

Ship Report Transcript
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By Joanne Rideout

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It's time for the Ship Report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout.

Today, we'll continue listening to parts of a lengthy interview I did with author John Kopp, former U.S. Coast Guard Curfman about a book he wrote called CG 41332, which is the name of a U.S. Coast Guard utility boat that was involved in a terrible tragedy on the Columbia River Bar in 1977. U.S. Coast Guard trainees were working aboard cg41332 during a practice run out on the river. Things went wildly wrong and the nightmarish accident that ensued cost three young crewmen their lives. It was a little known incident until Karp wrote his book. But what investigators learned from it changed the Coast Guard forever. The book came out in 2023. Today is part seven of that interview. We'll talk more about how this incident changed the Coast Guard. Here's more from my interview with John Kopp.

JK: And then the last big way, which is it's harder to see, but it's almost even more impactful is in terms of policy and training frameworks. So when this accident happened, there were there weren't really environmental limitations established for when boats could operate and when they could not. And I don't think it was exactly a cause of this accident that the boat operated outside of a reasonable limitation. It was it was going to head upriver in cold water and something bad happened. But the fact that in the investigation they found that this all was lacking cause the Coast Guard to promulgate boat operator handbooks for each specific type of boat. So a handbook for this 41 foot utility boat, a handbook for the 44 foot motor lifeboat. And in each of these books, they would specify the conditions when it was it was too big or too dangerous for the boat to go out and it couldn't operate. That exists still today. And it's a big deal. That's that's where those different tiers of boat operators and the Coast Guard come in, because each one is capable or I guess, allowed to take a boat into bigger and bigger conditions. And it's actually formally followed and adhered to now where it didn't used to be. And then I guess the second big administrative change or training change was the entire way The Coast Guard trains and certifies its boat crews changed in 1980 to 1982 directly because of this accident to kind of make the system that had existed before it way more robust, better explication of what the different criteria were for people to meet standards, to become certified as a boat crew member, as an engineer, as a boat coxswain. It allowed for the creation of kind of like a Coast Guard version of Chapman's, a three inch thick book called the Boat Crew Seamanship Manual, so that people who were studying for these crew roles could study a centralized or like standardized textbook, basically. And that system and basically a form of that book still exists today. And that is what every crew uses at every station, on every Coast Guard ship that has a small boat that people get certified to operate, that system is what they follow. And it's been that way since 1982 because of this accident.

JR: Wow. Oh, and for people who are listening and don't know what Chapman says, it's a really thick book for primarily for recreational boaters. It has every rule in the world and every bit of protocol and every bit of how to be smart on the water. It's a great book to have just to read. But most boater courses that are like United States Power Squadron, stuff like that, it's a textbook that you can use to really start to learn. And I think, you know, for me, because of what I do on the ship, report is so much about sort of civilian safety that one of the takeaways for me from this book was just how dangerous it is out here, even when it may not seem to be. I mean, when you have people whose job it is to save us getting in that kind of trouble, you know that you're in a place that is extraordinary.”

And that was a clip from my interview with John Kopp, who wrote the book CG for 1332 to about an accident on the Columbia River Bar in 1977 that caused the death of three Coast Guard students who were training at the time in a utility boat.

If you've been listening to this series, you know the story is grim and tragic, and I don't want to diminish the loss in any way for the families of those who died. And this is a story that needs to be told.

But in the aftermath of an accident, when something bad happens abruptly, wise people learn from it. And that's exactly what the Coast Guard did as an agency. They transformed as a result of this tragedy into the even more highly effective agency we have now. And they were already amazing before.

So I would hope that you wouldn't get the impression that I or John Kopp are being critical of this life saving agency. The Coast Guard is and remains a tremendous resource for us here and all around us coastal waters. If you ask around, there's hardly a person you could meet here whose life hasn't been impacted by the Coast Guard either by being rescued, towed in, helped out in some way and been the recipient of highly expert service for free from our coasts. So I think these folks are amazing.

My purpose in devoting so much time here is to explain this story, honor those who died and emphasize for those of us who are not in the Coast Guard that our region's waterways must be taken seriously by all of us because of the Coast Guard can get in trouble here on our waters, then it shows how very dangerous it is.

So our Coast Guard personnel always have my deepest respect. And it's also worth noting that if you get in trouble and are stuck out in horrible conditions in a boat hoping they will save you, they will do their best. But they are risking their lives to for you, in the graveyard of the Pacific.

If you'd like to meet author John Kopp, who wrote this book CG41332, he's going to be speaking at the Columbia River Maritime Museum in Astoria on August 29th, that's a Thursday, at 6 p.m.. And you can get copies of his book in various local venues. I think it's also what the Timberland Library in Washington. So a lot of opportunities and I'm sure he'll have books there at his at his lecture at the Maritime Museum.

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