

# Alaska and Hawaii

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

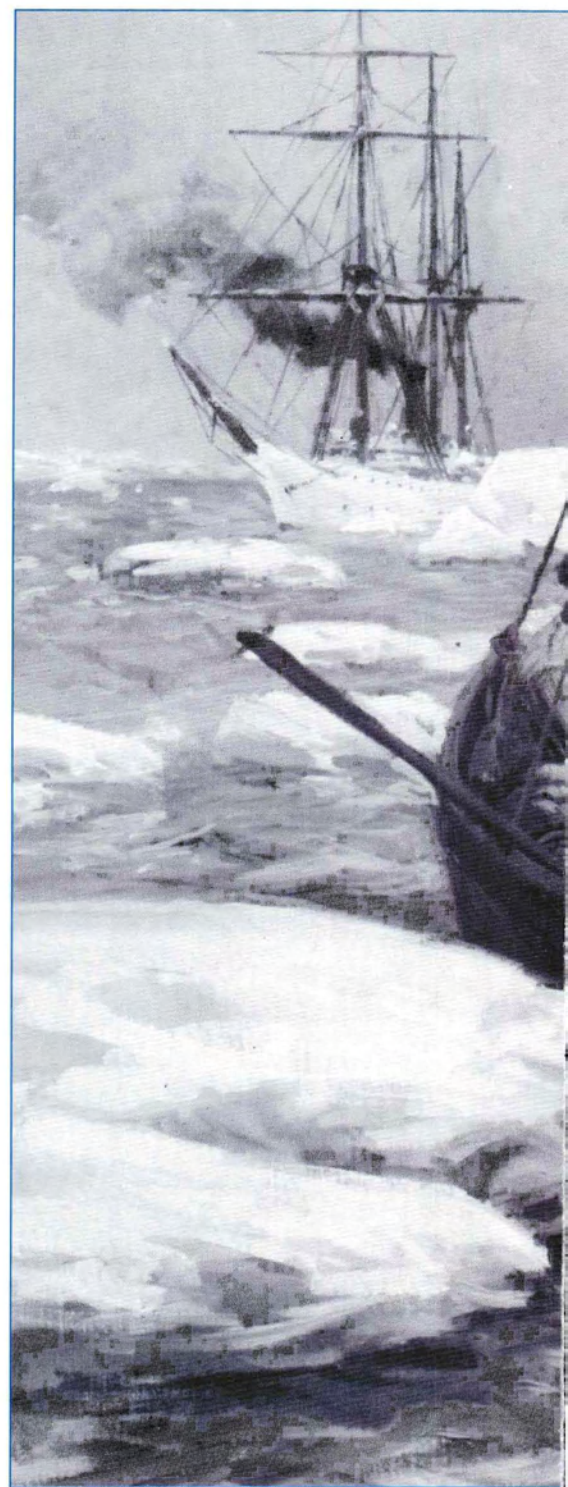
by Dr. Dennis L. Noble  
and PA1 Barbara Voulgaris

**T**he last two states to join the Union, Alaska and Hawaii, encompass some of the most rugged and isolated terrain in the United States.

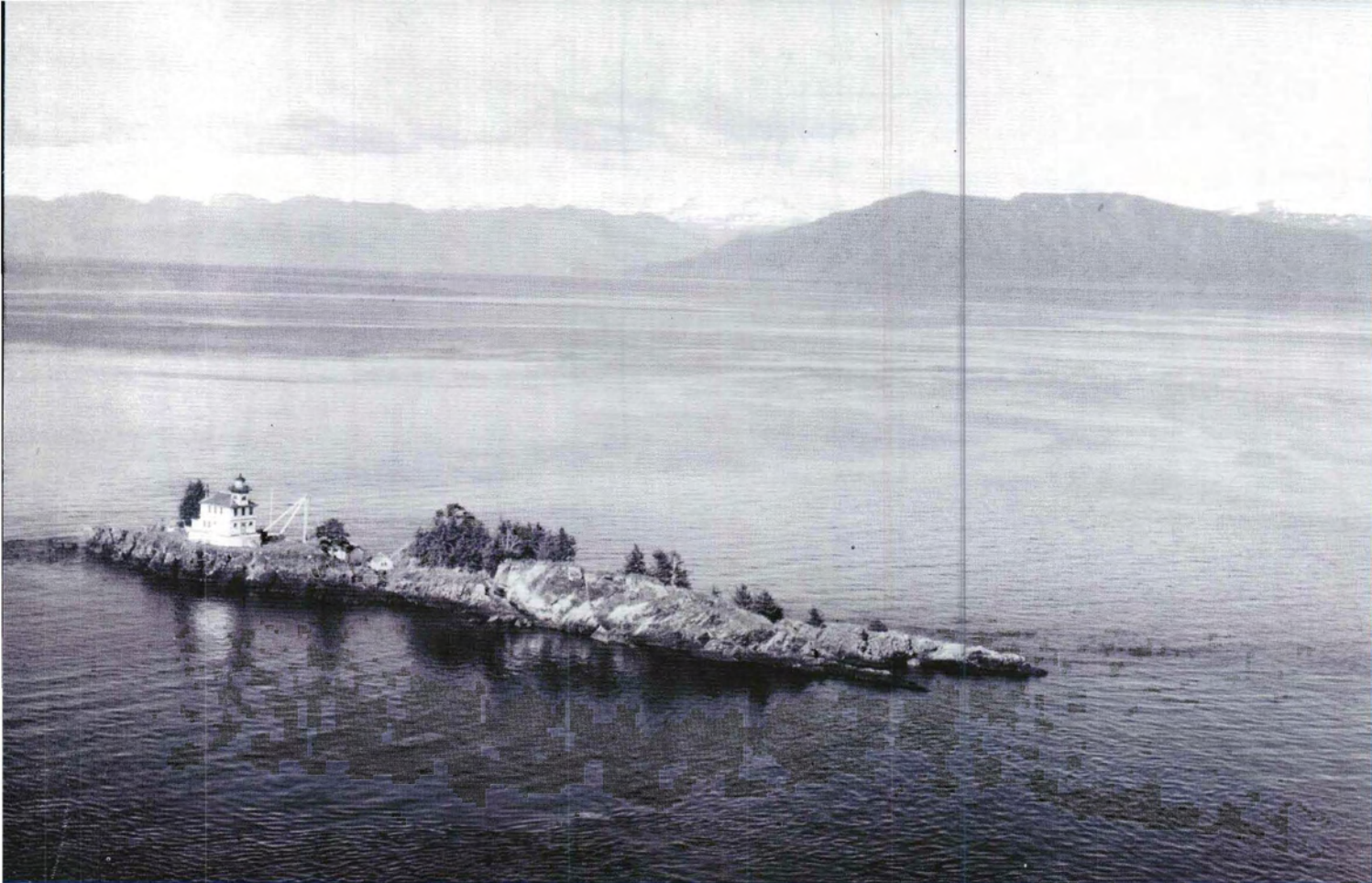
Since the 19th century, the Coast Guard and its predecessor agencies have enforced maritime laws, assisted distressed mariners and insured that ships were safely outfitted for sea in these remote areas.

The story of this service to others begins with three small federal maritime organizations. It is important to trace these agencies for they laid the foundations of today's Coast Guard. Two of the three organizations dominate the maritime history of both these unique states.

*Alaska and Hawaii, a brief history of Coast Guard operations*, is a publication by the Coast Guard Historian's office, May 1991. Research and manuscript by Dr. Dennis L. Noble. Editing and design by PA1 Barbara Voulgaris. *Right photo*: Artist's rendition of the revenue cutter *Bear* rescuing trapped whalers off Alaska's northern coast in the late 1800s. *Front cover*: Coast Guardsman Harry R. Crum waits for the CGC *Kukui* to arrive at LORAN Station Potangeras Island, Ulithi Atoll in 1949. *Back cover*: Coast Guardsmen march in a Fourth of July parade in Ketchikan, Alaska, circa 1945.







**T**he U.S. Lighthouse Service had the earliest impact on the maritime histories of Alaska and Hawaii.

In 1716, the first North American lighthouse was established, but it was not until 1852 that the first light towers were built on the West Coast.

When the U.S. bought Alaska from Russia in 1867, a light was already established at Sitka. This light was located in the cupola of the Baranof Castle, with a seal oil lamp and a large reflector.

Since Washington lawmakers were not completely convinced of the wisdom of Secretary of State William H. Seward's purchase of Alaska, Congress made little effort to fund any activities in this "ice box," so the Lighthouse Service discontinued the light. The U.S. Army, however, maintained it until 1877.

The Lighthouse Service gradually added more aids to navigation. In 1884, 14 iron buoys were set and a beacon light in Sitka's harbor followed in 1895.

The great gold rush of 1897-1898 brought many ships into the new territory. The 14 buoys and one beacon at this time were the only aids to help guide ships through the difficult channels and rocky coastline. It was inevitable, then, that a great many ships and lives would be lost.

To augment the aids, Congress appropriated \$100,000 in 1900 to establish lighthouses in Alaskan waters. Eleven lights were recommended for Southeastern Alaska and four for the Western coast.

In June 1901 the Lighthouse Service let contracts to build structures at Southeast Five Fingers Island and at Sentinel Island. These went into operation March 1, 1902.

From 1902 to 1905 there was a flurry of building on the Inside Passage to Skagway. A total of seven lights were constructed. All of the early lights in the territory were built of wood and eventually had to be rebuilt.

In 1903, the government built two lights to help ships bound for

the Bering Sea. Scotch Cap Light, located on the Pacific Ocean side of Unimak Pass, the main passage through the Aleutian Islands, was first lit on June 18, 1903. This was Alaska's first coastal light. The tower was an octagonal wooden one, which rose some 90 feet above the sea.

Cape Sarichef Light, established July 1, 1904, was the second coastal lighthouse and marks the western passage through Unimak Pass. It was the only U.S. manned lighthouse located on the Bering Sea. By the 1930s, 16 lighthouses dotted the Alaskan coastline.

Alaska was and still is the frontier of U.S. civilization and some of the stations were extremely isolated. At Scotch Cap and Cape Sarichef, for example, "two of the most isolated lighthouses in the United States," keepers were not allowed to bring their families.

In one period, from August 1912 to June 1913, keepers at Cape Sarichef were not resupplied. Their nearest neighbor was a trapper some 10 miles away. Due to the priva-



**Left:** Southeast Five Finger Light, Alaska, as it looked in 1929. **Above:** Sentinel Island Light Station. These lights were the first U.S. built lighthouses in Alaska. Both lights, built of wood, began operating in 1902. Photo courtesy of the Alaska State Historical Library.

tions they endured, keepers at these two stations carried one year's leave every four years.

In 1898, just over 20 years after acquiring Alaska, the U.S. annexed Hawaii. The territorial government was first responsible for aids to navigation, many of which dated back to the Spanish period.

The Barbers Point Light, for example, was first displayed in 1888. But on January 1, 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt transferred this duty to the Lighthouse Service.

The lights were made a subdistrict of the Twelfth Lighthouse District, which included California.

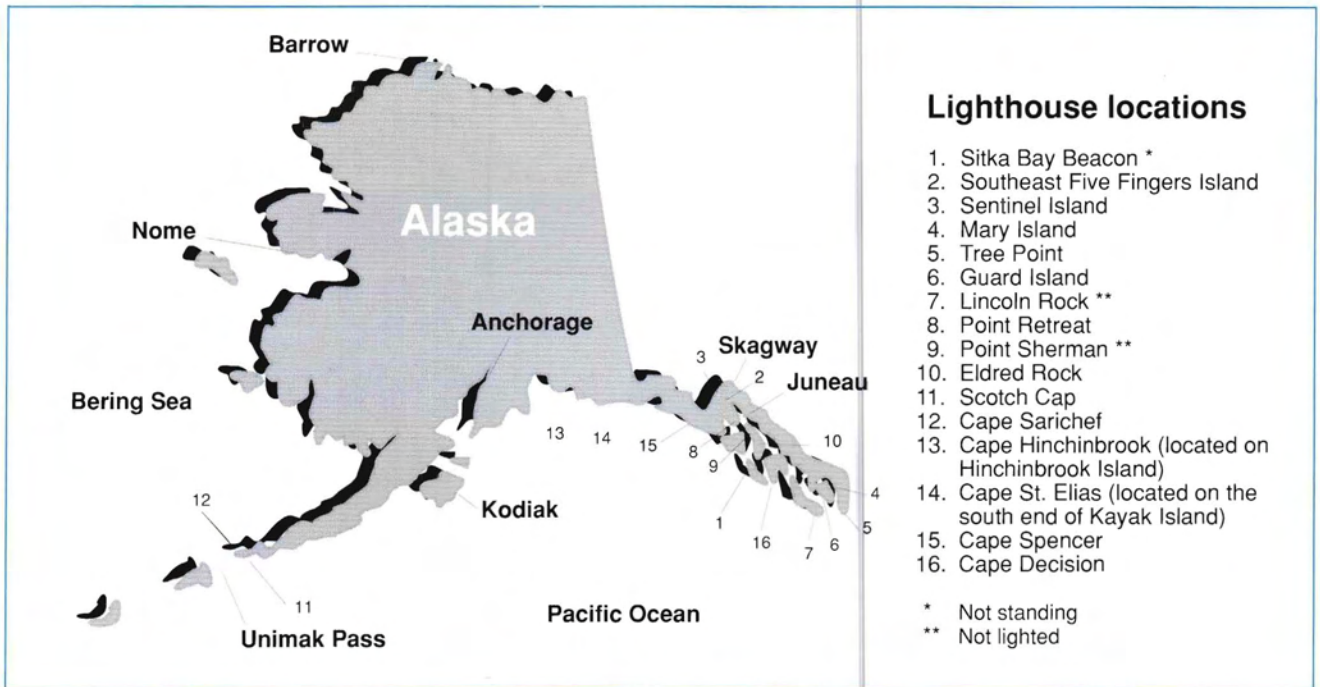
When the service obtained this added responsibility, there were 19 lighthouses, 20 daymarks and 20 buoys, along with some 16 private aids maintained by steamboat companies on the islands.

In general, the condition of the system was, in the words of one inspector, "very crude." For example, the lamps at Kanahene Point, on the south coast of Maui consist-

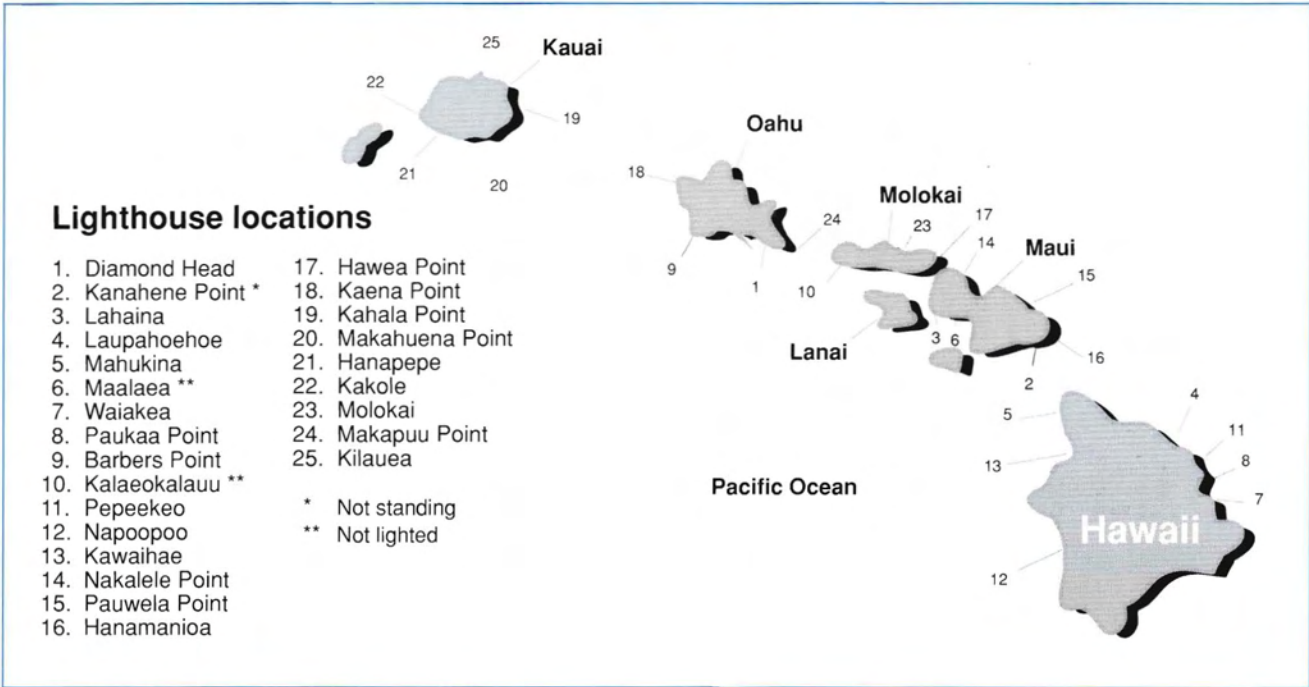
ed of two "ordinary kitchen lamps."

Only one lighthouse, Diamond Head, had a Fresnel lens, the standard device for good illumination. Without this type lens, the beam was weak and of limited use to mariners.

The Lighthouse Service set out to improve the aids in the islands. It installed Fresnel lenses and rebuilt old towers. It bought private aids and conducted a survey to determine where new lights were needed.



*Scotch Cap*



**Far Left:** Scotch Cap Lighthouse as it appeared in 1912. Scotch Cap is located on the Pacific side of Unimak Pass. It was first lit June 18, 1903 and was Alaska's first coastal light. • Diamond Head Light, Oahu Island Hawaii, as it appeared in 1960. The white pyramidal concrete tower was built in 1899. It was later re-built in 1917.



**Above:** Barbers Point Lightstation on Oahu in 1945. **Right:** Kilauea Point Lightstation rests high atop a rocky ledge on Kauai.

Between 1906 and 1920, the service built at least 15 lights and placed beacons and markers throughout the islands.

Lightkeepers not only tended to their lights but were also involved in rescues. The Lighthouse Service's annual reports are replete with the heroic rescues by its employees.

One case happened near Barbers Point Light in January of 1928. The five-masted sailing ship, *Bianca*, was struck by a sudden severe squall, leaving its sails in shreds. The ship's skipper let both anchors go, which held the vessel slightly off a reef. The anchors, however would not hold and if help did not arrive quickly, it would be dashed to pieces.

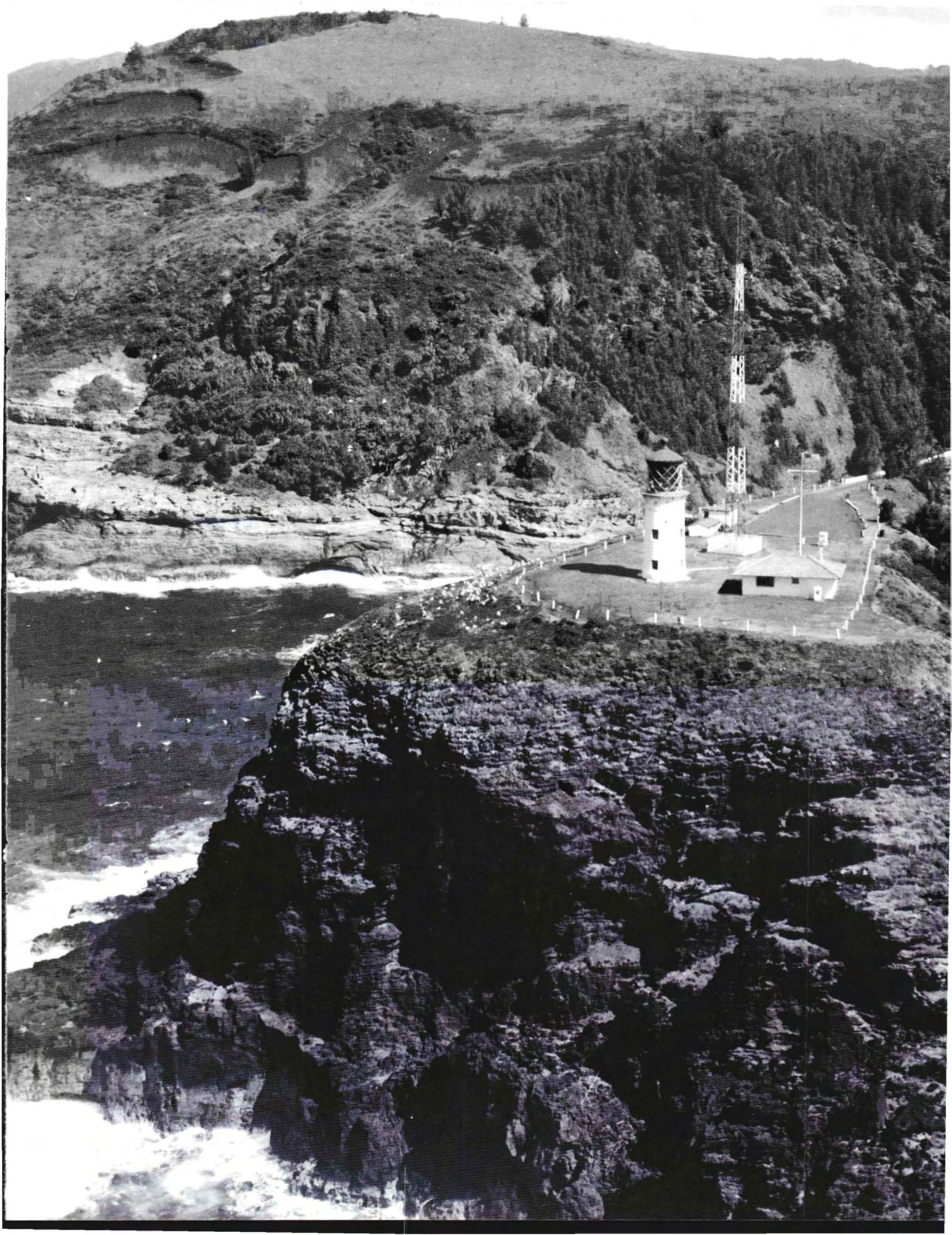
Keeper Manuel Ferreira, with no telephone or radio at the light, realized the danger and quickly went for help. Through "blasting winds and stinging rain," he ran three miles cross-country to the nearest telephone. Ferreira's long distance run was instrumental in having a ship tow the *Bianca* to safety.

Tending a light is often pictured as an idyllic existence but many lighthouse keepers faced life-threatening situations. For example, the five keepers at Scotch Cap Light in Alaska were killed when a tidal wave swept the entire station out to sea April 1, 1946.

In addition to operating aids to navigation, the Lighthouse Service also commanded a fleet of lightships and tenders. Lightships were placed where lighthouses could not stand to help guide ships through hazardous waters. The service's tenders maintained the buoys and lighthouses. The rocky and isolated nature of these regions made servicing aids dangerous work.

The Lighthouse Service tender *Shubrick* was the first steam-powered craft of this class and the first tender on the Pacific coast. The tender





was transferred to the Revenue Cutter Service between 1861-1867. But early in 1865 the vessel operated as part of the Navy for 90 days. It served as flagship for six vessels that surveyed the Bering Strait in an attempt to lay cable linking the first telegraph service between Europe and the U.S.

In 1908, as part of a fleet of six Lighthouse Service ships, the *Sequoia*, *Manzanita* and *Kukui* became the nucleus of the tenders working aids to navigation in the Pacific.

Increased shipping in Alaska and Hawaii changed the tenders operating procedures. Tenders were first stationed in Seattle and sailed to northern waters only sporadically.

In 1910, due to increased shipping and growing numbers of aids to navigation, the territory became a separate lighthouse district with a depot and headquarters at Ketchikan, Alaska.

Even with this change, tenders still steamed at least 1,400 miles to reach the lights at Unimak Pass.

With a great deal of steaming back and forth, the

crews aboard tenders were often in the position to assist those in distress.

One such rescue occurred in January of 1916 on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. The Lighthouse tender *Columbine* intercepted a distress call from the bark *British Yeoman* just off Port Allen, Kanai Island.

The *Columbine* arrived at night and found the bark with no anchors, its rudder carried away and its stern near the breakers.

*Columbine's* Captain Frank T. Warriner, took charge of the tender's whaleboat and brought the boat and crew into the "boiling breakers four times" in an attempt to pass a heavy towing hawser to the stricken ship. Each time, however, the line would snap under the strain of the tow.

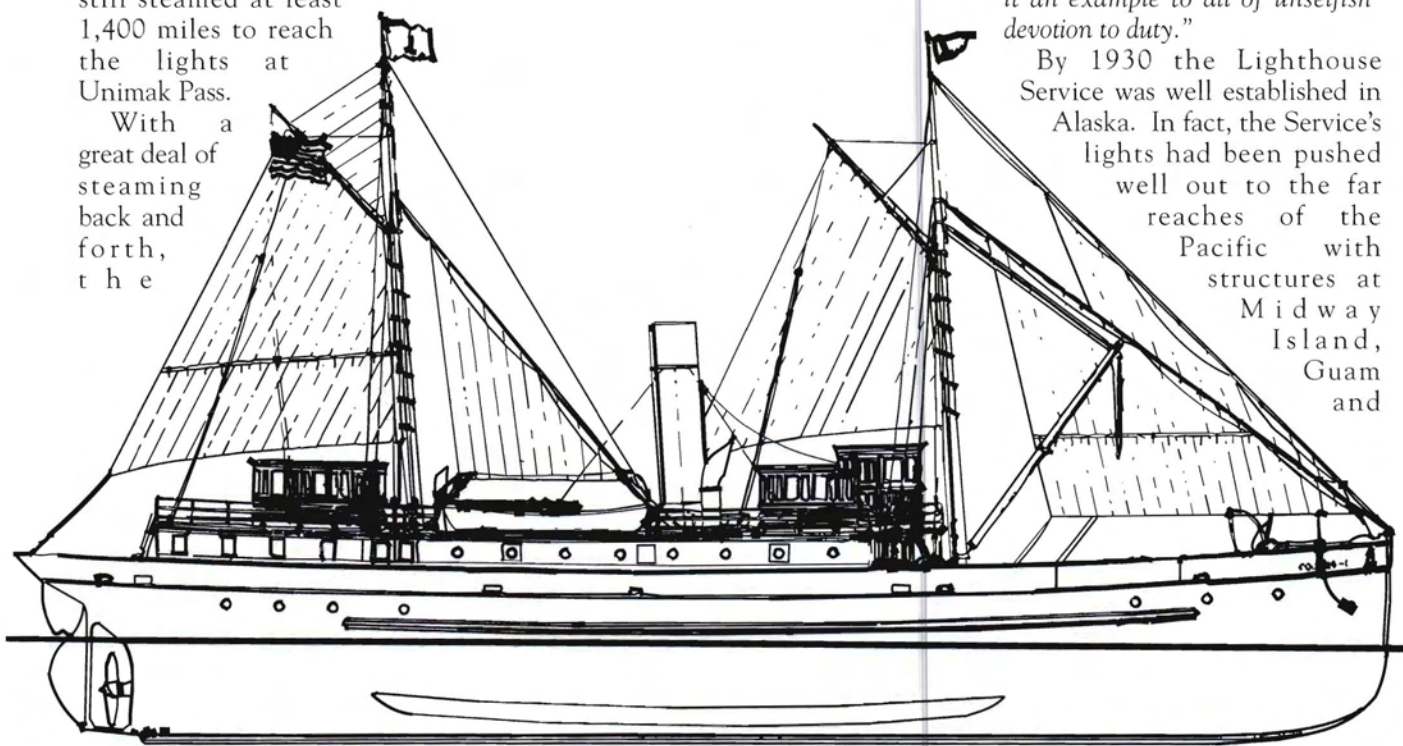
The *Columbine*, much older and smaller than the *British Yeoman*, could not tow the bark. Strong winds and seas made it much more

difficult. Warriner radioed for assistance the next morning and was told that the Navy tug *Navajo* was enroute.

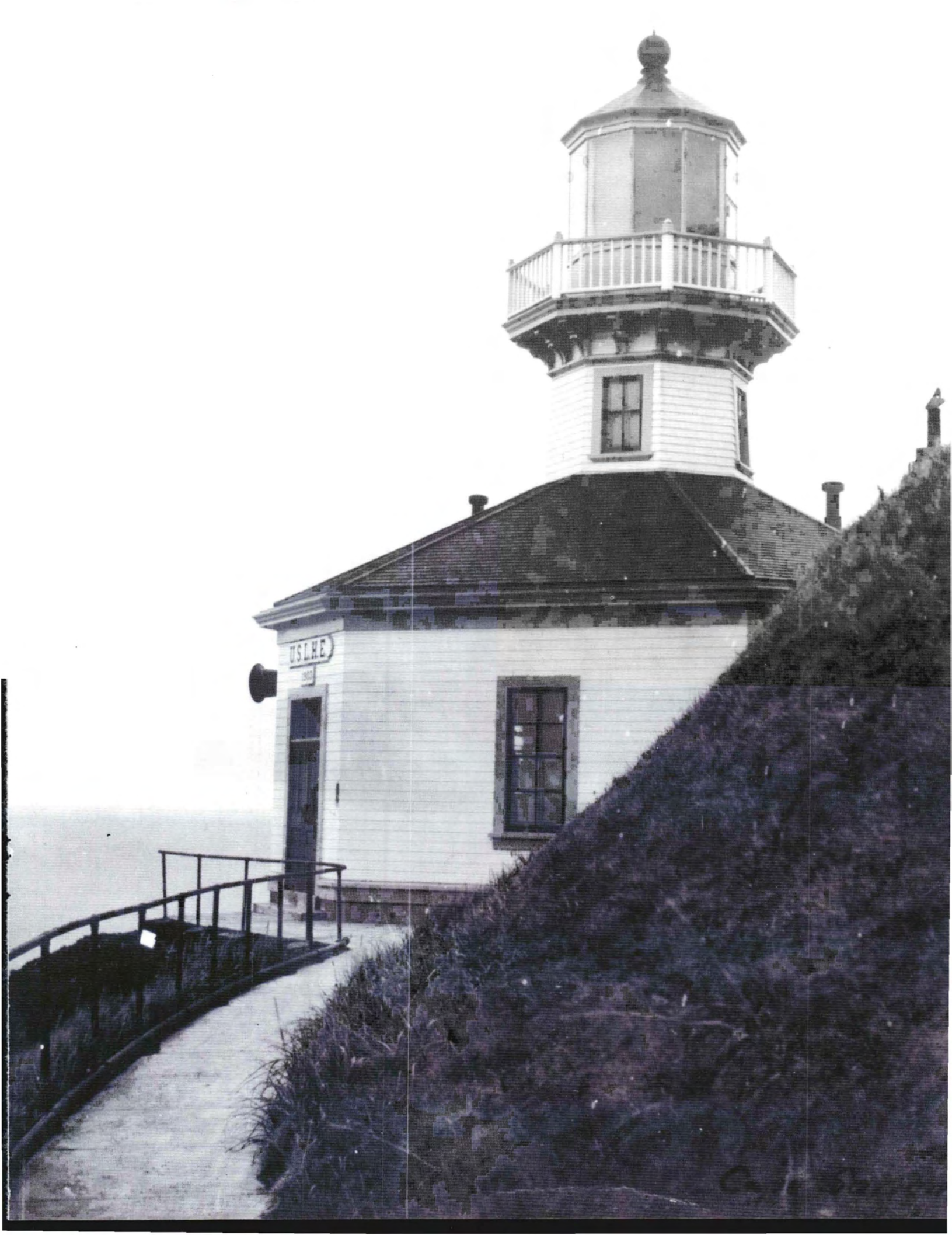
Before the tug arrived however, the *Columbine* managed to haul the *British Yeoman* out of immediate danger. The *Navajo* took over the tow while the *Columbine* escorting both ships back to Honolulu.

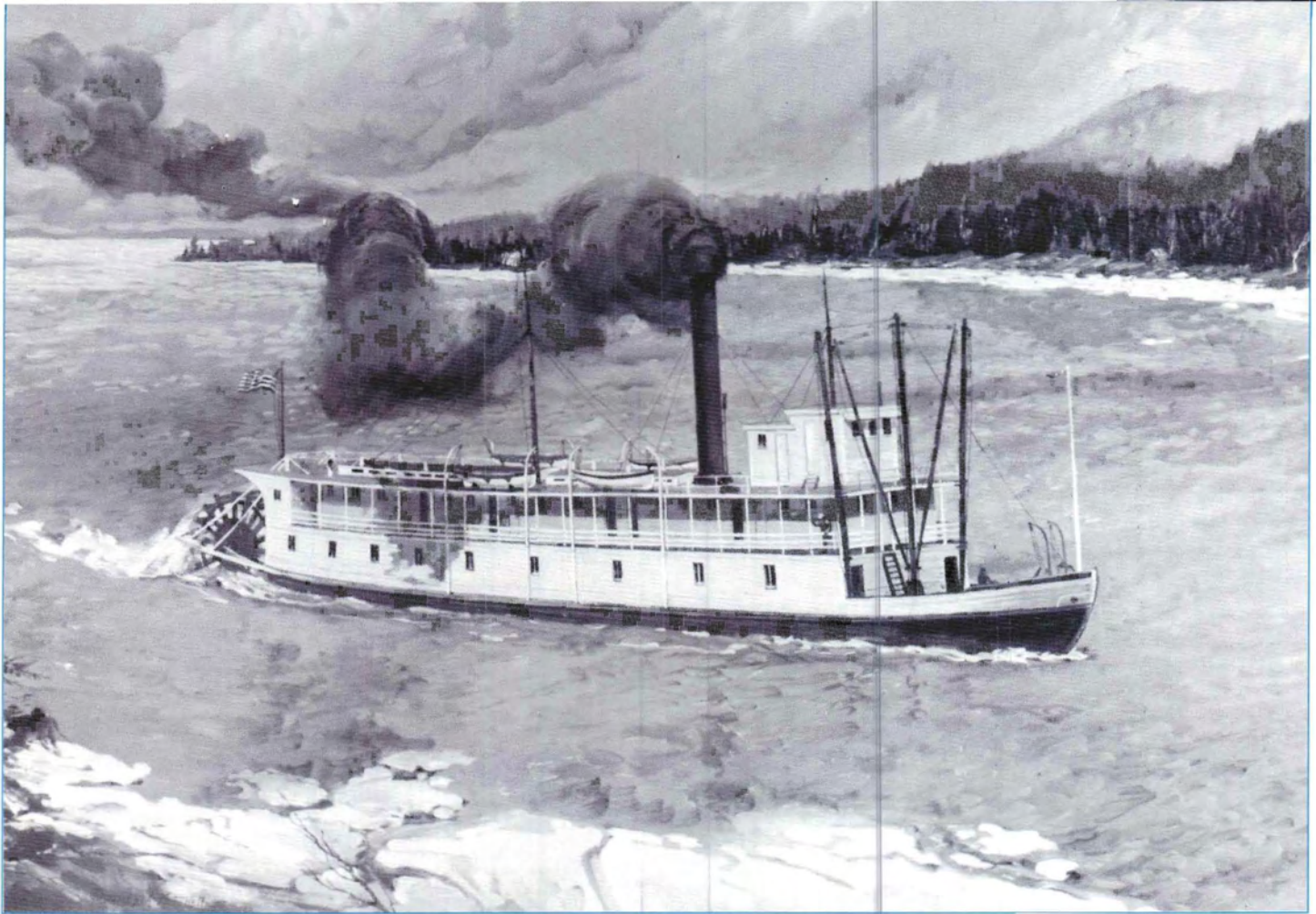
In a letter of commendation, Commerce Secretary William C. Redfield (the Lighthouse Service operated under the Commerce Department then) wrote: "Nothing short of the highest valor, seamanship and determination enabled those aboard the *Columbine* to save the imperiled vessel and every soul aboard her . . . Despite darkness and storm, undismayed by heavy seas or by the repeated breaking of hawsers, the courageous crew of the tender stood steady at their tasks for 56 hours without let-up until the bark was safe. I bring this incident to the attention of the entire Lighthouse Service to make it an example to all of unselfish devotion to duty."

By 1930 the Lighthouse Service was well established in Alaska. In fact, the Service's lights had been pushed well out to the far reaches of the Pacific with structures at Midway Island, Guam and



The tender *Columbine*, above, was a single-screw steamer, built in 1892. Right: Cape Sarichef in 1912. Marking the western passage through Unimak Pass, Cape Sarichef was the only U.S. manned lighthouse on the Bering Sea.



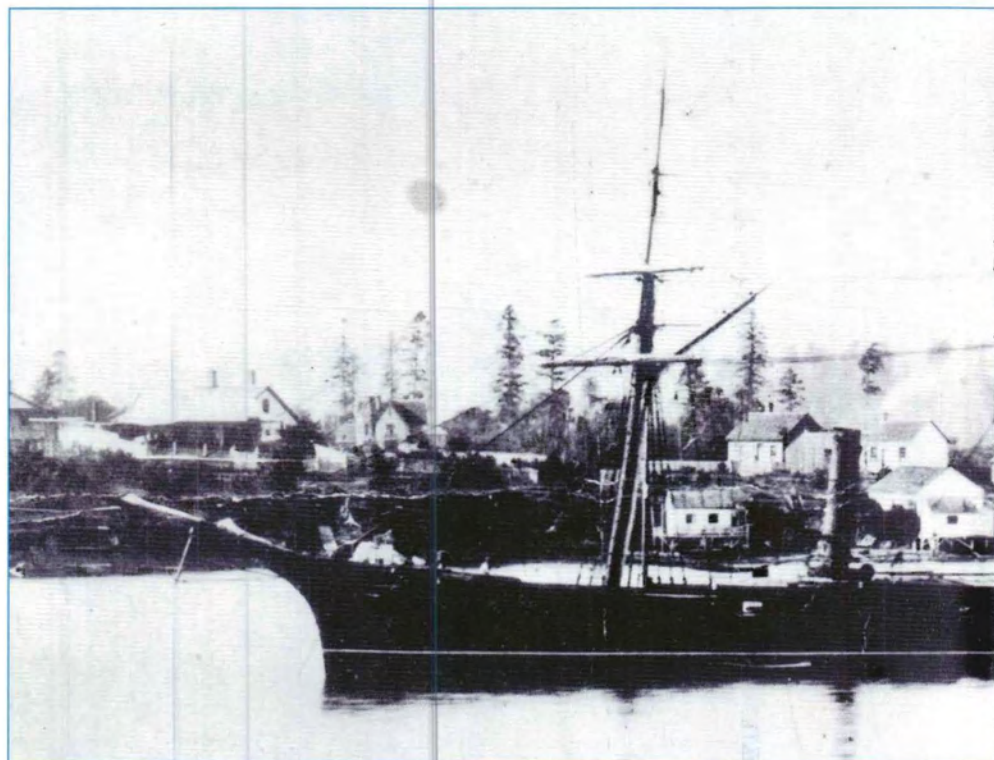


other islands. These lights, as well as other isolated aids in Alaska, were fitted with acetylene so they could go without servicing for longer periods.

Even though well-established, the service was to undergo a major change at the end of the 1930s. In 1939 the Lighthouse Service officially became part of the Coast

Guard. When the Coast Guard took over the Lighthouse Service, it began to automate the isolated lights. One method was electricity while another was solar power.

**Clockwise from top:** An artist's rendition of the stern wheel cutter *Nunivak*. This revenue cutter had the unusual duty of patrolling Alaska's Yukon River. • The revenue cutter *Thetis* patrolled the waters of both Alaska and Hawaii between 1899-1916. The famous cutter finally ended its career in San Francisco, where it was decommissioned in 1916. • The revenue cutter *Lincoln* anchored at Victoria, British Columbia in November of 1870. *Lincoln* was the first cutter to visit Alaska after it was purchased from Russia. The cutter transported government officials to survey the vast new territory.



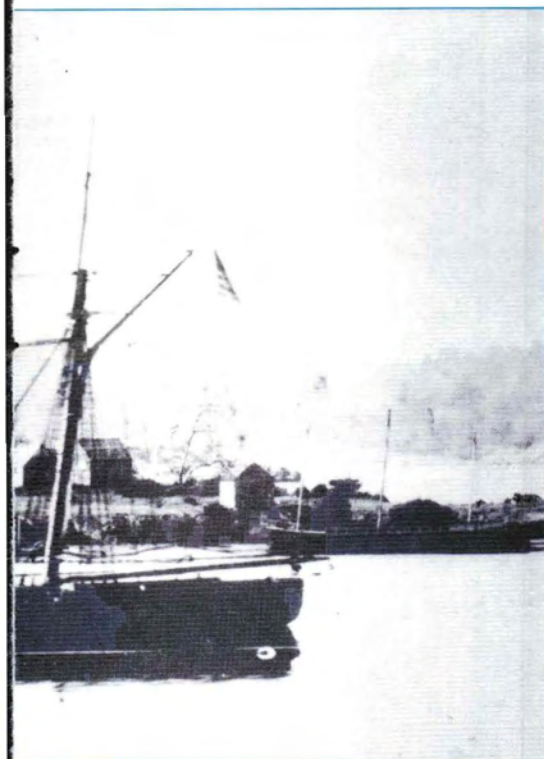
Changing technology soon made lightkeepers obsolete. No longer was anyone needed to trim wicks or to polish lenses.

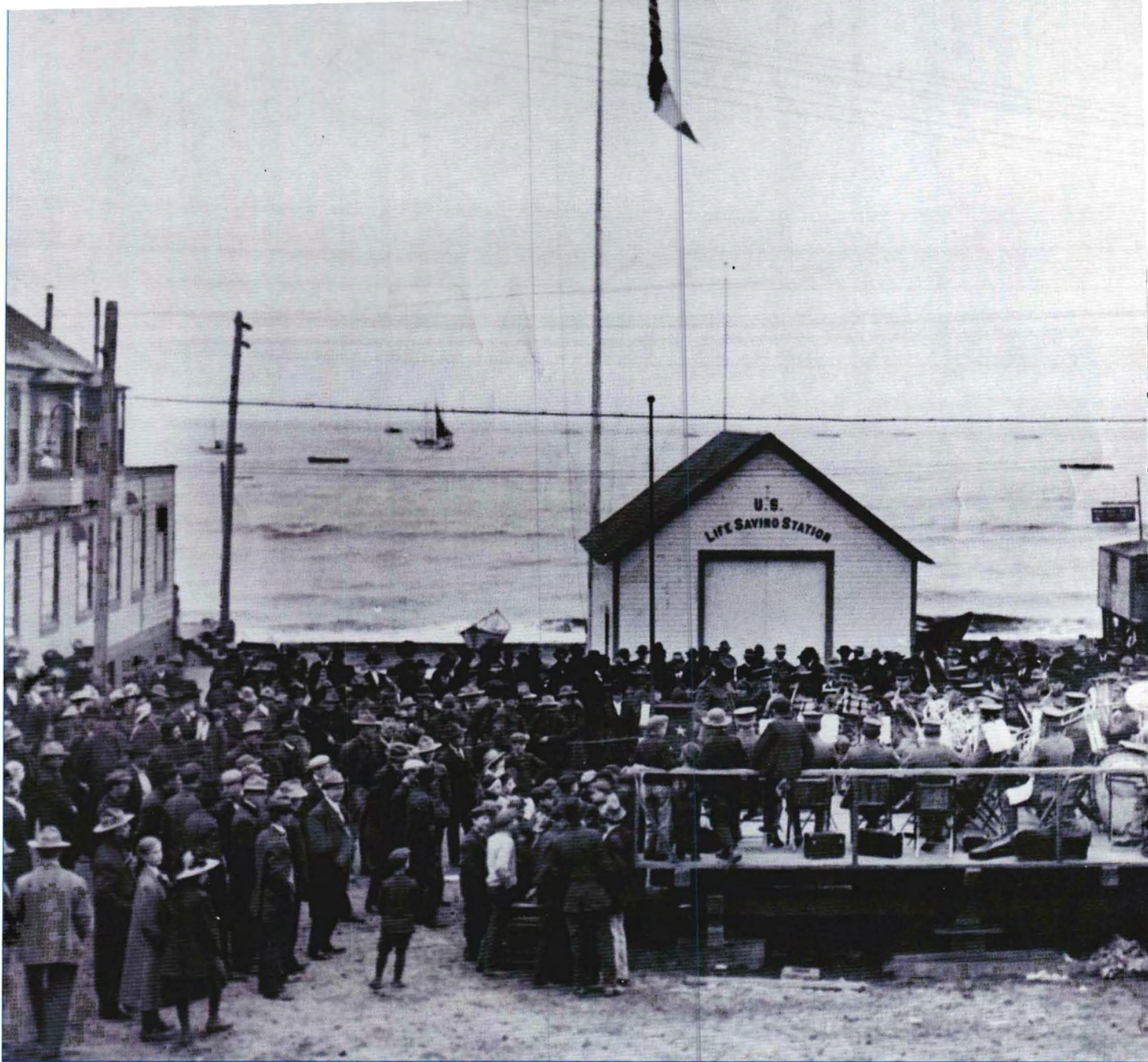
## The Revenue Cutter Service

The Revenue Cutter Service also greatly influenced the maritime history of these states. The Revenue Cutter Service's largest role in the Pacific region came in Alaskan waters. After the Alaska purchase, the revenue cutter *Lincoln* transported officials to tour the vast new territory.

The Bering Sea became the center of the service's multifaceted duties in the north. Eventually, the work would formally be called the Bering Sea Patrol. For nearly 100 years, revenue cutters sailed to the frigid, fog-shrouded waters of the Bering Sea in the spring and returned to their homeports in the fall.

The Bering Sea Patrol started as





Residents of Nome, Alaska, enjoy an open air concert performed by the 22nd Infantry Band of the U.S. Army in July of 1900. Sits in the background. Fire destroyed the station in 1934 and it was never re-built.

a reaction to the large scale harvesting of the fur seals. The illegal killing of these animals threatened to lead to their extinction and to deprive the U.S. of a revenue source.

The revenue cutters however, soon found themselves engaged in more duties than simply protecting seals. The small cutters provided a badly needed search and rescue service in an extremely isolated region. In 1880 and 1881, the *Corwin*, under the command of Captain Calvin L. Hooper, searched for the steamer *Jeannette* and two whalers, *Mount Wollaston* and *Vigilant*.

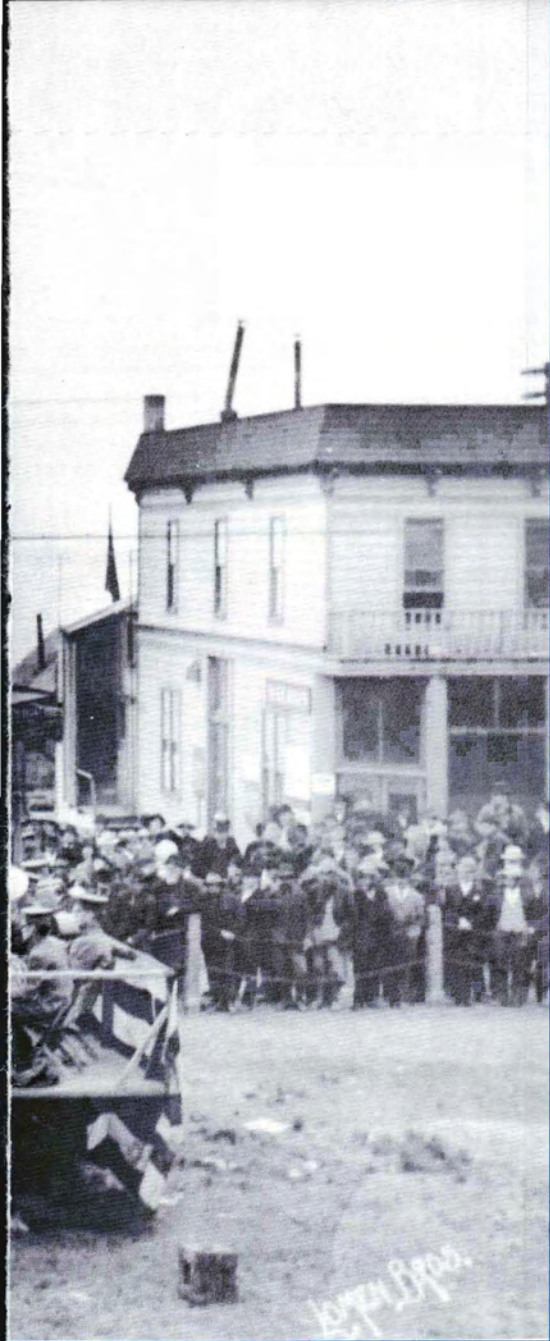
Throughout the seasons, Hooper maneuvered his cutter through ice-blocked waters and even sent parties overland by dog sled waiting for the ice to break.

Hooper's skills earned the praise of Captain Robley D. "Fighting Bob" Evans, commander of all U.S. forces in the sea. Evans noted that Hooper was "an able, fearless man who would carry out orders and accomplish his mission."

The cutters also came close to playing a military role in the Bering Sea. During the Bering Sea controversy of the 1890s, tensions between the U.S. and Great Britain were

heightened over fur seals harvesting. The cutter *Corwin*, operating with the Navy, apprehended the British steamer *Coquitlan*. The ship was bonded for \$600,000 which Evans thought, "paid for most of the expenses of our summer's work."

The cutters performed a variety of tasks. One of the more famous cutters in Alaska was the *Numivak*, a stern wheel cutter assigned to the Yukon River in 1899. Under the command of First Lieutenant John C. Cantwell the cutter's crew enforced customs, navigational laws and performed scientific studies in the region.



1910. The U.S. Life-Saving Station

Cantwell and his crew also enforced a quarantine at St. Michael, near the mouth of the Yukon River. A smallpox epidemic was raging in Nome and the cutter's work stopped the spread of the disease. One writer noted; "smallpox along the Yukon River was made practically impossible by the work of the *Nunivak*."

A theme that runs throughout the reports and logs of the officers of the Bering Sea Patrol is the concern for and the effort to help settlers and natives in these isolated regions. To provide services, the cutters visited villages from

Unalaska to Point Barrow providing medical care and food.

In 1891 the legendary cutter *Bear*, under the command of Captain Michael A. "Hell Roaring Mike" Healy, transported reindeer from Siberia to Alaska in an experiment aimed at turning natives from hunters to herdsmen and provide them with a steady food supply.

In 1897-1898, First Lieutenant David H. Jarvis, Second Lieutenant Ellsworth P. Bertholf and Dr. Samuel J. Call, all of the cutter *Bear*, drove a herd of reindeer, in winter's brutal grip, from Teller, Alaska, on the Bering Sea, to Point Barrow. Here, they provided food for a fleet of whalers frozen in the ice.

The Revenue Cutter Service provided a form of law and order in this isolated unforgiving land. They performed these duties in a region where no other law enforcement agency existed. The Revenue Service for many years acted as the only law enforcement agency and provided many civil functions. They even performed marriage ceremonies and held church services.

The cutters that sailed the Bering Sea Patrol were assigned to ports on the West Coast and Hawaii. The revenue cutter *Thetis*, homeported in Honolulu from 1909 to 1916, made three voyages to the north. When *Thetis* was not sailing in the north it performed a variety of duties in the more temperate climates of its homeport.

A cutterman recalled duty aboard *Thetis* during this period:

"We used to make trips to Midway and visit all the islands in between. We used to inspect ships suspected of bringing opium from the Orient. If we had reason to believe some ship was trying to smuggle opium into Hawaii we would go aboard and try to find it."

In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson began searching for a means

to streamline the federal government. One suggestion was to combine the Revenue Cutter Service and the Navy. This did not meet with approval, but a proposal to merge the Life-Saving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service did. So on January 15, 1915, the measure was approved and the Coast Guard was established.

For the next five years little changed in the normal operating procedures for the new Coast Guard in Alaska and Hawaii. The Bering Sea Patrol continued to operate as before and errands of mercy remained high on its list of priorities.

Changing technology hastened the end of the Bering Sea Patrol which ended officially in 1964. Aircraft could now reach many of the villages formally reached only by ship. This, however, does not mean cutters do not still work in the area. In fact, with large scale fishing in the Bering Sea, the Coast Guard is perhaps busier than before in the region. Alaska comprises 56 percent of the U.S. coastline and 70 percent of domestic and foreign fish are caught in these waters.

## The Life-Saving Service

The Coast Guard has a deservedly strong reputation as a lifesaving organization. The foundation for the modern reputation was the U.S. Life-Saving Service.

This service, however, got a relatively late start in both territories. In the age of sail, the best way to assist shipwrecks close to the beach was by shore-based small boats. Life-Saving stations were usually established in areas known to be treacherous to ships. The nature of shipping, terrain and weather in the Pacific Ocean around Hawaii dictated that the islands would have no stations. Alaska met all the require-

ments of terrain and weather, but for many years the amount of shipping did not warrant the establishment of stations.

The Alaskan gold rush drew thousands of fortune-seekers to the town of Nome. Nome's offshore anchorage provided no shelter and is extremely shallow, so passengers

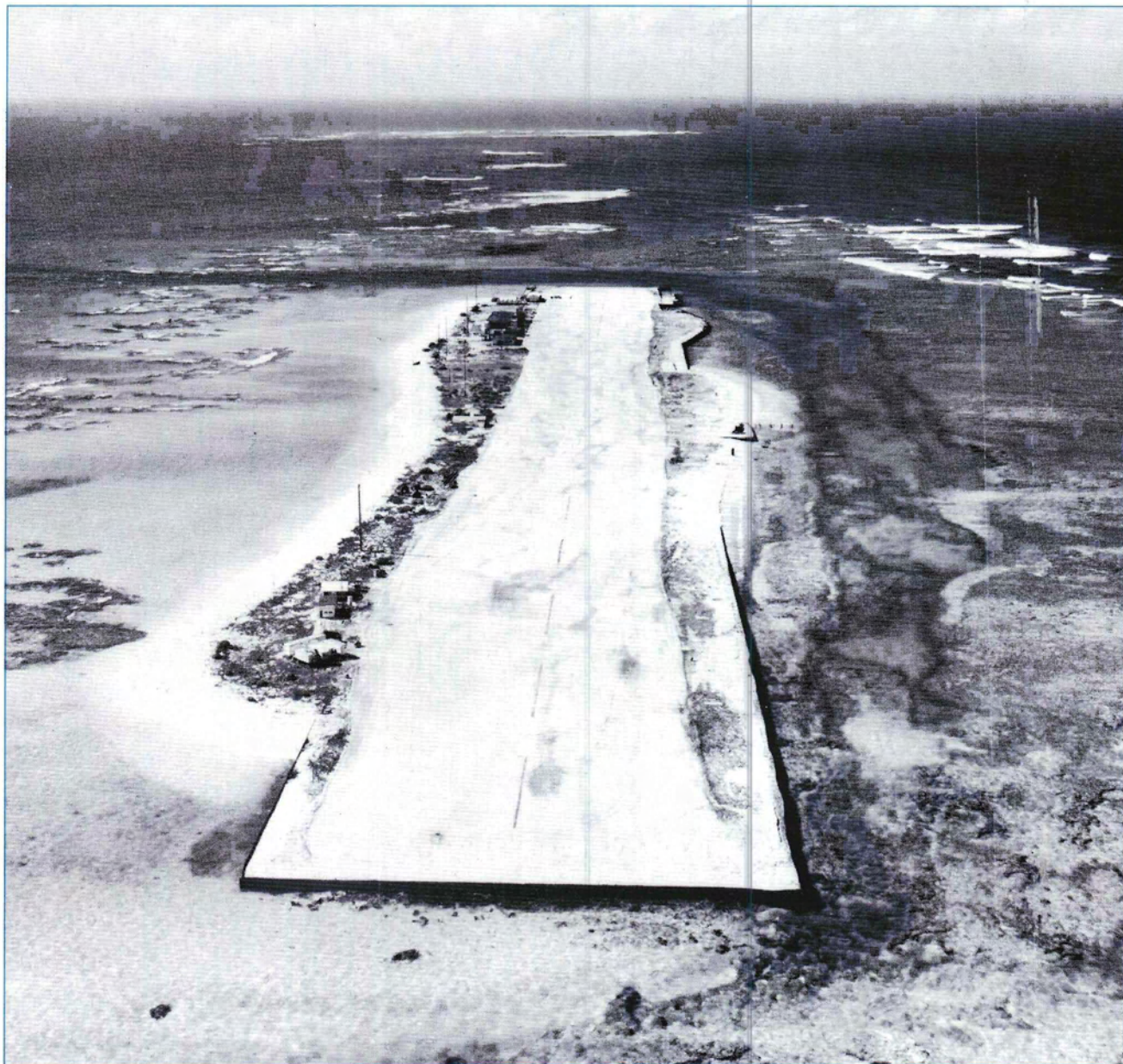
and freight had to be transferred to shore from two miles out by small boats. This eventually led to the establishment of a Life-Saving station there in 1905.

This station marked the northern-most of all units in the service. There was a refuge station at Point Barrow but this was not controlled

by the Life-Saving Service.

Keeper Thomas A. Ross and his crew of surfmen performed lookout duties and beach patrols. The surfmen rescued people from ice floes, grounded ships and capsized boats. The lifesavers also helped the local fire department fight fires.

The surfmen performed other



**Above:** French Frigate Shoals in 1966. Located 500 miles west-northwest of Honolulu, this was one of the most isolated LORAN stations. **Right:** The Coast Guard cutter *Kukui*. The *Kukui* maintained many of the isolated stations and was a workhorse for the Hawaiian Islands.



humanitarian services. Between 1918 and 1919, a devastating influenza epidemic swept Alaska. Keeper Ross sent a dog sled with surfman Levi Edward Ashton and driver Anders Peter Brandt, to Cape Prince of Wales and other villages with medicine and supplies. The two men were gone for almost two months.

The Nome Station was slowly reduced in the early 1930s, due again, to the changing nature of shipping and technology. Ross recommended cuts, but in 1934 fire destroyed the station and it was never rebuilt. The Coast Guard

used other buildings during World War II, but by 1951 the station was permanently closed.

The middle to late 1930s marked important changes for the Coast Guard in the Pacific area. To replace aging cutters, the Coast Guard acquired new ships, the best of which were the 327-foot Secretary Class.

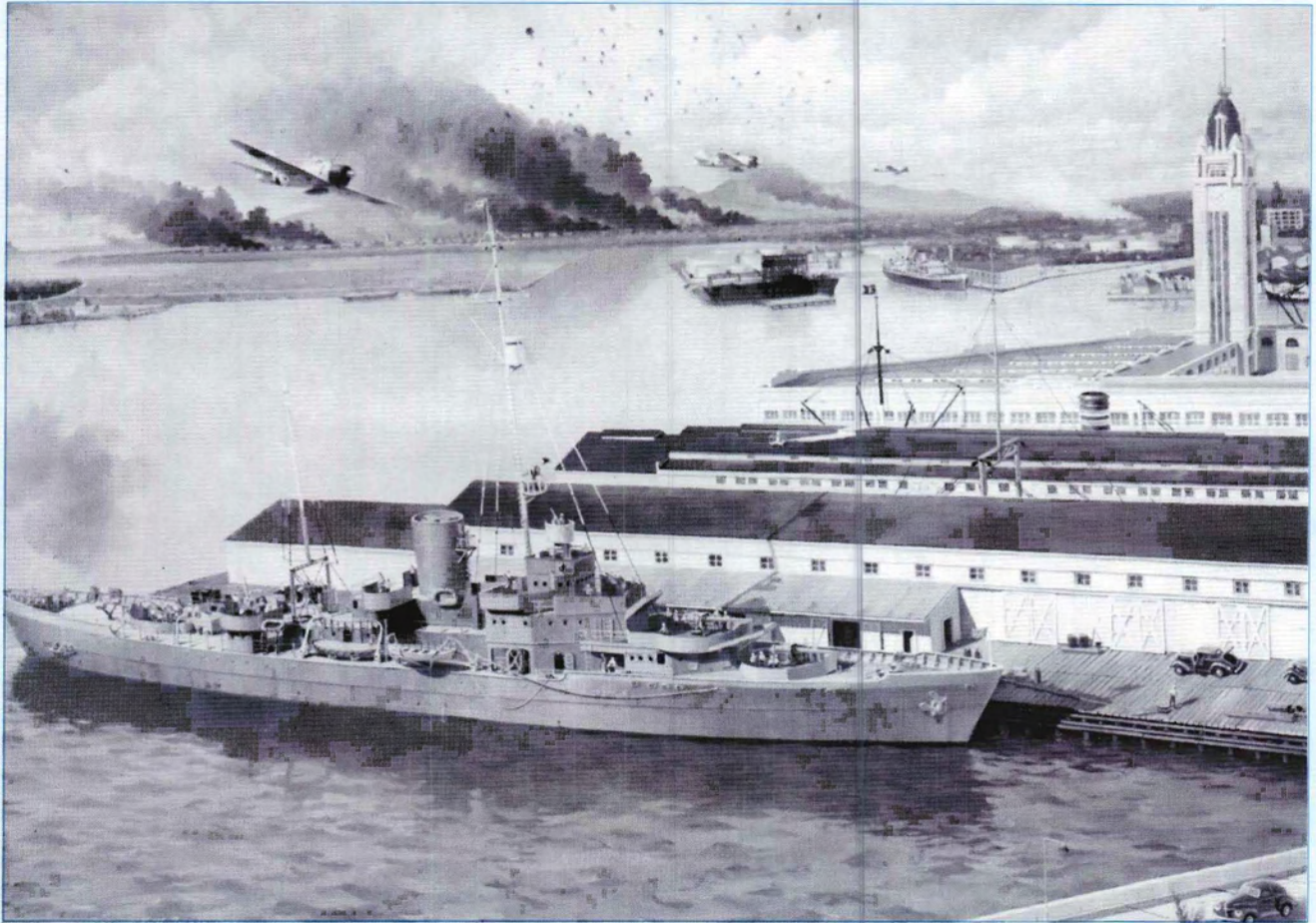
These tough cutters could carry a fixed-wing aircraft on board. The long range of the ships marked them for duty in the Pacific. The cutter *Taney* went to Honolulu while the *Spencer* went to Cordova, Alaska.

World War II had a great impact

on the Coast Guard in Alaska and Hawaii. Before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, district operations and personnel were limited in Hawaii. In July of 1939, only 30 officers and 200 men were assigned to the district. Floating units consisted of the *Taney*, two 125-foot patrol boats, two buoy tenders and five smaller patrol boats. Also within the district were 12 major light stations, 52 unattended fixed aids and a few other miscellaneous units.

At the beginning of the war, the district encompassed an area bounded roughly from the Hawaiian Islands to Midway Island, Wake





The Coast Guard cutter *Taney* fires at Japanese aircraft during the Pearl Harbor invasion December 7, 1941. This painting depicts *Taney* tied up at pier six in Honolulu harbor. During the spring of 1941, *Taney* and six other 327-foot class ships, had been transferred to the Navy due to their value as escort vessels.

Island and to Palmaid Island. Four years later, the area of responsibility stretched to include Japan, the Philippines and to near Samoa. And 200 officers and 3,000 enlisted people served in the district.

Coast Guardsmen in the Pacific served aboard transports protecting convoys and were coxswains aboard landing craft during invasions. Even the seemingly non-combatant buoy tenders were at times in the midst of the fighting.

The *Sweetbriar*, for example, repeatedly put up anti-aircraft fire against Kamikaze attacks. In May 1945, it assisted in downing a Japanese "Zeke" and a "Val." Although the Coast Guard did play an important combat role in the Pacific, one of the most lasting legacies of the war for the service was LORAN.

LORAN (Long Range Aids to

Navigation) uses radio signals to help ships and aircraft obtain an accurate position. Clearly, any device that would help navigators in the vast region of the Pacific would be of great help to the war effort.

On March 1, 1944, LT Alvin L. Loose and a small party of men built the first LORAN A station in the Pacific at Baker Island. LORAN units were built with increasing speed afterwards.

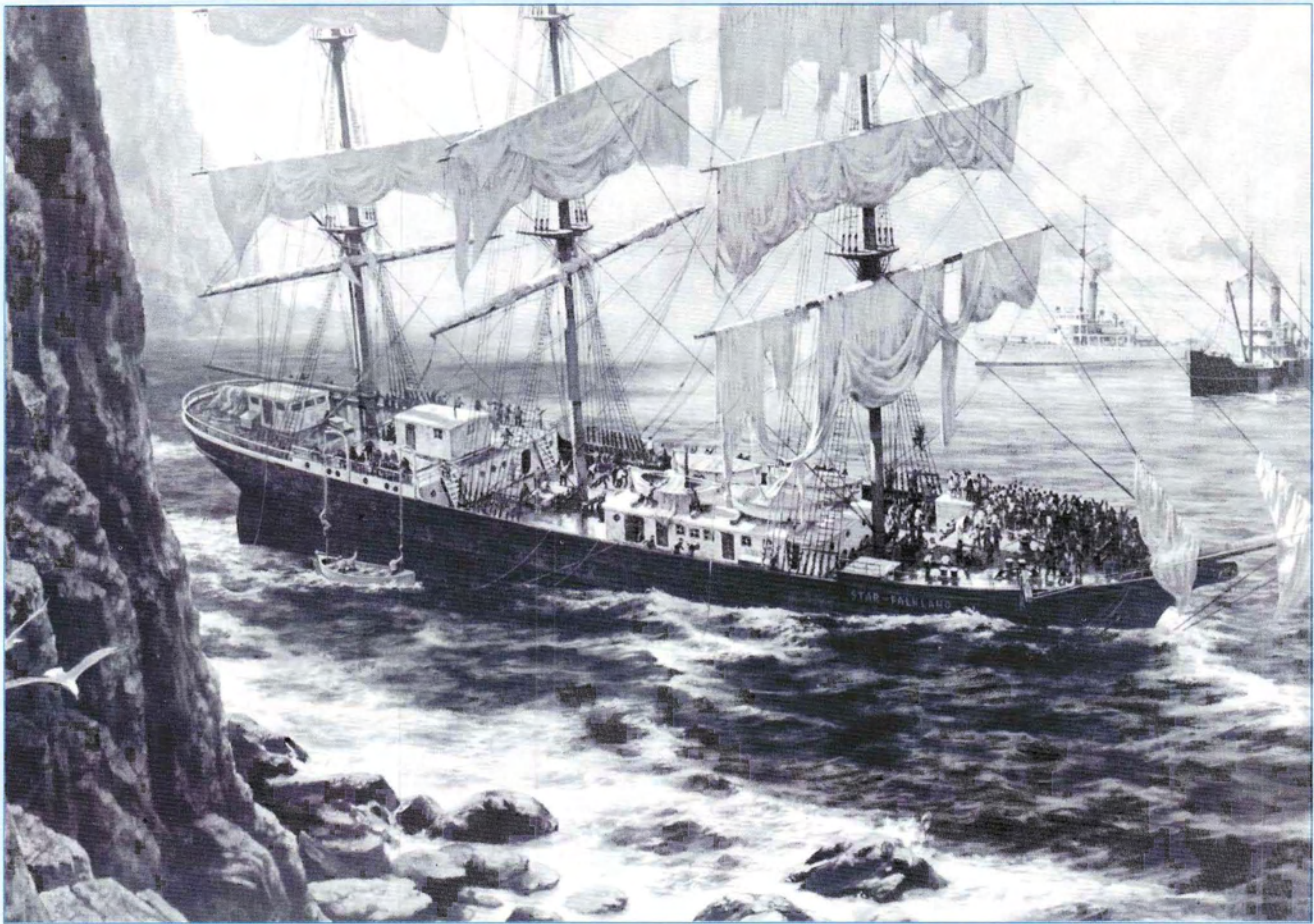
From November 8, 1944, to June 22, 1945, 19 stations were built throughout the Pacific Islands. Problems of supply and administration were enormous. The distance from Honolulu to units in the Marianas, for example, was 4,600 miles. "No other Coast Guard District," one official history stated, "was faced with such problems of distance, supply and transportation."

The LORAN A stations were classified as secret and each unit was given a code word. Sometimes six months would pass before a resupply ship would appear.

Eighteen months was a regular tour of duty. One official report aptly summed up the duty: "For the personnel who operated the stations, there was no glory and no medals — only dull, monotonous routine watches."

One of the most isolated of all LORAN stations and the one most Coast Guardsmen of the 1950s and 1960s came to recognize as the symbol of LORAN duty was French Frigate Shoals located 500 miles west-northwest of Honolulu.

The station was on Tern Island, which was bulldozed into the shape of an aircraft carrier during World War II. It provided a landing strip for the invasion of Midway Island.



The Coast Guard cutter *Haida* and the lighthouse tender *Cedar* prepare to rescue passengers and crew from the sailing vessel *Star of Falkland* near Unimak Pass, Alaska, May 23, 1928. Both vessels managed to take all the passengers off the *Star of Falkland* without loss of life.

The length of the runway is 3,100 feet, with a width of 410 feet and a mean elevation of nine feet above sea level.

On this small island, two officers and 18 enlisted men served for a one year period. The station was supplied weekly by C-130 aircraft from Air Station Barbers Point. The crew was once evacuated by a helicopter from a New Zealand frigate when heavy seas washed over the island in 1969.

On June 30, 1979, the unit was disestablished when LORAN C and OMEGA electronic navigational aids systems came into being.

The 339-foot cutter *Kukui* maintained many of these isolated stations and was a workhorse for the islands. Coast Guardsmen assigned to this ship had to be jacks-of-all-trades and move from island to island.

In 1972 the *Kukui* touched at, or worked on stations at Johnson, Atoll, Marcus, Saipan, Guam, Yap, Palau Islands, Anguor, Koror, Keelung, Iwo Jima, Yokosuka, Kure, Midway and French Frigate Shoals.

Other navigational devices began to replace LORAN A stations and the need for this type of ship ended. The *Kukui* was decommissioned in 1972.

The modern Coast Guard has benefitted greatly due to advances in technology and it has changed the nature of search and rescue. The helicopter, combined with better motor lifeboats, now insures that people can be reached faster than ever before.

In fact, shore-based rescue operations can now reach further out to sea than ever before.

The famous *Prinsendam* case in the Gulf of Alaska is a perfect

example. In 1980, the cruise ship was disabled by fire and 519 passengers and crew took to lifeboats. The nearest point of land was 129 miles away.

The Coast Guard together with merchant marine, Air Force, and the Canadians, turned a potential disaster into a dramatic rescue of all passengers and crew.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, the service has been many things to those in the 14th and 17th Districts: a marine policeman; a doctor; a protector of life and a guide to safe harbors.

Today, the men and women of the Coast Guard, building upon a strong foundation of service to others, now surpass the efforts of their illustrious predecessors in their service to those in Alaska and Hawaii.

