



## *U.S. Coast Guard History Program*

---

### **A Tribute: Bernie Webber, CWO (Ret.)**

Coast Guard Gold Medal Coxswain from the Pendleton Rescue

By: USCG Captain W. Russell Webster (Ret.)

Bernard Challen Webber, 80, formerly of Wellfleet, Cape Cod, died on January 24, 2009, at his home in Melbourne, Florida. Webber, with his three-man crew of young Coast Guardsmen, answered the call of duty on February 18, 1952, and rescued 32 sailors from the 503-foot-long tanker S.S. Pendleton which had broken in half in a winter Nor'easter featuring 70 knot winds, blinding snow and 60-foot seas.

He maneuvered the now-famous CG36500, a 36-foot rescue motor life boat under the Pendleton's stern as the tanker's crew abandoned ship. One by one, the men jumped into the water or onto the deck of the 36500, and were hauled to safety by Webber's crew.

In a tribute to his crew, Webber initially refused the Gold Lifesaving Medal, the service's highest award for bravery, when he was told his crew would receive lesser recognition. Due to his perseverance, he and his entire crew were awarded the Coast Guard's Gold Lifesaving Medal.

About five medals have been given out each year since they were introduced in 1874 for lifesaving acts of extraordinary heroism.

On August 21, 2007, Coast Guard leaders published their Top 10 all-time significant Coast Guard rescues undertaken during the previous 217 years.

The Pendleton small boat rescue was listed as the Number 3 all-time rescue, and only eclipsed by the 1980 rescue of 520 people from the Dutch liner Prinsendam off Alaska, and the service's phenomenal performance in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, during which 33,545 people were saved.

Webber originally served in the U.S. Merchant Marine from 1944-1945 in the Pacific, including a stint in a T2 tanker almost identical to the Pendleton, the S.S. Rubililne. He joined the Coast Guard in 1946 and rose to the rank of Chief Warrant Officer during a distinguished 20 year military career that included a tour off Vietnam as part of Operation Market Time.

Following his time in the Coast Guard, he was Wellfleet's harbor master, a charter boat captain out of Orleans, the Warden-Head Boatman for the National Audubon Society and part of the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School in Maine; all told, spending 42 years on the water. In his later years, he published his own book, Chatham the Life Boatmen, about the Pendleton rescue, and donated much of his time and energies to future generations of Coast Guardsmen, including US Coast Guard Academy cadets. Up until his death, Mr. Webber was a fixture at Cape Cod Coast Guard rescue stations during his annual summer vacations to Wellfleet, and could often be seen on the mess deck at the station talking to ordinary seamen, asking them about their best rescue and encouraging them in part through his personal interest in their courage and commitment. Mr. Webber's bravery is remembered by local plaques and several traditions at the Chatham Coast Guard Station. Each time a Chatham Petty Officer First Class is promoted to Chief Petty Officer, he is allowed to wear Mr. Webber's old collar devices for a period of time,

recognizing that today's leaders stand on the shoulders of those who served before them.

In May 2002, the Coast Guard honored Webber and his crew, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Pendleton rescue with ceremonies in Boston and on Cape Cod. Those ceremonies were overseen by Congressman William Delahunt (D-Mass.), and Vice Admiral Vivian Crea, now Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard. A special mural was created for the occasion by Connecticut artist Tony Falcone. That mural is now part of the US Coast Guard Academy museum.

I came to know Bernie during the course of planning the 2002 Reunion, and persuading him to come to the Cape, and Boston to attend events. I was proud to have called him my friend. He will be missed by many.

Warrant Officer Webber is survived by Miriam, his wife of 59 years, two children, Bernard C. Webber, Jr., and Patricia W. Hamilton, and three grandchildren. A late Spring 2009 funeral service on Cape Cod is planned.

[As published on [www.cg36500.org/history\\_webber.html](http://www.cg36500.org/history_webber.html)]

