



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

CHESTER R. BENDER

(1970-1974)



Chester R. Bender was born March 19, 1914, at Burnsville, WV, the son of John I. and Inez (Harbert) Bender. He received elementary and high school education in Burnsville and Plant City, Florida, where he moved with his family in 1925.

He was appointed a cadet and entered the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut in 1932. He was a member of the Academy boxing squad for two years. During his first class (senior) year, he was gun captain and served as humor editor of "Tide Rips", the cadet yearbook. On June 8, 1936, he became the first Floridian to graduate from the Coast Guard Academy when he received his Bachelor of Science degree and commission as Ensign.

Ensign Bender's initial duty was as a line officer aboard the cutters *Mendota* and *Bibb*, both on Atlantic patrol. In 1938, he was transferred to the cutter *Ossipee*, operating in the Great Lakes. During this tour he met his future bride, Annamarie Ranson of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. They were married September 1, 1939.

He was selected for flight training in 1939, and in June of that year began training at the U.S. Naval Air Station at Pensacola, Florida. A year later he received his aviator's wings and was assigned to flight duty at the Coast Guard Air Station at Elizabeth City, North Carolina. With the start of World War II, Lieutenant Bender flew anti-submarine patrols out of Elizabeth City.

Lieutenant Commander Bender served as commander of an air-sea rescue squadron at the Coast Guard Air Station at San Diego, California, from June 1943 to December 1944. He was promoted to the rank of Commander halfway through that tour of duty. Commander Bender then served as air-sea rescue advisor and liaison officer with the Far East Air Force Headquarters in the Philippines for the remainder of the war. He was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for this service.

In December 1945, he was assigned to Coast Guard Headquarters, Washington, DC as executive officer of the Air-Sea Rescue Agency. The following September he became pilot and personal aide to the Commandant of the Coast Guard. In June 1950, Commander Bender became executive officer of the Coast Guard Air Station at St. Petersburg. Three years later he went to Traverse City, Michigan to command the air station there.

He returned to Headquarters in June 1955 to head the War Plans Division. He was promoted to Captain in 1958 and assumed command of the Coast Guard Air Detachment at Barbers Point, Hawaii. The following year, after 20 years in aviation, he returned to sea in command of the 311-foot cutter *Bering Strait*, operating on ocean station duty out of Honolulu.



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In July 1961, he began a one-year assignment as mobilization and readiness officer on the staff of the Western Area Commander in San Francisco, California. He then returned to Washington, DC as Chief of the Administrative Management Division and later Chief of the Program Analysis Division at Coast Guard Headquarters.

In January 1964, President Lyndon Johnson nominated Captain Bender for flag rank and on July 1 of that year, he was promoted to Rear Admiral. At that time, he took command of the Ninth Coast Guard District headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio. A year later he was assigned as Superintendent of the Coast Guard Academy, relieving Rear Admiral Willard J. Smith, who later became Commandant of the Coast Guard.

During his two years as Superintendent, Admiral Bender continued the Academy's major construction program with Roland Hall Field house, one of the East Coast's most complete and modern athletic facilities nearly completed during his tour. He also established the U.S. Coast Guard Museum at the Academy, to preserve and display artifacts of the early Coast Guard.

In June 1967, he assumed command of the Twelfth Coast Guard District and Coast Guard Western Area, with offices in San Francisco. In the former position, he had responsibility for all Coast Guard units in Northern California and most of Utah and Nevada as well as areas in the Pacific. In the other assignment, he was the senior Coast Guard officer in the Pacific and exercised certain operational controls over Coast Guard commands throughout that ocean.

On April 16, 1970, President Richard M. Nixon nominated Chester R. Bender to be Commandant of the Coast Guard with the four-star rank of Admiral. The Senate confirmed the nomination on April 30. Admiral Bender relieved Admiral Willard J. Smith as Commandant on June 1, 1970.

Admiral Bender retired as Commandant effective June 1, 1974 after being relieved by Admiral Owen W. Siler, USCG at formal change-of-command ceremonies held at the Washington Navy Yard May 31, 1974. The cutters USCGB *Eagle* and USCGC *Ingham* were brought in to participate. Admiral Bender died on July 20, 1996 in Moraga, California following a long illness.

As Commandant, Admiral Bender implemented significant legislation that still stands. At his retirement ceremony, he was lauded for outstanding contributions to the control of marine pollution in his role as delegate and alternate chairman of the U. S. Delegation to the Marine Pollution Conference of IMCO in 1973. He was also cited for management of sensitive programs as the Coast Guard undertook new statutory responsibilities in the areas of marine safety, environmental protection and law enforcement. Admiral Bender, however, is best remembered for having established a distinctive uniform for the Coast Guard, still known as the "Bender Blues."

AWARDS:

In addition to the Bronze Star Medal, Admiral Bender's World War II campaign service medals and ribbons include: American Area; American Defense; Asiatic- Pacific with two bronze stars



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(ribbon) for participation in the Southern Philippine and Luzon campaigns; Philippine Liberation with two bronze stars; Philippine Presidential Unit Citation; World War II Victory Medal.

Other awards include the National Defense Service Medal. On May 28, 1970, Admiral Bender was presented the Legion of Merit by Secretary of Transportation John A. Volpe in recognition of his services in the last three tours of duty preceding his appointment as Commandant. On October 13, 1972, Admiral Bender received the Distinguished Service Medal from Secretary Volpe for exceptionally meritorious service in his post as Commandant. He was presented a Gold Star in lieu of a Second Distinguished Service Medal by Secretary of Transportation Claude S. Brinegar at change-of-command ceremonies, May 31, 1974.