

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 an interview I did with author John Kopp. Former U.S. Coast Guard Serviceman 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.

We began listening to this interview last week and will continue this week with more from John Kopp.

U.S. Coast Guard trainees were working aboard CG 41332 during a practice run out on the river on the bar. 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 Coast Guard procedures forever. The book came out in 2023.

Over the course of this almost hour long interview, John and I touched on many subjects. And one of them was access to information that he needed to write the book. Most of it needing to be provided to him by the U.S. Coast Guard. His answers to my questions were revealing about the tremendous responsibility the Coast Guard carries and has carried for generations now, not only in documenting their own history, but in evolving as an organization with a very dangerous and at times seemingly impossible mission, namely rescue, under overwhelming circumstances. And as a very small agency tasked with a huge job.

The story of CG 41332 is, as I have said in earlier segments in this series, a harrowing one. Kopp is a good storyteller, and as you read his account of the incident, it's hard not to put yourself in the place of these terrified young students and their instructor trapped upside down in the dark in a boat, in a small bubble of air keeping them afloat.

To be honest, I had to stop at times when I was reading it and kind of parse it out, because it was simply a situation in which people's most primitive instincts for survival and deepest fears must have been triggered. A more trying situation than any practice scenario these young people had ever experienced before, and that few mariners ever face and lived to tell about it.

Today we'll continue with part four of my interview with author John Kopp.

JR: I know in the book you mentioned that this was something that was not really widely known in the Coast Guard. How did you discover that this had even happened?

JK: I think a while before I joined the Coast Guard, I was just doing Cape Disappointment research or something as a teenager and found like a forum online where some of the survivors and eyewitnesses of this were kind of reconvening to talk about and process this decades later. But I didn't really remember it. And so it wasn't really until I got to Cape Disappointment and the first fall and winter I was there. We were preparing for the annual memorial service where there's a really large and well-known tragedy from 1961 that that service commemorates, but also some of the other losses of life since then. And this was brought up at that time and kind of, I don't know, maybe touched back to that old memory, but it was such a novel thing and no one really knew much about it. There was even a plaque at the time kind of memorializing those who'd been killed in the service on the bar. And one of

the people who was killed in this accident whose name was misspelled wrong. So there just wasn't a lot of wasn't a lot of corporate knowledge that had sort of preserved this story in the decades since. So that was kind of my first exposure to it.

And then it kind of lingered with me. And when I got out of the Coast Guard, I had kind of this vacuum of like what to do with my life and waiting to kind of get things set up in this new career direction. And it was about two years into that. After about two years of almost nightly dreams, kind of just about Coast Guard stuff and me sort of sifting through and figuring out what that meant, it brought me back around to these to my concern and care for these historic Coast Guard boat tragedies and in particular this one. And that's kind of when I started reaching out to some people I knew from previous generations in the Coast Guard to start kind of networking and meeting and researching and finding people who were there for this this incident. Did anyone did you encounter any resistance from anyone to writing about this? Because it there's some things that clearly could have been done differently that might have made a big difference. So did anybody say, what are you doing or having a hard time in any way? I was I was prepared and concerned about that. And I wouldn't say like overtly I encountered that at all, which is refreshing. And the feedback from people in the service and out of the service who have read the book is has been positive that it seems like it's an important thing. It seems like people value that this has been discussed less, less overtly.

It was just challenging to get a lot of documentation for this. I really wasn't able to get anything from the Coast Guard, and I don't think that that was in any way deliberate or any kind of cover up or anything like that. But I think it does speak to systemically the Coast Guard is so stretched thin in so many different directions that over the years they've just been really challenged to preserve their own history, whether that's talking about technical details of a mishap or even sort of memorial izing a tragedy, unfortunately, I think that contributes to the reason that this story has sort of been forgotten. And so that was a challenge, was, you know, doing Freedom of Information Act requests and the Coast Guard really not knowing where to look.

So where they did look, they couldn't find anything. And that was the challenging, too.

JK: Well, I mean, the you know, the conventional wisdom that you hear all the time is that the Coast Guard is smaller than the New York City Police Department. Right. And certainly, I mean, that may not be exactly true anymore, but they still are a very small agency of the military tasked with a gigantic job. And now homeland security added on to that since 911. So, I mean, they do an awful lot with with probably not enough.

JK: Yeah. And and so, you know, for me making this book, it's like there's so many authors who've done this type of work before that I really look up to for the deliberateness that, you know, and the time and effort that they put into it and the completeness. And so my hope is that we're the Coast Guard can't always do the best job of cataloguing and remembering and preserving the stuff that people on the outside who have some kind of care and some kind of maybe even lived experience can do that a little bit.

If you're intrigued by this story, you might want to read the book. It's available in numerous local bookstores around the region and in the Timberland Regional Library in Washington State. And if you'd like to see John Kopp speak in person about his experience writing the book and this true story of tragedy on the Columbia River Bar, he'll be appearing as a guest speaker at the Columbia River Maritime Museum in Astoria on August 29th at 6 p.m.. The title of the book again is "CG 41332.

Surfmen, The Cape Disappointment Motor Lifeboat School and the Forgotten Tragedy That Transformed U.S. Coast Guard Boat Operations.”

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