



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Owen W. Siler

1974-1978



Owen Wesley Siler was born on 10 January 1922, in Seattle, WA. He was graduated from Santa Maria High School, Santa Maria, CA in 1938 and received an Associate Arts Degree from Santa Maria Junior College in 1940. Appointed a Cadet on 19 July 1940, he graduated from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, New London, CT with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Engineering and with a commission as Ensign on 9 June 1943, the usual four year-curriculum having been shortened because of World War II.

From the Academy he was ordered to combat duty in the Pacific. On board the assault troop transport USS *Hunter Liggett* (APA-14) he took part in the invasion of Bougainville (Nov. 1943) and other Pacific landings. During his two years of duty in that transport, he served in various billets including that of Gunnery Officer, Assistant Navigator, and Deck Watch Officer. He was then transferred to the assault troop transport USS *Bayfield* (APA-33) in July 1945. While on board he participated in the occupation of Northern Honshu, Japan, following the surrender of the Japanese.

On returning to the United States in April 1946, he served briefly as Personnel Officer in the Manning Section of Alameda Training Station, CA and then served the remainder of the year as Navigator of the cutter *Taney* out of Alameda. By January 1947 he was stationed as Communications Officer at the 11th Coast Guard District office at Long Beach, CA.

Assigned as a student aviator in June of 1947, he took his flight training at the Naval Air Training Bases at Corpus Christi TX and at Pensacola, FL. After graduating from the latter with the designation of Coast Guard Aviator on 28 July 1948, he performed his first aerial patrols and search and rescue missions out of the Coast Guard Air Station, Port Angeles, WA. Following a course of advanced training at the Naval All Weather Flying School at Corpus Christi from February to May of 1952, he was next stationed for two years at the Coast Guard Air Detachment Barbers Point, HI. He served his next tour of duty at Coast Guard Headquarters, Washington DC as Aide to the Commandant, as well as Administrative Pilot from August 1954 to July 1959. During the following three years he commanded the Coast Guard Air Station at Corpus Christi.

From August 1962 to August 1964, he served as Chief, Search and Rescue Branch, at the 17th Coast Guard District Office in Juneau, AK. From there he transferred to the Coast Guard Air Station, Miami, FL where he first served as Executive Officer for a year and then as Commanding Officer for a year. Under his command that station received a Coast Guard Unit Commendation for the Cuban Exodus operations during October and November of 1965. During this period the Air Station was involved in 85 assistance cases and, with other Coast Guard units, helped deliver 8,100 refugees to Key West.



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

After a year of student work at the National War College from August 1966 to June 1967, he began his second tour of duty at Coast Guard Headquarters in the post of Chief, Administrative Management Division. In February 1968 he was named Assistant Chief of Staff for Management, and on 1 July 1969, assumed the post of Deputy Chief of Staff. Meanwhile, he earned an M.S. Degree in International Affairs from George Washington University in 1968.

By nomination of the President in January 1971, and the approval of the Senate, the then Captain Siler was appointed to rank as permanent Rear Admiral from 1 July 1971. Subsequently, he began his first assignment as flag officer in the post of Commander, Second Coast Guard District, St. Louis, MO. For his service during that tour of duty, he received the Meritorious Service Medal in 1972 for directing successful efforts to avert a potential major disaster near Louisville, KY, where a barge loaded with deadly chlorine had smashed into a dam. In May 1974 he received the Legion of Merit for his overall performance as Second District Commander.

Following his nomination by President Nixon on 4 February 1974, Rear Admiral Siler succeeded retiring Admiral Chester R. Bender, USCG, to the post of Commandant of the US Coast Guard with the rank of full four-star Admiral, effective on 1 June 1974. He accomplished many significant things during his tenure as Commandant. The first month of his term saw the end of the 34-year old Ocean Station program. He instituted a Minority Recruiting Program that substantially increased the representation of minorities in the service. Moreover, the distinctively unique new Coast Guard uniform, known as the Bender Blues, became the mandatory uniform for all service members under Siler's term. Also, he was instrumental in arranging to have women cadets admitted to Coast Guard Academy and the first female officers sent to flight training. Admiral Siler also prepared his Service for its new responsibilities with Congress' passage of the Fisheries Conservation and Management Act of 1976, which increased the Coast Guard's area of jurisdiction along the nation's coastline to over two million square miles.

Another significant occurrence was the start, in December 1975, of the processing of applications for the construction of deep-water ports in the Gulf of Mexico, which will give deep-draft tankers access to the United States and helped reduce the nation's fuel bills. In the fall of 1975, the Coast Guard again demonstrated its polar expertise, when three Coast Guard cutters and their helicopters escorted 15 barges around Point Barrow to the North Slope region with more than \$500 million worth of equipment, including assembled seven-story modular buildings. Then, in January 1976, the new polar icebreaker, the USCGC *Polar Star*, was commissioned. In 1975 strike team members, at the request of the Government of Japan, flew to Singapore to help stem the flow of oil from the grounded tanker *SHOWA MARU*. A year earlier, in August 1974, the Chilean government utilized similar assistance when the tanker *Metula* went aground in the Strait of Magellan. Strike team members also assisted in the February 1976 cleanup operations following a 250,000 gallon oil spill in Chesapeake Bay. Described as the worst in the bay's history, it occurred when a Stuart Petroleum Company barge ran aground in rough weather.

Earlier, in 1975, through chemical analysis or "oil fingerprinting" of samples from 34 ships that were tested at the Coast Research and Development Center at Groton, CT, the Coast Guard



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

was able to identify the polluter responsible for dumping 40,000 gallons of oil in the Florida Keys. This resulted in the arrest of the master of the Liberian flag tanker *Garbis*. In November 1974 the Coast Guard blockaded 275 miles of Florida's east coast as a means of curbing drug smuggling, this was the first time American waters had been blockaded since Prohibition. On 4 July 1976, the Coast Guard cutter *Eagle* proudly led the world's tall ships in a Bicentennial Salute to America at New York City as part of OPERATION SAIL.

Strong new emphasis was placed on the Coast Guard's Marine Environmental Protection (MEP) program during the '70s; much of it during Admiral Siler's tenure as Commandant. A plethora of oil tanker mishaps during the winter of '76 - '77 brought the effectiveness of the MEP program under close scrutiny by a concerned media and the public. Although the grounding of the *Argo Merchant* (a Liberian tanker that spilled some 7.5 million gallons of oil off Nantucket Island) focused new attention on the MEP program and sparked Presidential initiatives for pollution prevention, much had already been accomplished and the groundwork for implementing the President's policy already existed. Oil fingerprinting to identify polluters and airborne surveillance methods had been developed. The use of highly-skilled and specially-trained Coast Guard personnel, ready to respond to pollution incidents (strike teams) also had been greatly expanded. In fact these strike teams have an international reputation. Responding to requests from the governments of Norway, Chile, Japan, Colombia, and Ecuador, they fought pollution in the North Sea, Straits of Magellan and Malacca, and the Pacific Ocean.

Following the Carter initiatives in March 1977, new regulations were proposed which would require, for certain vessels, double bottoms, segregated ballast, improved emergency steering systems, inert gas systems, and back-up radar and collision avoidance equipment. At the February 1978 International Convention on Tanker Safety and Pollution Prevention in London, the only deviation from the U.S. proposals agreed to was the substitution of crude oil washing systems and protectively-located segregated ballast tanks. This was instead of double bottoms for new tankers and the exemption of small product carriers from the segregated ballast requirement. The measures agreed to at the Conference were contained in new protocols, one of which supplemented the 1974 Safety of Life at Sea Convention and a second which incorporated and modified the 1973 Marine Pollution Convention.

The prevention aspect of environmental concerns also had their affect on the Coast Guard's commercial vessel safety and port safety programs during the four years. Increased emphasis on pollution prevention greatly expanded workloads in this field. In addition to the proposed regulations already mentioned and legislation enacted prior to the *Argo Merchant* grounding, vessel traffic services to reduce the risk of collisions, groundings, and rammings became operational in Puget Sound, Prince William Sound in Alaska, San Francisco, Houston-Galveston, Berwick Bay, and New Orleans. These increased demands required the Coast Guard, not only assume greater workloads for personnel, but also to identify more efficient means of utilizing those personnel and their equipment. An excellent example of this was the combining of nearly forty Captains of the Port and Marine Inspection Offices into new Marine Safety Offices that are better able to meet the related needs of environmental protection and maritime safety.



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

While public awareness of the Coast Guard and its missions was greatly enhanced during the Siler era, one of the major challenges faced by the service provided the best vehicle for image-enhancement. The preparation for and implementation of the new 200-mile fishery conservation zone created by the Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976 (FCMA), not only placed increased demands on personnel and equipment, it also thrust the Coast Guard into the national media spotlight. Despite some pre-FCMA phobia concerning possible confrontations over fishing on the high seas within the zone and some skepticism of the Coast Guard's ability to do the job, implementation of the Act went smoothly. During the first year of enforcement, approximately 2400 boarding of foreign and domestic vessels were conducted. More than 500 citations for minor violations were issued and 250 civil penalty actions were initiated in cases of more serious infractions. During the early months of enforcement, three foreign vessels were seized resulting in the assessment of criminal and civil fines totaling \$589,000. In addition in February 1978, a Japanese fishing vessel was seized for deliberately trawling in a closed area. Sixteen tons of illicit catch from another foreign fishing vessel also was seized in early 1977.

Perhaps the most apparent result of the US fisheries management regime was the decline in observed foreign fishing activities. The foreign fishing effort was down to a twelve-nation operation with five fewer countries and 35 percent fewer vessels involved since the FCMA went into effect. Overall, the attitude of foreign fishermen toward the regulations was excellent and it was apparent that they were trying to comply with the FCMA and cooperate with enforcement personnel. During March/April 1977, the first two months of enforcement, violations were detected on 50 percent of the foreign fishing vessels boarded. This percentage decreased to only about 13 percent (and these were only minor infractions of the regulations) in July/August. Thus, with few exceptions, the trend in conformity with the law continued.

Yet another challenging expansion of its responsibilities during the Siler years was the Coast Guard's growing involvement in drug interdiction activities. Although anti-smuggling efforts were a historical Coast Guard role, there had been little modern activity in this area until 1976. This was when increased cooperation with the Drug Enforcement Administration and the US Customs Service saw Coast Guard interdiction efforts rise significantly. In the three years preceding 1976, Coast Guard efforts resulted in the seizure of 24 vessels and narcotics valued at 72 million dollars. But in 1976 alone, 26 vessels and 130 million dollars worth of narcotics were seized. The Service's renewed emphasis on drug interdiction operations continued throughout 1977 and by year's end, Coast Guard units had seized or participated in the seizure of 52 vessels and illegal drugs with a street value of over 400 million dollars.

In a related area, a task group for the prevention and prosecution of vessel hijackings was formed in October 1977. This group developed procedures for the identification and prosecution of vessel hijacking cases and to promulgate periodic advisories suggesting procedures that yachtsmen can take to minimize susceptibility to hijacking. Although the actual number of confirmed hijackings is low, Admiral Siler has stated that "any incident involving the taking and controlling of a vessel and the personnel aboard by force or threat of force is a serious matter for our concern and action." In addition to creating the task group, he issued new guidelines intended to make the Coast Guard more responsive to vessel theft victims and



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

the Service now will provide, within its jurisdictional authority and resource capability, as much assistance in stolen-vessel cases as possible.

The shift in emphasis among Coast Guard programs was visible in a unique way in the aids to navigation program. Maintenance and operation of aids to navigation traditionally had been a manual operation. For many decades, the manned lighthouse or lightship was the major component of the ATON program. This function, however, had been undergoing a continuous modernization process and became highly automated with most lighthouses being unmanned and most lightships being replaced by Large Navigation Buoys or offshore light structures. In addition the role of radio aids rapidly expanded. This automation process enabled the redistribution of personnel to more critical areas. In 1974 Loran-C was designated as the government-provided primary marine navigation system for use in the Coastal Confluence Zone (CCZ) of the United States and the Great Lakes. The Coast Guard moved steadily toward completion of the Loran-C system in the CCZ and the Great Lakes through the Loran-C National Implementation Plan. This plan was part of the Department of Transportation's National Plan for Navigation.

The chains serving the United States' West Coast, Canadian West Coast, and the Gulf of Alaska were completed and in operation. These were the first LORAN chains constructed specifically for civil use. The Canadian Coast Guard constructed and operated a Loran-C station at Williams Lake, British Columbia. This station operated with two United States stations to form the Canadian West Coast LORAN-C Chain and represented the first time in which another country, at its own initiative and expense, joined with the United States in providing LORAN-C service. There are several LORAN-C stations established on foreign soil to meet Department of Defense requirements, however, these stations were operated at the expense of the United States.

When he became Commandant, one of the first aims of Admiral Siler was to revitalize the Coast Guard's aging capital plant. These became increasingly difficult to manage and costly to maintain. Six of the High-Endurance cutters had been built in 1936 and five Medium-Endurance cutters had been around since the mid-1940s. Most of the medium-range aircraft were nearing the end of their operational effectiveness. His efforts to revitalize the fleet and reverse the trend were successful in a period when strong efforts were being made to reduce federal expenditures. The urgency of the Coast Guard's needs was presented so that the Department of Transportation, the Office of Management and Budget, and Congress clearly recognized it. This resulted in the commencement of a historic replacement program. This included two new 399-foot polar icebreakers and the construction of new 140-foot tugs with domestic icebreaking capabilities. In addition a new class of 160-foot construction tenders were built. These vessels were nearly 70 percent faster, had a smaller crew, and required 10 percent less maintenance than the tenders they replaced. Contracts for four new 270-foot Medium-Endurance cutters were awarded. New 41-foot motor lifeboats and 32-foot ports and waterways boats were also brought into the inventory. In addition the service refurbished the 180-foot buoy tenders and the 95-foot patrol boats.

Search and Rescue stations at Rockland, ME; Menemsha, MA; Fort Myers, FL; and Bayfield, WI were renovated, while a new station was constructed at Provincetown, MA. The stations at



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

St. Inigoes on Chesapeake Bay and Destin and Fort Lauderdale, FL also became operational. These latter improvements resulted from Admiral Siler's feelings that "the time has come when we must address the shore plant. Continued deterioration in this area forces expenditure of funds on inefficient 'patch work' repairs, detracts from operational efficiency, and forces our personnel to continue to live and work in an unsatisfactory, unwholesome, and often unsafe environment."

The role of women in the Coast Guard also expanded dramatically during Admiral Siler's four years as Commandant. Under his direction the Coast Guard did away with many of the old barriers to the career fields women could enter. The Coast Guard Academy at New London, CT was the first of the military service academies to announce acceptance of women cadets. In January 1976 the first female Coast Guard flight student reported for training and earned her wings in early 1977. A second woman pilot completed her flight training later that year.

A significant development in the role of women during the Siler era was the decision to assign women officers and enlisted personnel to both seagoing and isolated billets. Four officers and twenty enlisted women served aboard the 378-foot High Endurance Cutters *Gallatin* and *Morgenthau*. Many shore stations also had mixed-gender crews.

There were numerous other accomplishments during the Siler "Commandancy." These include the licensing of deepwater ports off Louisiana and Texas; the development, in 1976, of the most comprehensive regulatory package of safety standards ever devised for recreational boats; the expanded use of Coast Guard Auxiliarists for Search and Rescue and regatta patrols; enlightened employment of Reservists to augment regular forces in normal missions and emergencies; an ever-increasing role in international affairs, including negotiations on the Law of the Sea and participation in IMCO, the Inter-governmental Maritime Consultative Organization, which is the maritime branch of the United Nations; and the day to day struggle to remain "Always Ready" whatever the mission.

The traditional view of the Coast Guard as simply the "humanitarian Service," the waterborne rescue agency of the federal government, did not disappear during the Siler years, but it was altered. Although search and rescue was still the "bread and butter" mission of the Coast Guard, legislators and the general public attained a broader perspective of the service. It came to be recognized as a leader in marine environmental protection, a law enforcement agency with which to be reckoned, a conservation-conscious protector of our marine resources and as a major force in a dozen other roles the public was theretofore unaware.

On 30 May 1978 Admiral Owen W. Siler closed his thirty-five year Coast Guard career and retired. One of the characteristics of the Siler era was the Coast Guard's rapid growth in responsibilities and the resultant shift in program emphasis. While experiencing only modest growth in personnel, the service, under Admiral Siler's leadership, was successful in meeting its expanding missions by redirecting resources, improving techniques and making maximum use of personnel and equipment.



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Overall, the Siler era was four years of change and expansion, of challenge and growth, marked by active accomplishment. Admiral Owen Wesley Siler left the Coast Guard a legacy of inspired leadership of which he was justifiably proud.

The following is a resume of Admiral Siler's appointments in rank: Cadet, July 19, 1940; Ensign, June 9, 1943; Lieutenant (jg), April 1, 1944; Lieutenant, November 1, 1945; Lieut. Commander, August 26, 1952; Commander. July 1, 1959; Captain, July 1, 1965; Rear Admiral, July 1, 1971; Admiral, June 1, 1974. Furthermore, Admiral Siler's medals and awards included: Coast Guard Distinguished Service Medal (1977); Secretary of Transportation's Award for Outstanding Achievement (1977); Legion of Merit (1974); Meritorious Service Medal (1972); Coast Guard Unit Commendation (1965); Norwegian Order of St. Olav, Commander's rank (1976); World War II campaign service medal and ribbons--American Defense Service; American Area; Asiatic-Pacific; World War II Victory; Navy Occupation Service (Asia); also the National Defense Service Medal (Korean and Vietnam).