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TO EUROPE AND FAR EAST

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COAST GUARD ACTION IN ASIA AND THE WESTERN PACIFIC

BY JOSEPH LIFFRIG

The Coast Guard is typically assumed to operate in the coastal United States. However, as the words of *Semper Paratus* remind us, the needs of the Country often take our Coast Guard members "From Aztec shore to Arctic Zone, To Europe and Far East". Indeed, the Coast Guard has been active in Asia and the Western Pacific since World War II. This activity has ranged from active combat roles in Vietnam and WWII, to navigational support and search and rescue over the world's largest ocean.

Major Coast Guard activity in Asia and the Western Pacific began on 1 November 1941 when President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8929, transferring the Coast Guard from Department of the Treasury to the Navy¹. This resulted

in some ships being entirely Coast Guard manned, and some Coast Guard members integrating with Navy crews. New wartime duties were carried out in conjunction with existing duties such as Aids to Navigation and Port Security¹. The first combat action by the Coast Guard in the Pacific began at the Battle of Guadalcanal in 1942. Robert Johnson tells us that the *Hunter Liggett* was the only Coast Guard Vessel to participate in the action at Guadalcanal. She launched landing craft loaded with Marines, and assisted with the rescue

of survivors from ships that were sunk during the battle. Signalman First Class Douglas Munro embarked from the *Hunter Liggett*, and his gallant actions during the battle made him the only Coast Guard member to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor¹. Coast Guard sailors and ships were involved in many of the subsequent campaigns in the Pacific, primarily performing duties as escorts and landing craft



operators. When the Coast Guard was transferred back to the Treasury Department following the war, Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal summed up the service's contributions

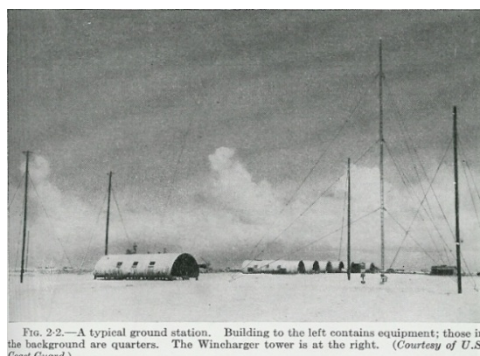


FIG. 2-2.—A typical ground station. Building to the left contains equipment; those in the background are quarters. The Wincharger tower is at the right. (Courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.)

best when he stated that “During the arduous war years, the Coast Guard has earned the highest respect and deepest appreciation of the Navy and Marine Corps. Its performance of duty has been without exception in keeping with the highest traditions of the naval service”¹. These meritorious contributions were vital in the successful outcome of the war, and marked the beginning of the long and successful Coast Guard involvement in the Far East.

Fighting a war over thousands of miles of ocean was no easy task, and good navigation was crucial to a successful outcome of World War II. When the administration of the new Long Range Radio Aids to Navigation (LORAN) program was transferred to the Navy on 1 January, 1943, the Coast Guard was tasked with building and operating stations to provide coverage for the entire Pacific theatre². This mandate was implemented by Coast Guard teams that followed immediately behind the combat and built sites on recently recaptured islands. With the first stations planned for the Bearing Sea, LCDR John F. Martin, USCGR, was designated as first Commanding Officer of a LORAN unit. More coverage soon followed, with transmitting stations built in the Aleutian, Hawaiian, Phoenix, Caroline, Marshall, Gilbert, and Marianas chains². The swift construction and operational readiness of these stations

provided navigational assistance to ships and airplanes as the fighting front moved inexorably closer to Japan and victory.

Following World War II, Coast Guard involvement in Asia centered on training the nascent Japanese and Korean Coast Guards. On 23 August 1946, Captain George McCabe arrived in South Korea as the first commanding officer of the training

contingent³. His task was extremely challenging, as he needed to build enlisted and officer forces and the fleet from scratch while dealing with cultural and language barriers. His relief, Commander William C. Achurch, arrived in Korea in May 1948 and served as the head advisor to the Korean Coast Guard until they made the decision to become the Korean Navy. At that point, the United States Coast Guard decided that it was not ideally suited to train a Navy, so Commander Clarence M. Speight, USCG (retired) was hired by the U.S. Army as the new Chief Advisor. He continued in this role until the North Korean invasion, at which point the advisor program ended³.

In 1947 Captain Frank M. Meals, USCG, arrived in Japan and helped to establish the Japan Maritime Safety



Agency. This organization would later become the Japan Coast Guard³. Although these training operations involved a small number of Coastguardsmen, they played a huge role in ensuring the stability of the region and helped to reconcile the tensions created by the War.

Coast Guard action in the Pacific and Asia during this time period was not limited to training. Coast Guard ships on Ocean Station provided valuable weather readings and assistance for incoming United Nations vessels, and the Coast Guard established air detachments throughout the Pacific. With locations in the Philippines, Guam, Wake, Midway, Adak, and Hawaii, these detachments conducted search and rescue flights to safeguard the flow of United Nations troops being moved across the Pacific to the war in Korea⁴.



In 1952 the Coast Guard established the Far East Section (FESEC) at Yokota Air Base in Fussa-shi, Japan. This office was tasked with the overall control of all LORAN units in the area. The increased air and sea traffic caused by the Korean War had resulted in the need for better LORAN coverage, so a new station was built at Pusan, South Korea. It went on air on 5 January 1953. This new station worked in conjunction with eight other stations in the region to provide invaluable navigational assistance to the United Nations forces engaged in

the war. These LORAN units constituted the largest permanent Coast Guard presence in the area⁴.

Following the cessation of hostilities in Korea, there was little Coast Guard action in the Far East until war broke out in Vietnam. This conflict brought about the most important engagements by the Coast Guard in Asia since WWII. Enemy land forces in the South were being resupplied by sea, but the Navy lacked the necessary shallow water craft and expertise to effectively prevent infiltration. In response to this deficit, the Coast Guard deployed twenty six 82-foot

cutters to support the blockade, dubbed Operation Market Time. This interdiction mission was difficult and dangerous. Crews spent 70 percent of their time underway to cope with the massive volume of small vessel traffic, and they

often took fire from enemy sampans and ground forces as they were making boarding approaches. In 1967 this force of small vessels was augmented by an outer echelon of five High Endurance Cutters. Combined with Navy swiftboats, these forces effectively stemmed the seaborne flow of enemy supplies into South Vietnam⁵.

Combat operations in Vietnam had also created a need for expanded LORAN coverage. The Coast Guard responded, and by 8 August 1966 LORAN stations were on air in Lampang and Sattahip, Thailand and

Con Son, Vietnam. These stations were monitored from a control station in Udorn, Thailand.⁵ The increase in vessel traffic created additional logistical problems that the Coast Guard worked to solve. An Aids to Navigation Detachment operated in South Vietnam to mark and maintain the waterways, ensuring that vessels could proceed safely into the ports. The Coast Guard Port Security and Waterways Detail inspected harbors and implemented security measures, and Explosives Loading Detachments supervised the offloading of ammunition and dangerous cargos⁵. These tasks helped to prevent accidents and enemy attacks, and served to ensure that a continuous flow of supplies and weapons was available to U.S. land forces. Several Coast Guard pilots also served with the Air Force on Search and Rescue helicopters. Coast Guard involvement in Vietnam ended in 1973, with some assets being transferred to the South Vietnamese, and the remaining vessels and personnel departing for home⁵.

Although the Vietnam War created a great deal of controversy, the positive impact by the Coast Guard is undeniable. According to Robert Sheina, around 8,000 Coast Guardsmen served in Vietnam. Seven lost their lives and 59 were wounded. Through 1970, Coast Guardsmen had received over 600 decorations from every branch of the armed forces and



from the Vietnamese Army⁵. This uncommon valor allowed the Coast Guard to fulfill a broad range of responsibilities in Vietnam, and truly demonstrated her strength as a multi-mission, combat ready force. In a time when the service was lacking identity, her effectiveness in Vietnam brought about greater cohesion and recognition that had been lacking since the transfer to the Department of Transportation¹.

After the Vietnam War, the primary Coast Guard presence in the Western Pacific consisted of LORAN-C stations scattered throughout the theatre. These stations were still under the control of FESEC at Yokota Air Base.

The number of stations peaked during Vietnam, when there were 18 stations in the area between Japan, Vietnam, and Johnston Atoll. With the advent of GPS, LORAN became less important, and these stations were either decommissioned or transferred to local governments by mid-1993⁴.

Prior to October 1993, operations in Asia and the Western Pacific were divided between FESEC in Tokyo and District Headquarters in Honolulu⁷. It was determined that this area of responsibility could be covered more efficiently by one office, so as the LORAN stations under FESEC closed, that office became Coast Guard Activities Far East (FEACT) under the command of Captain Richard C.

Wigger⁶. Captain Wigger assumed command of all Coast Guard activities in the Far East, including safety inspections of U.S. flagged vessels, maritime accident investigations, and liaison activities with U.S. Forces Japan and foreign maritime safety organizations. Due to the vast area to be covered, FEACTION also operates detachments in Singapore and Seoul, South Korea⁷.

Although the vast majority of Coast Guard units operate around the home waters of the United States, there are vital components that protect our nation's interests overseas. These Guardians are at the very tip of the spear, and carry on the valiant tradition of service far from home exemplified by Douglas Munro when he gave his life at Guadalcanal.

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