



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Russell R. Waesche, Sr.

1936-1945



Russell Randolph Waesche was born in Thurmont, Maryland on 6 January 1886. Having received his primary and secondary education in the Maryland public schools, he completed his freshman year at Purdue University before applying for entrance to the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service School of Instruction. He was appointed a cadet on 19 May 1904. He graduated and was commissioned an Ensign on 27 October 1906. During his first five years in the Revenue Cutter Service, Waesche was stationed in the North Atlantic, the Great Lakes, and the Pacific Northwest. He received his first command, USRC *Arcata* of the Pacific Northwest Division, in October 1911. He was assigned to the cutter *Pamlico* in November 1912 and then began a tour at Coast Guard Headquarters in February 1915. He would remain in this position throughout the First World War.

After the war Waesche commanded the Eagle-class patrol boat *Bothwell* and the 152-foot cutter *Snohomish*. From May 1924 through March 1926 he commanded the destroyer *Beale*. Afterward Waesche was assigned to the Philadelphia Navy Yard and represented the Coast Guard at the U.S. Sesquicentennial International Exposition. He later commanded the destroyer *Tucker* before briefly serving as the Destroyer Force gunnery officer. In March 1928 he went to Coast Guard Headquarters as Chief Ordnance Officer for the Coast Guard. Waesche also originated the Coast Guard Institute and Correspondence School for warrant officers and enlisted personnel. He developed the plan for the reorganization of Coast Guard field forces that took place in 1932. With this experience he later served in the Navy's War Plans Division and helped develop plans to integrate the Coast Guard into the Navy in the event of war. To improve efficiency, Waesche sponsored a plan for the selection of commissioned officers. In 1935 he was made an aide to the Commandant, Admiral Harry G. Hamlet. Promoted from the rank of commander, he was appointed Commandant with the rank of Rear Admiral on 14 June 1936.

As Commandant from 1936 through 1945 Waesche insured the successful integration of the U.S. Lighthouse Service, a purely civilian agency, with the Coast Guard in 1939 as ordered by President Franklin Roosevelt. He also presided over the greatest expansion of the USCG in its history and made sure the service maintained its separate identity while it was under the administrative control of the U.S. Navy. Admiral Waesche saw his small peacetime fleet swell with Coast Guardsmen manning more than 750 cutters, 3,500 miscellaneous smaller craft, 290 Navy vessels, and 255 Army vessels. The Coast Guard participated in every major amphibious operation. Furthermore, activities at all Coast Guard air stations were increased as aviators engaged in anti-submarine and convoy escort operations and performed numerous search and rescue missions. In 1943 Waesche also secured Congressional support for the Coast Guard's return to the control of the Treasury Department as quickly as possible after the end of the Second World War. In doing this, the service avoided the problems that occurred after the end of the First World War when the Navy attempted to maintain its control of the Coast Guard.



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Admiral Waesche earned praise from the Secretary of the Navy for his stewardship of the Coast Guard during the Second World War.

After the longest tenure as Commandant, Admiral Waesche retired from the Coast Guard effective 1 January 1946. He died later that year on 17 October 1946 and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery on 21 October. Two weeks after he retired Navy Secretary James Forrestal decorated Admiral Waesche with the Distinguished Service Medal for "exceptionally meritorious service to the government of the United States in a duty of great responsibility as Commandant, United States Coast Guard."

In March 1946 President Harry S. Truman nominated the ten top U.S. wartime generals and admirals to retain permanently their wartime ranks. At the same time the President announced the formation of an "elder statesmen's organization" for national defense consisting of those ten officers. Admiral Waesche was one of those officers so-designated.

Though largely responsible for the efficient expansion of the service, Admiral Waesche also improved the traditional functions of the Coast Guard. The activities on the Great Lakes and the inland waterways were extended and intensified. His administration placed increased emphasis on maritime safety, icebreaking, and aids to navigation. As Commandant he also took a keen interest in the work in the field and frequently made personal inspections of district units and activities. In short his tenure as Commandant was one of the most successful in the service's distinguished history.

Admiral Waesche received an honorary degree as Doctor of Engineering from Purdue University in February, 1944. He was elected President of the Society of American Military Engineers in May, 1944. He was survived by his wife, Agnes R. Cronin, and four sons, three of whom entered military service. His oldest son, Russell Randolph Waesche, Jr., later retired from the Coast Guard as a flag officer.

Chronology of Appointments & Promotions:

Cadet: 19 May 1904

Third Lieutenant: 27 October 1906

Second Lieutenant: 2 September 1907

First Lieutenant: 2 April 1917

Lieutenant Commander: 12 January 1923

Commander: 1 July 1926

Rear Admiral: 14 June 1936

Vice Admiral: 10 March 1942

Admiral: 4 April 1945.