

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 begin listening to parts of an interview I did in the spring of 2024, so just not too long ago with author John Kopp, former U.S. Coast Guard surfman, about a book he wrote called CG41332, 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 on the bar. Things went wildly wrong and the nightmarish incident that ensued cost three young crewmen their lives. It was a little known incident until Karp wrote the book. But what investigators learned from it changed Coast Guard procedures forever.

About the author: John Kopp is a former U.S. Coast Guard surfman who trained and served at Cape Disappointment. Today, we begin with his overview of the book. I found this story riveting, tragic and very hard to read in places because his account of the situation was meticulously researched and utterly factual, and so horrifying for the people who were involved in it. The mental images of what I read have stayed with me in the months since I read the book. It's hard to forget, and for those of us locally who are listening, this is a story that happened right here where we live and those same conditions that ambushed this boat and its crew are still present out there on the bar to this day. Here's part of my interview with John Kopp.

JR: Can you give us just a short explanation of what the book is about for people who are not familiar with it?

JK: Yeah, I would say, first off, as it reads or as I intended it, it's kind of like a cross between the perfect storm and a white paper or a historical researched book. I really wanted it to be accurate and not hyperbolic or sensational. And some of the content, some of the things that happened were genuinely dramatic and heartbreaking and intense and all those things. So, you know, I wanted to represent that as well. But it's kind of like three books, and they sort of go in sequence of a beginning, middle and end or a present day.

And the beginning lays out the early foundations, the early beginnings of organized maritime lifesaving in the United States. And the reason I kind of broke it up this way and started there is because the middle piece, which is about this accident and the at the time not national, but now it is a national motor lifeboat school that keeps this appointment, these beginning foundational historical bits about the Coast Guard and its predecessor led directly to it.

So it led to the foundation of this school at Cape Disappointment and also led to some of the challenges that kind of set the stage in 1977 for this accident to happen. So the middle chunk of the book and literally it's kind of like three books. It's a big it's a big read. But that middle piece is about this accident, the run up to it, the immediate accident timeline, and then the immediate aftermath. And then the third and final part of the book kind of brings the trajectory that this accident set up all the way up to the present. I didn't intend that necessarily when I started researching it.

But in all the investigation I did, I was completely surprised how much this accident affected present day operations. Literally, the people on the boats today at Cape D or any of these other stations, they're wearing equipment that was iterated and implemented as a result of this accident. And they're following a training syllabus that was iterated because of this accident. You know, all these different things that affect things today. So it felt like it needed to bring it all the way up to the present.

And the title of this book is called 41332. And the subtitle is: Surfmen, The Cape Disappointment Motor Lifeboat School and the Forgotten Tragedy that Transformed U.S. Coast Guard Boat Operations.

All the way back predecessor to the Coast Guard and the US lifesaving service there were surfmen, and these were guys rowing wooden boats wearing, you know, oil skin slickers in the middle of a nor'easter off of Massachusetts or wherever they were. That term today represents someone who certifies to a particular level in this kind of hierarchy of of boat operators and the Coast Guard, but that it also kind of describes the community of these specialized service stations. And this specialized occupation is kind of like a microcosm in the Coast Guard. And so bringing it up to the last part of the book, I'd kind of describe the state of that microcosm today as best I could with the people I spoke with.”

And to give you some more specifics about what we're really talking about here, what the story was. let me read you the blurb that is on the back of this book. C.G41332:

“Hell isn't hot - 20 minutes into a night navigation exercise at Cape Disappointment. Washington, Coast Guard Utility Boat 41332 tracked off course, strayed into breaking surf and capsized. That means rolled over completely, trapping eight of its ten person crew inside a dark, slowly floating cabin.

Over the next hour, the survivors fought their way underwater to the outside. Three students lost their lives.

Beginning with the historical origins of the U.S. Coast Guard's rescue boat community. CG41332 offers the first book length account of this 1977 accident, the lineage of Surf Men, and the evolution of the service's National Motor Lifeboat School, which is located right here at Cape Disappointment.

Meticulously prepared by a former Cape Disappointment surfman. CG 4133 brings new light to the relationships between these interconnected histories and also explores healing after adversity.”

And for those of us who do live here in coastal communities, it's difficult not to know someone who has been at one time or another helped or rescued by the Coast Guard. We live in a challenging maritime area that has justly earned its name as the graveyard of the Pacific.

We rightly think of these folks who come out to save us as heroes, and they are. This story shows that they are human beings too, and that sometimes the conditions are too much for even the most seasoned mariners. As we hear excerpts from this interesting interview series, you'll hear a lot about the Coast Guard and its evolution and about human resilience. How abject terror affects people's judgment and how sometimes what might seem like miraculous good luck or even perhaps divine providence may sometimes be a factor in what happens in a tragedy.

More tomorrow from my interview with John Kopp about his book. CG 41332. About a tragedy that happened right here in 1977 with the Coast Guard.

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Thanks for listening and have a great day.