

COAST GUARD:
Career often felt
'tailor-made'

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massive Navy base, and our oldest two children were born in the Navy hospital there. Yet, there was only one tour in three decades when we actually lived on a military base; that was my first permanent Alaskan assignment in Valdez, at the end of the Alaska Pipeline. During the course of my career, we moved 12 times, lived at every corner of the continent, and traveled in all 50 states.

It was during my assignment to Valdez, that I took part in the largest at-sea rescue in Coast Guard history. The cruise ship *Prinsendam* caught fire and eventually sank in the Gulf of Alaska. We successfully rescued every single one of the more than 500 passengers and crew. I headed a rescue team with emergency supplies that boarded one of the rescue ships at sea. With multiple ships and helicopters involved, the survivors, including separated families, were scattered over several sites along the Alaska coast.

When our ship made it to Valdez, we had the largest contingent of survivors; and I was put in charge of coordinating the survivor count among the various locations. The operation could not be concluded until we were certain that everyone was safe; and I remember the elation when — at 0400 in the morning — we were able to confirm that we had every single person safely accounted for.

I am often asked which duty station was the best, and that's not an easy question because each assignment had things about it that we liked. We were fortunate in that each location was well suited to the ages of our children and the needs of our family. One thing was definite; when our kids were little, they were certain in the knowledge that Santa arrived on a Coast Guard helicopter!

The largest chunks of time in my career were spent in the San Francisco Bay area, Puget Sound, and Alaska. Even while stationed in California, I spent quite a bit of time in Alaska as the Pacific Area Liaison Officer to the joint military Alaska Command. One of the more unusual tasks I was assigned involved training U.S. Navy reservists in coastal defense of the Aleutian Islands.

One of my "achievements" was that I successfully managed to avoid assignment to Headquarters in Washington, D.C. On the other side of the ledger, though, I was unsuccessful in ever being assigned to my home state of Oregon. I had to retire to get back here!

My final tour was another



PHOTO PROVIDED

CAPT Craig F. Eisenbeis — Commanding Officer, Coast Guard Marine Safety Office, Wilmington, North Carolina (1991-1994).

in Alaska, where one of my responsibilities was to visit every Coast Guard unit in our far-flung operational area. That was one of several Coast Guard jobs I had that seemed to be tailor-made just for me. I still have to periodically return to the north for an "Alaska fix." People sometimes ask me if I miss guarding the coast, and I like to respond that I'm enjoying guarding the mountains now.

Editor's note: Craig F. Eisenbeis, USCG (ret.) is the recipient of the Meritorious Service Medal, five Coast Guard Commendation Medals, and is a graduate "with highest distinction" of the U.S. Naval War College.



Coast Guard celebrates 230th birthday

By **Capt. Craig F. Eisenbeis**
USCG (retired)

On August 4, 1790, at the urging of Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton, Congress created the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service to enforce U.S. tariff laws. In observance of that date, Coast Guard Day is to be celebrated this week, marking the service's 230th birthday.

Upon its creation, Alexander Hamilton's Cutter Service was the nation's only naval force, the U.S. Navy having been disbanded at the close of the Revolutionary War. The Navy was not reconstituted until several years later, leaving the Cutter Service — or Coast Guard as it is now known — to claim the title of the nation's oldest "continuing" seagoing service.

In addition to enforcing U.S. tariff laws, the fledgling Cutter Service soon took on responsibility for at-sea ship rescues and combating piracy. Shortly thereafter, the service was also charged with intercepting ships engaged in the illegal slave trade. By the time of the Civil War, the cutters were credited with capturing approximately 500

slave ships; and the Revenue Cutter *Harriet Lane* is recognized as having fired the first naval shots of the Civil War during the siege of

Fort Sumpter.

The modern name, Coast Guard, was created in 1915, when the Revenue Cutter Service was merged with the U.S. Lifesaving Service, itself having roots back into the 1700s, when volunteer-staffed lifesaving stations were established in New England. The Lifesaving Service had already been under the administration of the Revenue Cutter Service since the 1800s. The U.S. Lighthouse Service was added later, in 1939, and the Bureau of Marine Inspection in 1942.

Following World War I, there was pressure to merge the Coast Guard into the Navy. However, the Coast Guard is the only military service that also has domestic law enforcement responsibilities, so the service is kept separate from the Defense Department, which is precluded from domestic action. In time of declared war, however, the Coast Guard can be transferred to the operational control of the Navy. This occurred in both World Wars. Since then, the Coast Guard has acted in support of military operations in other conflicts.

After nearly two centuries, the Coast Guard was transferred from the Treasury Department to the Department of Transportation when President Lyndon B. Johnson sought to combine all federal

transportation interests; and the Coast Guard has always been closely intertwined with the maritime industry. The Coast Guard assumed its present departmental status when it was moved into the newly created Department of Homeland Security in 2003.

Notably, the Coast Guard has set some interesting precedents in areas of equality. In 1865, Mike Healy, born a slave in Georgia, was commissioned an officer in the Cutter Service and rose to the rank of captain. In 1881, Healy was given his first command and, in 1887, took command of the Cutter *Bear* and became a legendary figure in the history of Alaska. Today, the Coast Guard's largest ship, a 420-foot icebreaker is named for him. In 1979, Beverly Kelley became the first woman to command a U.S. military vessel, the Coast Guard Cutter *Cape Newhagen*. In her 30-year career, she went on to command the Coast Guard's largest high endurance cutters.

With the highest entry standards of any service, the Coast Guard remains the most difficult service to gain entry to. Further, even with the highest entry standards, the Coast Guard also has the highest boot camp failure rate of any service, at 20 percent. As rewarding as it can be, pursuing a Coast Guard career is not for everyone.

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