Born of an idea, an invention saves thousands of lives and is the beginning of the U.S. Lifesaving Service

Saving lives along our coast

Photo courtesy of John Bailey Lloyd

A lifesaving crew and a lifeboat on the beach. Note the steamship in the distance.

It was the sight of the bodies of 13 drowned seamen scattered along the Long Beach strand that provided the impetus for lifesaving ideas that laid the foundation of the U.S. Lifesaving Service which was to play such a vital role in local and national history.

This uniquely American institution with its very special breed of men, was to function very successfully as preservers of life and property along our coasts for more than 60 years. The Lifesaving Service and Revenue Cutter Service were merged in 1915 to form the U.S. Coast Guard.

On Aug. 13, 1839 the Austrian brig *Terasto* (or *Count Parasto*) buffeted by a violent storm, struck a bar 300 yards from shore at Great Swamp, now known as Surf City. The captain and entire crew perished, while trying to swim through the raging surf and wreckage.

LATER BECAME GOVERNOR

It was young Dr. William A. Newell who witnessed the tragedy and conceived an idea how the seamen might have been saved: if a rope could have been thrown over the chasm to the seamen, they could have been hauled through or over the surf.

The words are those of the same man 61 years later, when as New Jersey's former Gov. William A. Newell addressed a meeting of the Monmouth County Historical Society. He told of his years as a congressman and the formation and development of the Lifesaving Service to which so much of his time and effort had been devoted.

SEVERAL EXPERIMENTS

Dr. Newell experimented by throwing light lines by bow and arrow, by rockets and blunderbuss. He finally succeeded in throwing a line several hundred yards by firing a ball with the line attached by means of a mortar or carronade. His device was to become the basis for getting breeches buoys and lifecars to vessels wrecked on offshore shoals.

The New Jersey coast was known as The Graveyard of the Atlantic because of the appalling loss of life and property there. Trim sailing vessels in this major coastal shipping area fell victim to violent storms and the menace of offshore shoals. An error in navigation could mean destruction of a ship and all aboard. In winter, ships were sometimes driven full rigged into the surf, when sails and rigging became so ice covered as to be unmanageable.

So acute were the problems that 122 wrecks were recorded in an 18-month period beginning in 1846. Today, the locations of more than 500 wrecks along the New Jersey coast have been charted by the government as hazards to navigation. All in all some 5,400 shipwrecks have been documented off the New Jersey coast.

Because Dr. Newell felt Congress should provide all possible safeguards for the men of the sea, who contributed so much to the young nations economy, he ran for Congress. He was elected in 1846 to represent New Jersey's Second District, which included the shore area from Sandy Hook to Little Egg Harbor.

HIS FIRST EFFORT

Rep. Newell's first action on the first day of the first session of Congress, Jan. 1, 1848, was to offer a resolution for Congress to set up a committee on commerce to study plans to protect life and property along the dangerous coast in his district.

He failed to convince the House then, and failed on bill after bill, but continued to fight for support until the end of the session was nearing. When the Senate Lighthouse bill came to the House of Representatives, he offered his resolution as an amendment. The bill and amendment were unanimously adopted by both houses.

Under the bill Congress appropriated $10,000 to build eight small boathouses equipped with lifeboats, carronades and other lifesaving apparatus along the New Jersey coast, from Sandy Hook to Little Egg Harbor. This was the first appropriation of its kind in the United States. The next year construction of 14 more was authorized for the coasts of New Jersey and Long Island.

SHINGLED SHANTIES

Those early boathouses were shingled shanties about 16 by 28

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feet. One of the first to be built was at Sandy Hook, and that tiny building has been preserved as a museum for maritime equipment of the era.

Plans for equipping the first eight boathouses, according to a letter to Dr. Newell from the Revenue Cutter Service officer in charge of the operation, included galvanized surfboats with 10 separate air chambers, 160 fathoms of hawser, 370 fathoms of hauling rope, 600 yards of rocket lines and rockets, stores, etc. There were to be stoves and fuel in each building.

Dr. Newell was responsible for the 1854 Act of Congress which established the U.S. Lifesaving Service. His amendment to extend the system to include all of the Jersey coast, establish two stations in Connecticut, install buoys at Barnegat Inlet and the mouth of Toms River, and reopen the Little Egg Harbor Lighthouse at Tucker's Beach was also adopted.

WANTED CARRONADES

Newell wanted stations along the more dangerous parts of the coast to be equipped with carronades powerful enough to throw a ball with line attached over a vessel in distress, when storms and high seas made it impossible to launch surfboats in the foaming surf.

The bar paralleling the Jersey beaches varied from 300 to 800 yards from shore, and at times was covered with not more than two feet of water. It was said, "Not even a ship's longboat can float over this bar."

Congress had earlier recognized the dangerous conditions along our coast by building lighthouses and breakwaters and anchoring buoys to mark harbor channels.

The first trial under fire for a ball and line firing mortar occurred early in January 1850 near Manasquan Inlet. The Scottish barque *Ayrshire*, carrying Scottish and Irish immigrants to America, had foundered two weeks earlier off Absecon Beach, and drifted helplessly until she beached at Squan Beach in a blinding snowstorm. Every person on board (201 in all including small children), who might otherwise have perished, was brought safely through the foaming surf in a lifecar. The mortar or carronade became a part of every LSS station.

1ST BALL IN MUSEUM

That first ball fired from a mortar on shore, and the line it carried over the *Ayrshire*, are displayed at the National Museum in Washington, D.C.

President Lincoln in 1861 appointed Rep. Newell, a superintendent of the USLSS for the New Jersey coast, a post he held for a number of years. When he left the system and became governor of the state, there were 28 stations on the Jersey coast. In 1915 when the USLSS merged with the Revenue Cutter Service to become the Coast Guard, there were 42 stations between Sandy Hook and Cape May, with an average of six to eight highly skilled lifesavers at each.

Coastal residents all over the world had always done what they could to save the shipwrecked on their shores. Some volunteer organizations were formed for that purpose. But the USLSS was the most unusual, widest in scope and certainly the most successful until modernization of communications and facilities removed many of the hazards of seafaring.

SOCIETIES HELPFUL

The Royal Humane Society was founded in Great Britain in 1774 to help shipwrecked seamen. Fifty years later it was supplanted by the National Life-boat Institution of Great Britain, which became a great lifesaving agency in that country.

In this country the Massachusetts Humane Society, founded in 1785, began to build houses of refuge along that coast. In 1807 the Society began equipping the houses with lifeboats.

Volunteers on our own coast performed daring and heroic feats to save the shipwrecked. Small groups banded together to have boats built to carry them to waveswept wrecks. Lookouts were stationed at high points in stormy weather to watch for vessels in distress. The volunteers who met at Bonds Long Beach House in event of a shipwreck were later organized into one of the very first lifeboat stations.

ONLY KEEPER PAID

At first only the keeper of a lifesaving station was salaried, while the crew served gratuitously when needed. A descendant of Capt. Jarvis B. Rider, first and only keeper at the Little Egg Harbor Lifesaving Station at Sea Haven, has his first commission paper. It is dated Nov. 3, 1869 and calls for a salary of $200 a

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Photo courtesy of John Bailey Lloyd

The Tucker's Island lifesaving crew demonstrates a breeches buoy, which carried a person over the surf to safety.

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year. His 1878 commission dated July 7, calls for an annual salary of $400. Capt. Jarvis served for 46 years until 1915 when the USLSS and Revenue Cutter Service became the U.S. Coast Guard.

Newell in 1866 urged Congress to salary the surfmen and to reward them for dangerous missions and meritorious acts of life or property saving. His plan was subsequently adopted. It was not until almost the turn of the century that Congress enacted legislation for pensions for men who had served 20 years or more, and their widows and children. Lifesavers disabled before passage of the pension bill did not receive pension recognition until 1919.

New, larger and better equipped buildings gradually supplanted the first LSS stations. In particularly dangerous areas stations were located two miles apart. Between Barnegat and Little Egg Harbor Inlets there were stations at Barnegat City, Loveladies, Harvey Cedars, Ship Bottom, Peahala, Beach Haven and the Little Egg Harbor station at Sea Haven.

A typical building of the late 1800's and early 1900's had a watchtower and accommodations for the officer in charge and eight or nine surfmen. Some of the shipwrecked found shelter at the station while others were cared for in the homes of the crew and other nearby residents. Equipment included a 26-foot self-baling lifeboat, a dory or two, a lifecar, beach cart, Lyle gun, breeches buoy apparatus, stocks of hawsers and lines, provisions and great piles of cut wood for the stoves. Lights, lanterns, flares, rockets, and axes were also on hand.

THE LIFECAR

The lifecar was an elliptical metal boat seven or more feet in length with a watertight hatch, which was closed after it was boarded. It would hold six persons. There were lines attached at either end, so it could be hauled back and forth between ship and shore. Even longtime lifesavers conceded it was a frightening experience to ride a lifecar in a storm.

The two wheeled beach cart with its iron rims was drawn by hand over the sand. It carried reels of lines and apparatus for getting the lines to a stranded ship.

The Lyle gun was a small brass cannon with a 2-inch bore, which was a perfection of a mortar used by Dr. Newell. From it a projectile about 16 inches long and weighing 19 pounds with an eyelet in the end shot over the wreck carrying with it 400 or more yards of light line. The light line was attached to a block or pulley, which was drawn to the ship to be attached well up on the mast. A two-inch hawser attached to a sand anchor on the beach end, was then hauled to the ship and its other end attached to the mast.

SAVED THOUSANDS

The breeches buoy, hauled back and forth on this rope suspension bridge, saved thousands of lives. It was a ring buoy attached to a strong pair of canvas breeches, and was strung from a pulley on the hawser. A seaman climbed into the buoy, sat in the breeches and rode to shore over the pounding surf.

Hawsers and lines were precious possessions, they were expensive and might be needed immediately. To save them, the lifesavers used an ingenious block with a sharp cutting knife controlled by a lever, which was hauled by a whip line for attachment to the mast. When all aboard the ship had been

Photo courtesy of Marvin Inman

Bill De Fritas shows how a man would enter a metal lifesaving car.

landed, a couple of sharp jerks on the whip line caused the knife to part the hawser which was then drawn back to the beach. The only things lost were the whip line and a frayed end of the hawser.

TOOK SPECIAL COURAGE

A lifesaver of necessity had to have a special quality of courage and fearlessness to face the dangers of his man-against-the-sea vocation. Many of them lost their lives in the line of duty or were permanently disabled.

To be accepted into the service, a man had to be 21 and be an experienced surfman. The late John R. Pharo of Ship Bottom told the Times-Beacon he gained his experience as a substitute at the Little Egg Harbor station where his father, Robert Pharo, was a regular lifesaver. John Pharo served at Little Beach, Loveladies and Bond's Lifesaving Stations until 1915, after which he served as a Coast Guardsman at Bond's. Altogether his service until he retired totaled 30 years.

Reuben Corliss of Manahawkin gained his experience as a hand-line ocean fisherman for three years before he was accepted in 1903. He was stationed at North Brigantine for five years before transferring to Loveladies, where he was a crew mate of Pharo.

PROMOTED TO CPO

In 1915 Corliss was promoted to chief petty officer of the new Coast Guard and was stationed at Cedar Creek. After retiring to do war work for a couple of years, he returned to the Coast Guard and served at Barnegat City until his final retirement.

Tales of tragic shipwrecks on our shores and the heroism of our own lifesavers are told and retold in older families of the locale. It was a proud and still untarnished tradition of rugged courage, stamina and bravery, that the officers and men of the U.S. Lifesaving Service passed on to its illustrious successor organization, The U.S. Coast Guard.

Gov. Newell was honored by the State Legislature in 1896, when it officially recognized he was solely instrumental in establishing the U.S. Lifesaving Service. The State of Washington later endorsed the recognition. In Asbury Park there stands a monument honoring Gov. Newell and men of the lifesaving crews. Local museums, particularly the Beach Haven Museum and the Barnegat Light Museum, have excellent displays of artifacts and material about the lifesavers and shipwrecks.