

Film reminds of everyday risks

Lifesaving technology has drastically improved since daring 1952 rescue

By **BERIT BOYLE**
Special to The Daily Astorian

WARRENTON — Upon earning my commission in the U. S. Coast Guard, the first search and rescue mission I experienced was as a deck watch officer aboard a 210-foot cutter patrolling in the Caribbean. While conducting counter-narcotics operations, we were diverted to aid a vessel in distress. As we made our approach, I remember thinking, “Yes! This is what I want to do. This is why we are here — to help people.”

The crew onboard that cutter and the Coast Guard crews around the country are committed to performing their duties to the best of their ability. This summer, I reported to the Incident Management Division at Sector Columbia River in Warrenton. Sector Columbia River’s personnel ensure maritime safety, security, and environmental protection from the “Graveyard of the Pacific” to inland waters throughout the Columbia, Snake, and Willamette river systems. The sector and its eight subordinate units conduct 10 of the Coast Guard’s 11 statutory missions, including maritime law enforcement,

aids to navigation maintenance, pollution response, and search and rescue coordination.

Coast Guard men and women work hard; they study and train so they can be qualified to have a positive impact on someone’s life. It is an oath we take when we join the service. It is the responsibility Bernard Webber and his crew honored when they braved 60-foot seas during a 1952 nor’easter to rescue 33 crew members onboard the SS Pendleton, an oil tanker that was ripped in half off the coast of Massachusetts during one of the worst storms to ever hit the East Coast. As depicted in the film “The Finest Hours,” Webber defied great odds to reach the Pendleton and save 32 men from the storm that threatened to take them all. For his immense bravery and admirable leadership, Webber was memorialized as the namesake of the Coast Guard’s first 154-foot Sentinel class patrol boat, which bears his name on its stern.

A surf station

Coast Guard Station Chatham, where Webber was assigned at the time of the rescue, is a surf station.

However, fully half of the Coast Guard’s 20 capable surf



Berit Boyle

stations are located right here in the Pacific Northwest. Three are subunits of Sector Columbia River, which is headquartered at the Warrenton airport. The three subunit surf stations nearby are located in Tillamook Bay, Cape Disappointment, Washington, and Grays Harbor, Washington. Surf stations are required in areas where surf conditions greater than 8 feet occur 36 days or more each year.

Designation as a “surfman” is the highest qualification a coxswain can achieve in the Coast Guard, and takes years to earn. While the mission remains the same, in the 64 years since Webber’s daring rescue, life-saving technology has drastically improved. Surf stations are now equipped with the 47-foot motor lifeboat, which can right itself in 30 seconds if knocked over by surf.

Honor hero’s legacy

The men and women of the Coast Guard honor Webber’s legacy as they conduct missions today. “The work that our boat crews in the Pacific Northwest are doing day in and day out, from intensive training, to exhausting rescue and assistance missions, some taking more than

20 hours to complete, is simply astounding,” said Lt. Tom Condit, the commanding officer at Station Cape Disappointment, which features some of the most experienced “surfmen” in the entire Coast Guard. Condit and some of his crew recently took in a screening of “The Finest Hours,” and for many of them, the tale of Webber’s rescue reminds them of the risks they take day in and day out.

In the past week alone, Coast Guard lifeboat and helicopter crews in the Pacific Northwest pulled eight mariners from the Pacific Ocean’s cold clutches when their vessels capsized near coastal bars.

If you thank a Coastie for their service, they will likely respond, “You’re welcome,” or “Anytime,” and they will mean it. When help is needed, the men and women of the Coast Guard will respond, and they will continue to evaluate and improve those responses to ensure they are doing the best they can to serve and protect the maritime community.

Lt. j.g. Berit Boyle is a Coast Guard Academy graduate assigned to the Incident Management Division at Sector Columbia River. She qualified as a deck watch officer on the cutter Valiant before reporting to Sector Columbia River in her second tour in the Coast Guard. She has begun working on a surf station boat crew qualification.

Movie: ‘Certainly was entertaining’

Continued from Page 1A

“It’s good to see our heritage,” said Chief Warrant Officer Jeremiah Wolf, a surfman trainer at the National Motor Lifeboat School in Ilwaco, the only such school in the U.S. “It made me proud to be a surfman, and proud to be doing what I’m doing today at the motor lifeboat school, training future surfmen, training people to do what Bernie Webber did.”

Elite coxswains

Surfmen, the elite coxswains who crew lifeboats and provide rescues and other assistance on the water, originated with the U.S. Life Saving Service, which merged with the Revenue Cutter Service in 1915 to become the Coast Guard.

Today’s surfmen can go through up to six years of training to earn their insignia. The school at Cape Disappointment teaches them how to handle the 47-foot motor lifeboat in rough weather. The school’s first and likely only class of the year includes nine operators from troublesome bars around the country who

will soon finish up their month-long training.

Lt. Tom Condit recently replaced Lt. Scott McGrew as commander of Station Cape Disappointment, the largest search and rescue station on the Pacific Northwest coast, covering 50 nautical miles from the entrance to the Columbia River.

“It certainly was entertaining,” Condit said of the movie, which he said depicted an extraordinary situation, with two tankers breaking in two on the same night and the Coast Guard rescuing 70 people.

Condit said the rescue, made amid 60-foot seas and 70-knot (80 mph) winds, probably would have been made with a helicopter today.

The unofficial Coast Guard motto, uttered in the movie, is, “You have to go out, but you don’t have to come back.” The motto stretches back to the regulations of the Life Saving Service, but Condit said the pervasive attitude has changed to one of risk mitigation as technology has advanced.

“You have to keep the crew together, you have to keep our

boat together, before we’re able to rescue anybody else,” Wolf said. “We take great care, because we want to be able to effect rescues, and not have to be rescued ourselves.”

Rosecrans

More than 100 years ago, 16 rescuers from two lifeboat crews on either side of the Columbia River were awarded the Gold Lifesaving Medal after battling gale-force winds and monstrous seas and losing their vessels during a daring rescue of the crew of the grounded steamer Rosecrans.

The Rosecrans grounded on Peacock Spit, a shoal at the entrance to the Columbia, on Jan. 7, 1913. After grounding, the ship made three or four S.O.S. calls, before the captain ordered them halted, fearful sparks would start a fire on board. The Rosecrans did not blow its whistle, either, and it took several hours for rescuers to find the ship in the bad weather.

Of the 36 crew members on board, 33 died. Two were rescued from the steamer’s rigging by the lifeboat Dread-

naught from the Point Adams Lifesaving crew several hours after the stranding. The final survivor drifted ashore on a plank. Oscar S. Wicklund, one of the rescuers from Point Adams, said most of the crew could have been saved, had the Rosecrans been found earlier.

The lifeboats Dreadnaught and the Tenacious from Cape Disappointment, with help from tugs, battled the strong winds and high waves trying to locate and rescue the remaining crew from the Rosecrans.

The Tenacious was eventually capsized, its hull cracked and steering disabled. The Dreadnaught towed the Tenacious to the nearby tugboat Fearless, before returning to the wreck of the Rosecrans to rescue two crew members still clinging to the rigging. The crew rescued a third, who later died from a severe concussion.

Both the Tenacious, being towed across the bar by the tug Fearless, and the Dreadnaught, tethered to the lightship Columbia after its crew was brought on board, were destroyed in the Graveyard of the Pacific.

Buehler: Hosting a love-themed recital

Continued from Page 1A

“Given the world today, that’s not a bad thing to be focusing on,” Schwend said.

Cary Lewis, the director of chamber music at the Astoria Music Festival, is slated to accompany the singers on piano.

Repertoire

The set list spans the 17th and 20th centuries: from classical to modern, Brahms to Bernstein, Schumann to show tunes. The bulk will be “art songs,” pieces composed specifically for voice and piano, and consisting of classical music set to classic poetry.

“We’re all singing such a variety of repertoire that it gives you a whole new perspective and, perhaps, maybe even a better introduction into classical music for those who think classical singing is just opera,” Guidi said.

He and Buehler will sing the comedic duet “Carried Away” from the musical “On the Town.”

“It basically is these two people lamenting about the fact that they can’t just do anything normally. Everything that they do, they are so impassioned that they just kind of go crazy every time they do something,” she said.

And, for the finale, the singers will perform a trio



Erick Bengel/The Daily Astorian

Susan Buehler, a piano and voice teacher living in Cannon Beach, plays her baby grand in her home studio.

from a Verdi opera.

“It’s beautiful music. It’s fun music. And I think there will be some things performed that people have not heard before,” said Buehler, who will hand out program notes she wrote herself. “We’re just eager to do it ... and then get the heck outta there so that we can go see the Broncos win the Super Bowl,” she added with a laugh.

‘Practice room romance’

Buehler’s home studio is lined with bookcases stocked with vocal literature, all of it written for solo performance. Near the wall sits a baby grand piano covered with sheet music. A pump organ is tucked

away in the corner.

“I really do think music speaks to the inner self,” she said. “More than anything, music kind of feeds the soul.”

Born and raised in Kansas, Buehler began learning piano at around 6 years old and played in three to four piano recitals a year.

She discovered in high school that “saxophone playing was not my thing” but joined the school choir, earned her bachelor of music degree at Fort Hays State University, and received her master’s and doctorate degrees at University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music.

It was at Fort Hays that she met her husband, John, while they were undergraduates.

John was a singer, she was his accompanist.

“We had what was called a ‘practice room romance’; we met in the practice room,” she said, chuckling.

The couple later taught together in the music department at Baker University, a private liberal arts school in Kansas. In 2009, they took early retirement and moved to Cannon Beach to be closer to their grandchildren in Forest Grove.

Play on

But, even in retirement, music is, and always will be, where it’s at for the Buehlers.

They both participate in the Cannon Beach Chorus, Susan as the pianist, John as the director. Meanwhile, Susan plays the organ at the Cannon Beach Community Church and Seaside Calvary Episcopal Church.

“I feel very fortunate that my husband and I both have been able to do music for literally all our lives,” she said.

As for her private students, Buehler now has nine students, and behind them is a waiting list, she said. Her youngest, a piano student, is 9 years old, and her oldest, a voice student, is almost 80.

“It’s a much broader range than what I had at the university,” she said. “And I don’t have to give grades anymore; that’s kind of out the window.”

— Erick Bengel

Chief: Balzer claims wrongful discharge

Continued from Page 1A

critical comments made by his wife, Colleen, on social media. The firing was motivated by “personal animus,” the amended complaint states, and “did not constitute the good faith sufficient cause under the employment agreement.”

According to the amended complaint, Balzer was “unwilling and unable to restrict his wife from speaking her mind, despite the threat that he could be discharged if she continued to express her opinions.”

The complaint states it is against public policy for a public body like the fire district board to fire an employee “for his inability to restrain his spouse’s speech, particularly when the expressions are criticisms of public officials.”

Performance review shows warnings

Board directors described the firing as “strictly business, not personal.”

Documents provided by the fire district after an open records request include a 2014-15 evaluation of Balzer’s performance. Balzer, who earned more than \$100,000 in annual salary and compensation as chief, was said to demonstrate “poor leadership,” “poor communication” and “lied” to the board when he agreed to leave the chief’s truck on district property and failed to do so, directors said.

“This continues to seriously erode the trust the board has for the chief,” they wrote.

In addition, remarks by Balzer’s wife on social media exhibited “poor judgment” by Balzer “in allowing his spouse to continue to interact inappropriately online via social media criticizing board members and staff,” directors wrote in their evaluation.

In four out of five categories — accuracy, job knowledge, productivity and timeliness — Balzer’s work “needed improvement,” according to the directors.

In the fifth category, thoroughness, Balzer received a “satisfactory” rating.

Balzer, who signed off on the evaluation in March, told the board at the time: “After

reviewing the contents of this review, I believe it’s best to not comment on how things were said and written.”

A six-month review was to be held in November. “Failure to achieve the six-month goals may result in termination,” directors wrote.

Board recall sought

Balzer was terminated three weeks prior to the six-month review period.

Since that time, many Cannon Beach residents have defended the former chief and sought his reinstatement. Resident Susan Neuwirth launched a petition to remove three of the board’s five directors, President Sharon Clyde, Garry Smith and Linda Beck-Sweeney, in a recall election.

Neuwirth accused the board of lacking transparency and being “unprofessionally run.”

Recall proponents need 125 signatures to force a vote by April 6, a number determined by taking 15 percent of the votes the district cast in the last election.

As of Friday, Neuwirth said she had the required number but was seeking at least 150 additional names in the event some signatures are dismissed on technicalities.

“We’re well within the time period,” Neuwirth said. “We’re just gleaning people who were out of town and were missed. People are seeking me out.”

If an insufficient number of signatures are submitted, it proceeds no further, Clatsop County Clerk Valerie Crafard said. “If a sufficient number of signatures are submitted, I inform the public officer that they may submit their resignation or a statement of justification,” she said. “If the public officer does not resign within five days, the election must be held no later than the 35th day after the last day for the public officer to resign.”

If the three commissioners named in the recall petition choose to fight the ouster, a special election would be held at a cost of about \$6,000 to the taxpayers, Neuwirth said.

“If they step down, there’s no cost,” she said. “There’s that to factor in. Do they want to cost the district more money?”

Pot: 3 percent local tax brings levy to 20 percent

Continued from Page 1A

Under state law, cities — with voter approval — can add a 3 percent local tax on top of the 17 percent levy from the state once recreational marijuana retail outlets are licensed.

Since January, consumers have been paying a temporary 25 percent tax on recreational pot at medical marijuana dispensaries that are allowed to sell the drug to recreational users through the end of the year.

Johnston, after talking with the four medical marijuana dispensaries in Astoria that are selling recreational pot, estimates that a local tax could bring in roughly \$100,000 in annual revenue.

State law prescribes that state tax revenue from marijuana be distributed by formula, with 40 percent going to public schools, 20 percent to mental health, alcoholism and drug services, and smaller shares directed to the state police, city and county enforcement, and alcohol and drug abuse prevention.

The state has estimated \$10.7 million in new tax revenue over two years.

Local tax revenue, by contrast, can be spent at city discretion. “I think the city should do it,” Johnston said. “I think it’s a revenue source available.”

Many in the burgeoning marijuana industry anticipated that cities would likely take advantage of the local tax option.

“Like I told Brad Johnston, he’d be foolish not to go after that,” said Oscar Nelson, the co-founder of Sweet Relief Natural Medicine in

Astoria. “It’s expected. It’s logical. It’s nothing that’s going to be a pain in our ass.”

The retail price of marijuana will likely fluctuate for a few years as outlets compete for customers, perfect growing, supply and distribution techniques and adjust to tax and regulatory burdens.

Marijuana’s transition from a widely used illegal drug sold on the black market to a legal, government-taxed product will likely be challenging. The Oregon Department of Revenue said Friday, for example, that 120 of the 309 medical marijuana dispensaries selling recreational pot had not registered with the department. Just five, according to the department, had scheduled appointments to pay the taxes owed on January sales.

Raja Afrika, a shift manager at Hi in Astoria, worries that if prices get too high, some consumers might return to “Joe on the couch” — the black market — for their supply. He said he has seen a decline in customers since the temporary 25 percent tax was imposed in January.

Afrika also cautioned that higher prices could be a hardship on people who use marijuana for medical reasons but do not have medical marijuana cards that enable them to purchase the drug tax free.

“I think I would ask them to consider the patients,” he said of the City Council. “Consider the people who are the most vulnerable, because they’re frequently the ones that are hardest hit by all of these changes.”