue Marine Division. Kimball completely reorganized and professionalized the



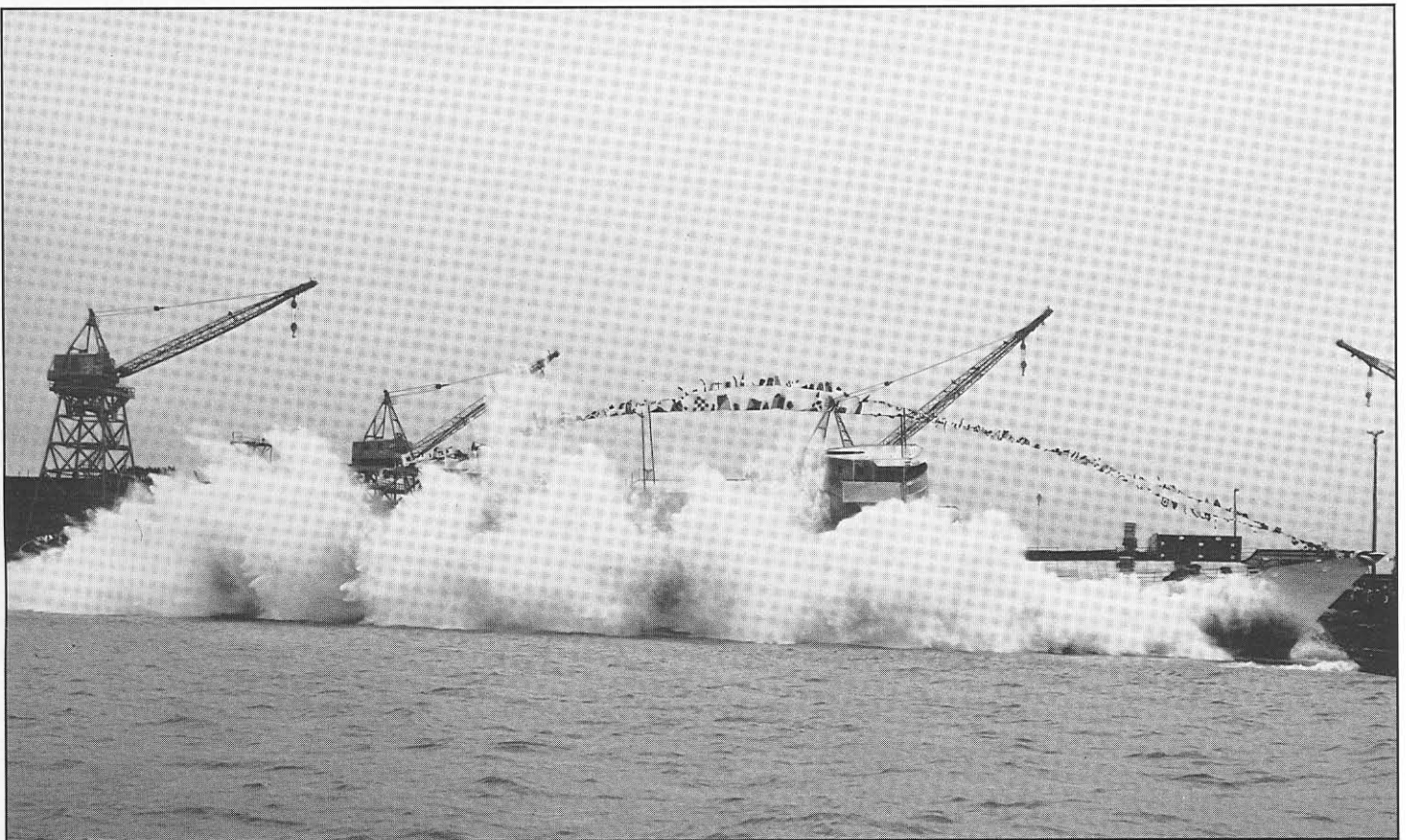
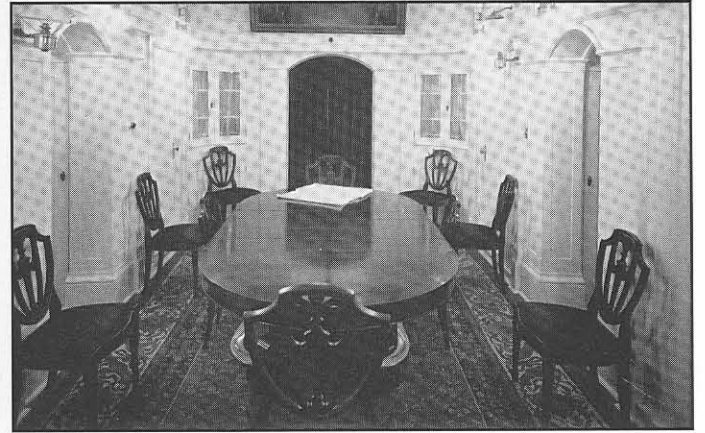
Top: Flood relief operations on the Tennessee River near Paduca, Ky., in January, 1937. *Right:* Coast Guard emergency flood boats are “flipped” into the Ohio River at Louisville, Kentucky Lifeboat Station, the Coast Guard’s only floating lifeboat station on the rivers. As one Coast Guardsman succinctly stated, “In case of flood we don’t use trucks, we just hit the water.”



Top left: Pensacola Light, Fla., built in 1825, can be seen over 20 miles out to sea.

Directly below: This is not the dining room of a posh hotel, but the wardroom of the old Lighthouse Service tender *Greenbrier*.

Bottom: The *Hamilton* (then WPG 715, now WHEC 715) is launched at Avondale Shipyards, New Orleans, La., Dec. 18, 1965. *Hamilton* was the first large cutter built in the Gulf of Mexico.





Coast Guardsmen place sandbags along a rising river. Flood duty periodically occurs along the Western rivers.

U.S. Life-Saving Service and, in 1871, was appointed the General Superintendent of the Service.

The Service had basically three types of stations, lifeboat, lifesaving, and houses of refuge. The stations in the southern coastal region tended to be of the latter two types. Houses of refuge sheltered shipwrecked sailors along Florida's east coast and were manned by a single keeper. Lifesaving stations, on the other hand, were for very isolated areas and were manned by a full crew, equipped with both a 700 to 1,000 pound, oar powered surfboat, or a 2 to 4 ton oar propelled lifeboat. Each boat was self-bailing and self-righting. In the southern coastal region, houses of refuge were located at: Bethel Bay, Cape Malabar, Chester Shoal, Gilberts Bar, Indian River, Indian River Inlet, Mosquito Lagoon, and Orange Grove, all in Florida. Lifesaving stations were at Aransas,

Brazos, Galveston, Sabine Pass, Saluria, San Luis, and Velasco, all in Texas.

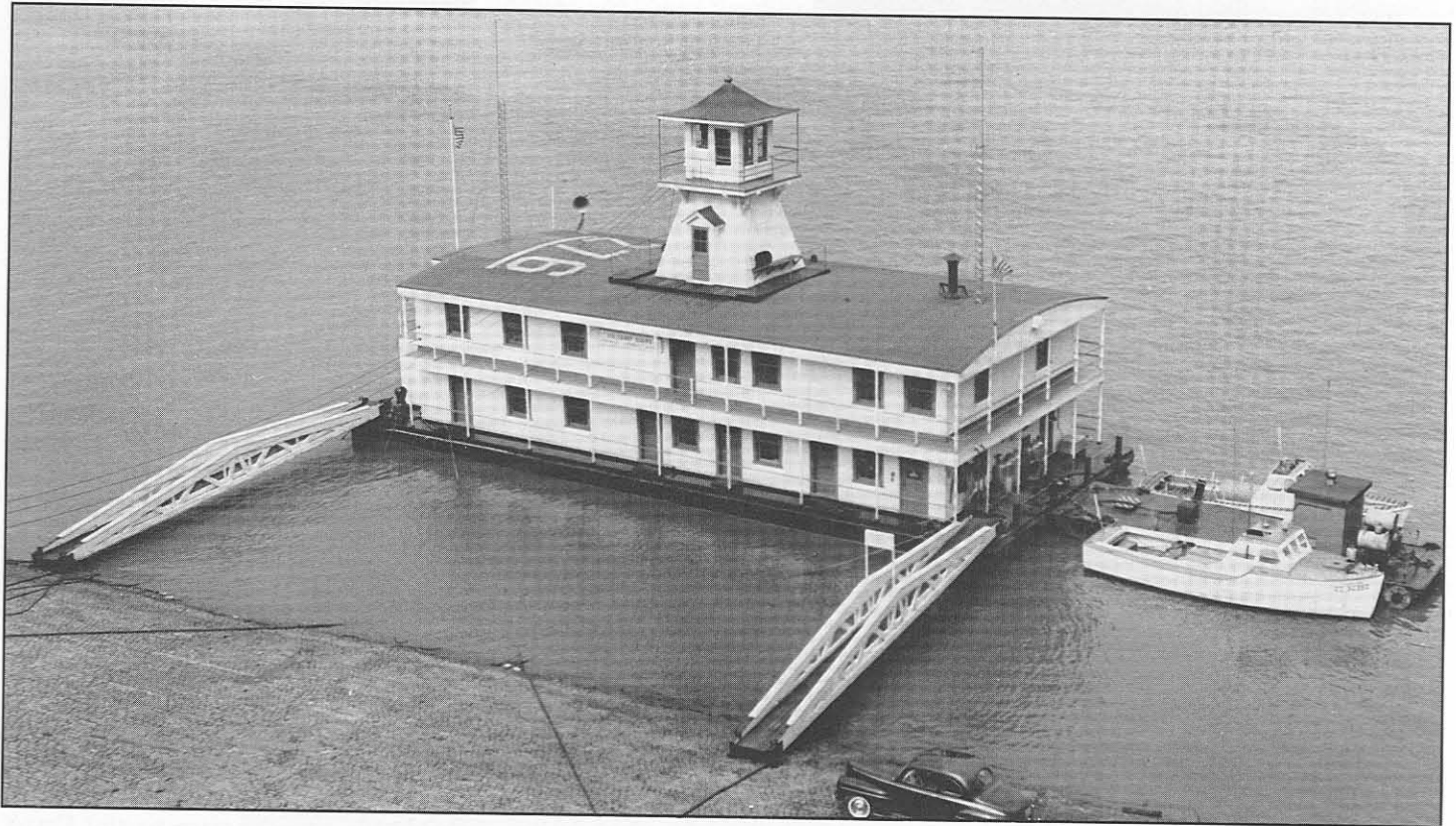
The most unusual of all the stations of the U.S. Life-Saving Service, and the only one of its kind in the world, was established at the falls of the Ohio River at Louisville, Ky. The first station, a houseboat, was wooden and placed into commission in 1881, later replaced by another wooden structure, which, in turn, was replaced by a steel hulled houseboat, built in Debuque, Iowa, in 1928.

Shortly after being commissioned, the crew of the station saved 14 people who had been carried over the falls. The following year the same crew rescued 200 people from the steamer James D. Parker after it struck a bridge and sank. In 1913, the Louisville Station crew was credited with saving 500 families in a flood at Dayton, Ohio. Keeper Benjamin G. Cameron, in 1899 was awarded a Silver Life Saving Medal

for saving 108 people on "various occasions from 1875 to 1897."

The last of the four federal maritime organizations operating in the region came about because of the advent of steam navigation. During the early years of steamboats, many lives were lost due to faulty boiler' explosions. In 1837, after the explosion of the Pulaski in North Carolina, with 100 lives lost, Congress finally passed an act "For the better security of the lives of passengers." This was the beginning of the U.S. Steamboat Inspection Service.

The Steamboat Inspection Service grew in fits and starts. There was a constant debate as to whether government or private industry should regulate safety at sea. When the Sultana in 1865, exploded on the Ohio River between Memphis, Tenn., and Cario, Ill. with a loss of 1,500, it prompted



The Louisville Kentucky station, operated near Ohio River Falls from 1883 to 1963, was the only one of its type in the world.

additional maritime safety regulations. The Service slowly built up and each new disaster refined the role of the organization.

A brief look at the Service's Louisville office provides an example of every-day operations on the Western Rivers. John Shallcross was assigned as the first United States Supervisory Inspector, in 1852. His district covered the Ohio River, and its tributaries, to above the mouth of the Kentucky River, with Louisville as headquarters. The local inspectors were Joseph Sweegur (Hulls) and Ruben Dawson (Machinery and Boilers). In the period from August 30 to November 28 in 1852, the office certified 72 steam vessels, licensed 176 pilots, and 263 engineers and assistants. The total tonnage inspected was 19,175 gross tons, which was sixth in the country, out of 25 reporting districts.

In 1903, the Service was transferred

from the Treasury Department to the Department of Labor and Commerce. In 1932, the Steamboat Inspection Service and the Bureau of Navigation were combined into the Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection. The Bureau was completely reorganized in 1934, and two years later renamed the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation.

On January 20, 1915, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and the U.S. Life-Saving Service were merged to form the U. S. Coast Guard. The first major task for the new Service after World War I, began in 1920 with Prohibition, the banning of alcoholic beverages in the United States. The Coast Guard waged a thirteen year battle – the rum war. A large expansion in personnel began in 1925 and new patrol boats and cutters were put on smuggler patrol.

Once the new equipment and crews were aboard, the Service adapted their strategy to the smuggler's tactics. Typically, the contraband was loaded in larger ships in a foreign country and then they would lie off-shore awaiting smaller boats. Small, fast boats met with the heavily laden ships, transferred their cargoes and raced to the beach. Coast Guard ships shadowed the large smuggling ships and reported the comings and goings of the contact boats to the faster patrol boats, which would then go after the on-coming smuggler's boat.

In the first years of the rum war there was almost a game-like attitude on both sides. Coast Guardsmen and rummies, in many cases, had a grudging respect for each other. However, on August 7, 1927 the situation changed dramatically when one Coast Guardsman was murdered and another mortally wounded. CG-249, command-



Left: Coast Guardsmen bring three Missouri flood victims to safety in Oct. 1986. Bottom: SN Jerry Ryder and SA Kelly Bell examine 155mm lantern, 20 feet above ground, while SN Tim Brennan lifts the battery box of the solar powered light near Sallisaw, Okla. Next page: A Douglas amphibian aircraft arrives at Air Station Biloxi, Miss. in 1925. The station was established for search and rescue efforts in the Gulf of Mexico.

ed by Boatswain Sidney C. Sanderlin, was transporting a Secret Service Agent, Robert K. Webster, to Bimini. Sanderlin noticed a suspicious boat and attempted to overtake it. The boat refused to heave-to so shots were placed across her bow, and she finally stopped. The boat, crewed by Horace Alderman and Robert W. Weech, had 160 cases of illegal liquor aboard. When Sanderlin went to radio his base about the seizure, Alderman shot and killed the Boatswain and mortally wounded Motor Machinist Mate First Class Victor A. Lamby. The rum runners took control of the patrol boat and threatened to kill everyone aboard. In a struggle to regain control, Agent Webster was killed and another Coast Guardsmen wounded. The smugglers, however, were overpowered. Alderman was hanged for his crime at the U. S. Coast Guard Section Base, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., in 1929, the only person ever executed by the Service.

The efforts to stop the flow of illegal spirits also caused international complications. The *I'm Alone*, a two masted schooner with two twin 100 horsepower auxiliary motors, was built especially for the smuggling trade. From 1924 to 1928, she operated primarily between Gloucester, Mass., and the Virginia

Capes. In 1928, she was sold to Captain John T. Randall and moved to the Gulf of Mexico.

Randall and the *I'm Alone* worked outside of the territorial limits. She was soon shadowed by the cutter *Wolcott*. This cat-and-mouse game continued until March 1929, when Boatswain Frank Paul, commanding the *Wolcott* fixed the position of the smuggler at 10.8 miles off-shore, within the 12 miles then recognized as the United States' jurisdiction. Randall, however, felt he was at least 15 miles out to sea. Boatswain Paul ordered the *I'm Alone* to heave-to. After having blank warning shots fired at him, Randall ordered his schooner to stop, then changed his mind and decided to flee. The *Wolcott* opened fire with live ammunition and was joined in the pursuit by the cutter *Dexter*. The firing "grew hotter and hits were more numerous. . . ." One of the *I'm Alone's*

crew, a citizen of France was killed in the gun battle. The French government protested as did the British (Randall's nationality) and the Canadians, where the *I'm Alone* was registered. It took several years to untangle the twisted international legal ramifications.

The need to locate smugglers far out at sea also brought about a "renaissance" in Coast Guard aviation. The first Coast Guard aviator, LT Elmer Stone, had pointed out the need for aircraft as early as 1916, but the air arm had languished. Prohibition proved Stone correct and from 1926, when the Loening OL-5 amphibious plane became the first aircraft built to Coast Guard order, aviation grew in importance. The first Coast Guard Air Station in the southern coastal region was commissioned in June 1926 at Miami, Fla., followed by stations at St. Petersburg, Fla. (1934), and Biloxi, Miss. (1934).

By the late thirties, as war clouds thickened, President Franklin D. Roosevelt enacted more changes within the Coast Guard. On July 7, 1939, in the interest of streamlining the federal government, the President transferred the Lighthouse Service to the Coast Guard. Shortly thereafter, the service itself became part of the U.S. Navy as



the nation entered World War II. Later, as a wartime measure, the Steamboat Inspection Service, now called the Bureau of Marine Navigation, was temporarily transferred into the Coast Guard in 1942. The move was made permanent in 1946.

The U.S. Coast Guard that emerged from World War II is basically the Service that now operates in the southern coastal region and along the Western Rivers of the United States. Several changes have since taken place as a result of progressive technology. Almost as soon as the Lighthouse Service came under the Coast Guard, there was a drive to automate the lights in order to release keepers from isolated stations. Electricity was the first step in this process, followed by solar power. Lightships were replaced by Texas-tower type of structures, and by Large Navigation Buoys.

Shore-based rescues also changed as technology evolved. The 44 foot motor lifeboat responds much faster and further than former small boats. and helicopters can reach individuals in distress out at sea even further and faster. The helicopters agile abilities was graphically demonstrated on the night of January 27, 1967.

The 62 foot *Cecil Anne*, with six people aboard, reported at 1:10 am that she was sinking 50 miles, 146 degrees from Carrabelle, Fla. The vessel had no flares or rafts. A HU-16E fixed wing aircraft from St. Petersburg attempted to drop pumps to the boat, but was unsuccessful. Shortly after two in the

morning, the captain of the *Cecil Anne* decided to abandon the boat and requested that the two teenage boys be taken off by helicopter. The wind and seas made the remaining adults' chances doubtful as the the boat wallowed badly in four to six foot seas and a 25 knot wind with gusts to 30 knots whipped across the area.

Meanwhile, a Coast Guard HH-52A helicopter from St. Petersburg, with LT Robert B. Workman, as pilot, and LT Norman H. Huff, co-pilot, and AM1



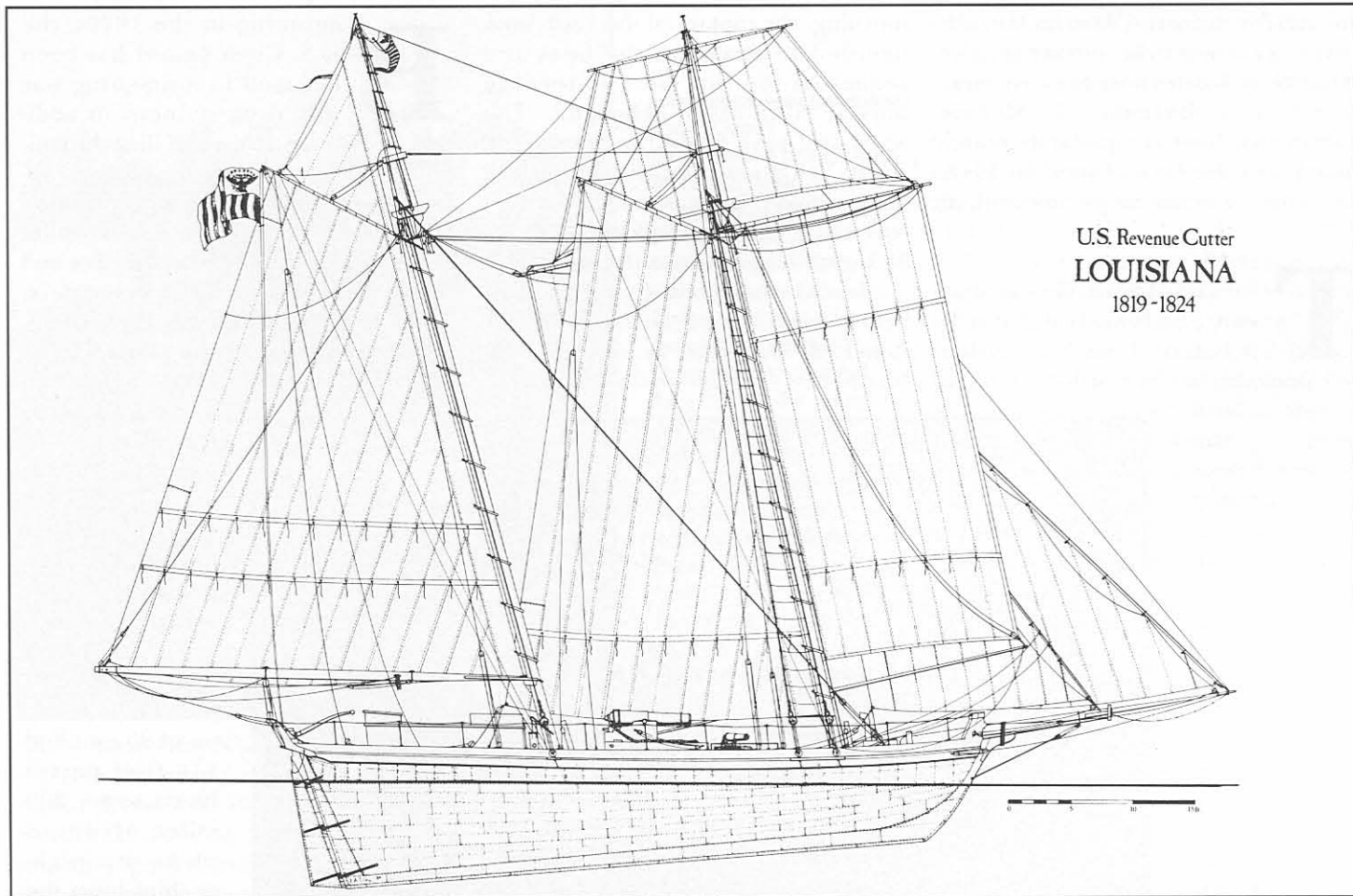
John L. Chassereau, hoist operator, were proceeding the 120 miles to the site. Under the hazardous conditions of darkness and strong cross winds, LT Huff and his crew raced to the *Cecil Anne*. The hoist could only be made in the bow section of the boat, which was obstructed by a 24 foot antenna and 12 foot jack staff. The helicopter began hoisting aboard the people from the *Cecil Anne*. Due to the large amount of weight, a total of 961 pounds, "the last hoist was made with continuous forward flight using 100 percent torque to remain airborne." When the chopper landed safely at Crystal River airport, it had only 350 pounds of fuel remaining. For their actions, LT Workman was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and LT Huff and AM1 Chassereau were awarded Air Medals.

Beginning in the 1970s, the U.S. Coast Guard has been engaged in a on-going war with drug runners, in addition to a steady stream of illegal immigrants, and an exodus of people escaping oppression. The Caribbean's Windward Passage was a natural route for the Prohibition's rum runners and is now also used by drug smugglers. The war against "druggies" is conducted much like the old rum war, with various medium and high endurance cut-

ters placed in the Caribbean to patrol and to cut off natural "choke points" between the islands where "mother ships" sail, carrying large loads. The next line is made up of 95 foot and 110 foot patrol boats some 200 miles off-shore where the mother ships meet the smaller, faster boats for their attempt to make the beach. The last line of defense is made up of 18 to 41

foot small boats operating close to shore. The war against drug smugglers is not limited to just the Florida region, it is being carried on throughout the southern coastal region. For example, from January 1, to October 30, 1988, in the Gulf of Mexico there were 30 arrests, involving 16 vessels. The total amount of marijuana involved was 17,551 pounds and 1 pound of heroin. Include the southeastern region's seizures, and the total amount of marijuana seized was 186,232 pounds and 30,776 pounds of cocaine.

Smuggling in the 1980's has not been limited to just drugs. The Coast Guard has had to deal in another "sorry and often tragic" trade, the smuggling of illegal economic migrants. On September 29,



Pirate Jean DesFarges was hanged on board the cutter *Louisiana* in 1820 at New Orleans, La.

1988, President Ronald Reagan ordered the Service to stop vessels on the high seas that were suspected of carrying illegal migrants. Cutters and aircraft throughout the United States were shuttled to the region to carry out this order. The nature of the work was, as one Coast Guardsman said, "no fun for anyone. . . . These people, primarily Haitians, have often sold everything they own in order to pay the captains of . . . scows (a flat-bottomed boat with square ends), who would pack them in like animals in the holds."

The Cuban Exodus of 1980 greatly taxed the U.S. Coast Guard's resources. When political refugees attempted to flee Fidel Castro's regime, they sailed almost anything that could float, risking a large loss of life. The Coast Guard attempted to bring order to this flood of refugees. More than 5,000 vessels, carrying some 117,000 people were involved in the exodus. During this year, the Coast

Guard dealt with 1,300 reported rescue cases.

The U.S. Coast Guard on the Western rivers was also very busy in the 1980s, battling their traditional enemy, mother nature. In 1988, the mid-west suffered an acute drought that greatly reduced the water levels of the Mississippi River and other rivers. Normally, the Coast Guard maintains more than 10,000 buoys to mark the dredged channels of the rivers and 3,000 shore aids to navigation. The large drop in the rivers' level, however, caused the Service to order an additional 2,000 buoys to replace those lost from barges trying to navigate the smaller river channels. The importance of keeping these channels open is grasped when one realizes that a 15 barge tow pushed by a 3,500 horsepower tow boat can transport 22,500 tons (787,500 bushels or 6,804,000 gallons).

In addition to drought, the Service

on the Western Rivers responded to a large oil spill. An Ashland Oil Company storage tank at Floreffa, Pa., near Pittsburg, collapsed on January 2, 1988, spilling nearly one million gallons of diesel fuel into the Monogalhela River. The U. S. Coast Guard's Atlantic Strike Team, from Mobile, Ala., used for major environmental cases, coordinated the cleanup of the spreading oil slick.

The Atlantic Strike Team also came to the aid of the Argentine ship *Rio Neuquen*. On July 30, 1984, the *Rio Neuquen* exploded while moored at Houston, Texas. The explosion was centered in a cargo container with approximately ten tons of aluminum phosphine fumigant with high amounts of toxic phosphine contained in flasks. The risk of further explosions and the release of toxic fumes into the atmosphere prompted the government to appoint the Coast Guard as on-scene coordinator for a multi-agency recovery and disposal



Coast Guard patrol forces in Key West, Fla., 1971, consisted of two 210-foot medium endurance cutters, an 82-foot patrol boat and 40-foot utility boat.

operation. The flasks were removed from the *Rio Neuquen* and, in a four day operation, taken to an EPA-designated dump site in the Gulf of Mexico.

Three days after the *Rio Neuquen* explosion, on July 30, the British tanker *Alvenus* grounded with "catastrophic structural failure" about 11 nautical miles south southeast of Cameron, La., creating the largest oil spill from a ship in the Gulf of Mexico. From July 30 to August 4, approximately 2.7 million gallons of crude oil flowed into the Gulf of Mexico from this grounding. Members of the Coast Guard Strike Team, the Marine Safety Office, Port Arthur, Texas, and many other units, worked from July 30 to August 20, tracking the oil slick and supervising the clean up.

The U.S. Coast Guard along the Florida coasts, the Gulf Coast and on the Western Rivers continues to perform its tradi-

tional duty of saving lives. Saving lives remains the most important duty in the Coast Guard. The call may come at any time, as illustrated when BMI Stephen A. Cirinna, stationed on board the buoy tender *White Holly*, saved a drowning girl. On April 30, 1983, BMI Cirinna was out jogging near Fort Pickens Beach, Fla. when, two "hysterical girls" ran up to him. They took him to the beach where they pointed to a girl, about 75 yards offshore, "with her head bobbing out of the water." A small boat was nearby, but waves prevented the boat from reaching her.

Cirinna saw a group of men standing on the beach watching, but making no attempt to enter the water. The Boatswain's Mate, however, quickly ran into the sea and immediately discovered the reason for the hesitancy of the on-lookers: A very strong shore current, a riptide, swept the area. Cirinna waded out about 50 yards, through 4 to

6 foot surf, knowing he could not swim in the "chin-deep, swift current". Then he swam 25 yards to the exhausted girl and grabbed her, wondering, as he later related, whether he would have the "strength to pull her to safety." As he fought his way to the beach, the current pulled both Cirinna's and the girl's "heads under the water a couple of times." The Coast Guardsman's strength held, he reached the beach and quickly began treating the girl for shock and hypothermia until she was evacuated to a hospital. For his rescue, BMI Stephen A. Cirinna was awarded the Silver Life-Saving Medal.

In 1990, the U.S. Coast Guard will celebrate two hundred years of service to the nation. Building upon the strong foundations laid by their predecessors, the men and women of today's U. S. Coast Guard in the southern coastal region and the Western Rivers continue the service to others who live in this area.

