

Ship Report Transcript
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By Joanne Rideout

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You listening to the ship report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout.

Today, we'll continue listening to parts of an interview I did in the spring of 2024 with author John Kopp, former U.S. Coast Guard servant, about a book he wrote called CG41332, which is the name of a U.S. Coast Guard utility boat that was involved in a horrific 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 accident until Karp wrote his book, but what investigators learned from it changed Coast Guard procedures forever. Today, we'll begin part two in this interview series.

JR: We talked before about you reading some excerpts from the book, and I wonder if you could do that now, because I think it will really give people a sense of of what it's about.

JK: Yeah, maybe I'll start with the introduction to the book. All right.

“Visit the Pacific Northwest coast on the right day and it will be totally confounding that an ocean so capable of fury, of producing waves of 40 and 50 feet right here could be called the Pacific. There is nothing soothing or mild tempered about a winter mid-latitude cyclone in the North Pacific or even the 8 to 10 foot drop found on summer days between the tips of the protective jetties at the mouth of the Columbia River. The indigenous people who, for at least 10,000 years made a rich life in the Pacific Northwest and the first Europeans to visit here knew this well. Today, so does the U.S. Coast Guard.

Well before sunrise, the Coast Guard lifeboat stations along the Washington and Oregon coasts. 4 to 6 person boat crews roll out of bed each morning to take a rescue boat underway on a bar report, which is a mission to observe the weather and sea conditions at the river mouth near each station. On a given day at any one of these stations, the boat engineer more than likely beats everyone to the dock to get the 47 foot motor lifeboats, diesel engines lit off and its electronics energized.

As the lifeboat rumbles to life and its lights and screens come on. Other crew members arrive, pull on Mustang suits and zip up survival suits and wait for the coxswain, which is the boat's primary operator and the one responsible for the whole crew. Meanwhile, far from the dock, the coxswain has electronically signed the boat out for the mission and visited the armory to obtain small arms for the crew.

When the coxswain arrives, there's a quick huddle on the lifeboats aft deck so that the team can discuss the weather, the mission, the vessel's operational status and how everyone is feeling. Perhaps after yesterday's late night training with the helicopter. Then the crew splits. The coxswain climbs the steps to the outside steering station and the crewmembers hop back to the dock to line handle. After calling the station via VHF radio to say they're getting underway and to pass on a risk assessment score calculated during the briefing, the coxswain holler for the crew members to clear them. Lines are cast off and the lifeboat pulls out of the mooring basin for its run to the ocean, where conditions will be observed. And the first sidebar report radioed back to the station in the station's communication center.

One of the unit's most junior members records all the information transmitted from the boat and makes a radio broadcast to the world.

Instantly, the eager public knows what the early morning conditions are and what the answer is to a most anticipated legal question: whether or not the coxswain has decided to place a restriction on the bar prohibiting non-commercial craft up to a certain size from operating too far towards the ocean.

Aboard the motor lifeboat, the helmsman, the person actively driving, has already turned the boat around, heading it back towards the station where a freshwater hose, 50 gallons of diesel fuel and eventually breakfast await the crew. Before they reach the docks, though they'll likely pass a parade of outbound small craft recreational boats, most about 15 to 25 feet that are scooting out towards the ocean to send down their lines. After less than an hour, the 47 footer warms up and the crew shares the duties of securing the lifeboat from this mission and readying it for the next one.

Though none of the crew members probably gave it a passing thought, their 45 minute boat ride likely took them within sight of places where tragedies once unfolded in Washington and Oregon. These somber but oft forgotten places are transited daily by professionals at Coast Guard stations near Grays Harbor, Cape Disappointment, Tillamook Bay, Depoe Bay, Equity Bay, South La River, Umpqua River, Coos Bay and Chicago River, as well as from the service's National Motor Lifeboat School. In the sense that these patches of sea have borne witness to countless maritime disasters over the decades.

There are certainly graveyards, but in the sense that they have also claimed generations of lifesavers. They constitute unique graveyards. Each is a graveyard in which those seemingly least likely to lose their lives did. While this book focuses on one snapshot from the graveyard at Cape Disappointment, Washington, its realities are interchangeable with almost any Pacific Northwest Station and indeed many small boat stations in the US Coast Guard.

The work the Coast Guard, does today is not all that different from the work they did. 45 or more years ago. And we have many reasons not to forget it.”

And that was author John Kopp former U.S. Coast Guard serviceman and coxswain who trained at Cape Disappointment and has written a book about a terrible tragedy that occurred on the Columbia River Bar in 1977, in which a Coast Guard utility boat carrying student trainees got caught in turbulent conditions that caused the boat to capsize and remain upside down. The harrowing story of their rescue and the deaths of three of those students was little known until Kopp began writing his book. I interviewed him recently and we talked in depth about the incident and the book he wrote, which is a comprehensive and exhaustively researched true story that is nonetheless harrowing and difficult to read. Most of us are never in situations during the course of our workday that could kill us. Even fewer of us have to go up against our deepest fears in the course of doing something routine. This incident caused young cadets to push themselves into territory. That they were not yet trained to handle. And indeed conditions in which anyone would find it challenging to keep their wits about them. Kopp captures all of this well while explaining how the incident happened and what beneficial changes happened in the wake of this tragedy. Tomorrow, we'll hear more from my interview with author John Kopp.

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