

The Heroes *of* Cape Hatteras

Unrecognized for 100 years,
the courageous efforts of an
African-American lifesaving crew
are finally being honored.

BY WENDY MITMAN CLARKE



TOWARD THE NORTHERN END of the strip of sand, dunes, and barrier island that constitute Cape Hatteras National Seashore, some concrete tanks jut out from the beach. They seem odd: out of place and out of time. But if you stand at that spot, squint south down the bleached sand as far as you can see, and imagine a wild, wind-whipped night full of fury, you might get an inkling of the extraordinary courage of seven ordinary men who lived and worked in this place a hundred years ago.

This is the site of the U.S. Life-Saving Service's Pea Island, North Carolina, station, the only all-African-American station in the national service dedicated to rescuing survivors and retrieving victims of ships wrecked along the coasts. On a furious night a century ago, the seven men saved nine people, including a captain's wife and three-year-old son. That rescue had gone unremarked until last year, when Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Robert E. Kramek awarded the men a posthumous Gold Lifesaving Medal. The medal and recognition have ended what some of the descendants of the seven men saw as a historical injustice.

For others, it was the right thing to do to mark the men's accomplishments as African Americans and lifesavers, even a hundred years later.

"The attitude was, someone was in trouble, you have to go out and help them," says Capt. Dwight Meekins, 47, a search-and-rescue helicopter pilot, who followed the path of his grandfather, Theodore Meekins of the Pea Island station, into the Coast Guard. "There are times today when we may [assess the risk and] say 'no,' whereas back then, I don't think they ever said no. They just went."

Herb Collins, 74, who served 34 years in the Coast Guard and whose great-uncle, Dorman Pugh, was one of the seven, says, "I think the men themselves thought it wasn't a big deal, but I have felt all my life they should have been given a lifesaving medal. When it came, I was grateful. I don't have any regrets, don't have any malice."

Dramatic Rescue

In those days, 1896 to be precise, the U.S. Life-Saving Service was at its peak. Initiated in 1848 after several horrible shipwrecks on approaches to New York Harbor, the service began as something of a volunteer organization, under-

funded, under-staffed, and rife with political cronyism. But in 1871, Sumner Kimball became the service's superintendent, and under his guidance, it grew into a professional organization and the stricken sailor's best hope.

The need was obvious. The growing United States relied upon shipping as the backbone of its trade network. But because aids to navigation were not as sophisticated as they are today, ships often hugged the coastline. It was a dicey strategy; there was precious little room for navigational errors, and a quick, vicious storm could drive a ship onto a beach within hours.

Driven by wind, waves, and tides, ships would run aground on shoals and sandbars, where the sea would pound them to pieces. Often stranded several hundred yards from shore, those who tried to swim through the maelstrom rarely survived. The alternatives were a slow death from exposure and sheer exhaustion from clinging to the rigging, or a quick one in the sweep of a crushing wave.

The Life-Saving Service established stations along the coasts and Great Lakes and staffed them during the most dangerous months; West Coast stations stayed open year-round, whereas the active season on the East Coast eventually became Sept. 1 through May 1. Surfmen walked 24-hour patrols along the beaches, exchanging tokens to prove that they had met their colleagues at the halfway point.

They drilled daily to hone their skills at firing lines (which would be shot to stricken ships), practicing retrieving "victims" with the breeches buoy (a sort of life-ring with shorts in which a person would sit and be pulled to shore along a line attached to the ship), handling their surfboats, and quickly preparing and moving their equipment in a heavy, wide-wheeled wagon known as the apparatus cart.

Surfmen saved thousands of lives at stations up and down the coasts including Old Harbor, now part of Cape Cod National Seashore in Massachusetts; Sleeping Bear Point and South and North Manitou islands, all part of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore on Lake Michigan; Fort Point, now part of Golden Gate National Recreation



A calm sea at Cape Hatteras National Seashore belies the hazards along this barrier island. On October 11, 1896, a storm blowing along the cape claimed the Newman but not its crew—thanks to the Pea Island Life-Saving surfmen.

Area in San Francisco; and Spermaceti Cove Life-Saving Station at Gateway National Recreation Area in Sandy Hook, New Jersey.

Graveyard of the Atlantic

But perhaps nowhere were the life-savers more vital than along what is now Cape Hatteras National Seashore, a stretch of sea and shoals infamous as the Graveyard of the Atlantic. Jutting nearly into the powerful Gulf Stream close to where its warm waters collide with the cold Labrador Current, Cape Hatteras, Frying Pan Shoals, and Diamond Shoals earn the wary respect of mariners even today. Hundreds of ships have fallen prey to the area's unpredictable weather and tormented currents. The service established 29 stations along the North Carolina coast, 11 of them on the beaches that now compose the national seashore.

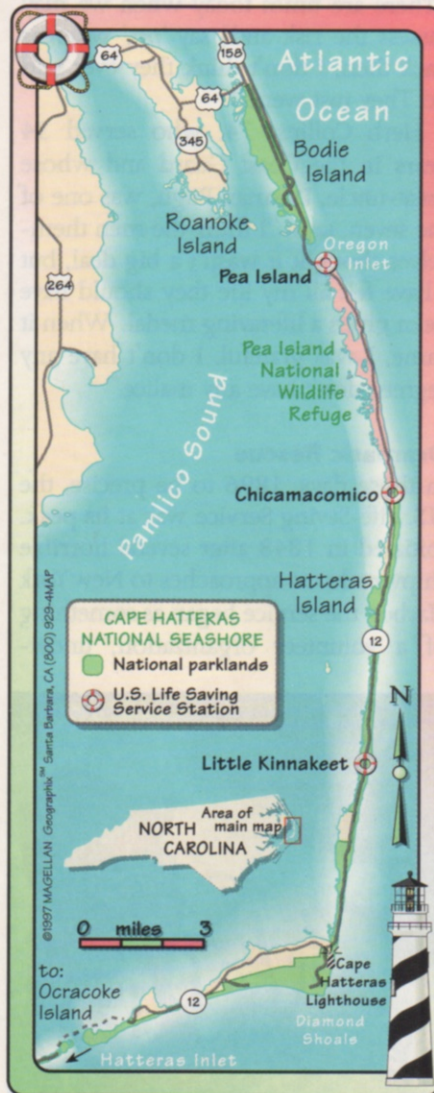
Pea Island, the first station south of Bodie Island and Oregon Inlet, was built in 1878. Two years later, after investigating a fatal wreck that occurred in clear weather and uncovering negligence and lying by the station's keeper and a surfman, Lt. Charles F. Shoemaker recommended that "Richard Etheridge, colored, now No. 6 surfman in Station No. 16," be appointed keeper.

"I have examined this man and found him to be thirty-eight years of age, strong robust physique, intelligent, and able to read and write sufficiently well to keep the journal of a station. He is reputed one of the best surfmen on this part of the coast of North Carolina," Shoemaker wrote. He also recommended that Etheridge's crew be African Americans, chosen from nearby stations. "I am aware that no colored man holds the position of Keeper in the Life-Saving Service, and yet such... surfmen are found to be among the best on the coast of North Carolina." So was established the first and only all-African-American station in the service's history.

"Why did Lt. Shoemaker make what for that time and place was a radical recommendation?" asks Dennis L. Noble in his book on the service, *That Others Might Live*. "There is nothing to

show his reasoning. Perhaps he was simply color-blind in matters of the service...subsequent events proved the wisdom of his decision."

Etheridge and his crew weathered all the post had to throw at them, including a suspicious fire that destroyed the station soon after his appointment. Authorities charged no one, the service rebuilt the station, and Etheridge and his men became well-known, trusted life-



savers. The station's most famous rescue—carried out by the crew on duty: Benjamin Bowser, Lewis Wescott, Dorman Pugh, Theodore Meekins, Stanley Wise, and William Irving—came early on the stormy night of Oct. 11, 1896.

"The patrolman on watch from sunset to 9 p.m. discovered from the station...through the blinding storm a distress signal," begins Etheridge's account of the wreck of the three-masted schooner *E.S. Newman*.

The ship, unladen, was bound from Providence, Rhode Island, to Norfolk, Virginia, when weather that Etheridge described as a hurricane blowing from the northeast shoved the ship south, grounding it about 30 yards from shore and about two miles south of the Pea Island station. The weather was so vile, Etheridge wrote, that the surfmen could not patrol because the sea was washing over the beach. But once the signal was verified, the crew set out with a team of mules pulling their apparatus cart.

"It seemed impossible under such unfavorable conditions to render any assistance. The team was often brought to a standstill by the sweeping tide...but the wreck finally was reached rolling and tossing well upon the beach with head sales [sic] all blown away...the voice of gladden hearts greeted the arrival of the station crew," Etheridge wrote.

But the foul conditions soon stymied the crew; the shifting sands prevented them from setting a sand anchor (against which a breeches buoy line would be levered), and the usual methods of rescue clearly would not work. So Etheridge asked two men to tie themselves together and carry a line to the ship.

What must have been a fearful swim into a maelstrom of undertows, currents, and waves in the pitch darkness, Etheridge sums up without fanfare: the men went "down through the surf as near the side of the vessel was possible where a ladder was lit over the side, where each survivor with a line around their body with great difficulty was carried back on the beach...the station crew arrived back at the station at 1 o'clock a.m."

The *Newman* was destroyed, but its crew of seven, including Capt. Sylvester R. Gardiner, his wife, Irene, and three-year-old son, Thomas, survived.

Continuing to Serve

Etheridge's impressive leadership of the Pea Island station ended when he died there in 1900 after an illness of some months. According to Joe A. Mobley in his book *Ship Ashore!*, the station remained the nation's only all-African-American station, even after Congress

in 1915 combined the U.S. Life-Saving Service with the Revenue Cutter Service to become the U.S. Coast Guard. The Coast Guard replaced the original station and then finally decommissioned Pea Island in 1947; Herb Collins, descendant of surfman Dorman Pugh, handed over the keys to end its proud and singular career. During the station's lifespan, the crews serving there remained primarily African American.

"People thought highly of them, particularly at that station," says Collins. "When I was a kid I used to see the surfmen...in their uniforms, and I said to myself, 'I'm going to get to that station.' That was my goal, and I did get there."

For decades, all that remained of the Pea Island men and their finest moment were the memories and stories of their descendants, many of whom followed them into Coast Guard careers; the carefully written records and logbooks buried in the National Archives; the *Newman's* nameboard, now at the Chicamacomico station (part of Cape Hatteras National Seashore but operated by a private historical association); and a small plaque near the concrete tanks jutting from the beach that describes Pea Island, the African-American surfmen, and the *Newman* rescue.



William Bowser, 81, grandson of a Pea Island surfman.



FRED HIRSCHMANN

This U.S. Life-Saving Station at Cape Lookout was decommissioned in 1937.

No one can say for certain why the service failed to reward the surfmen at that time. "I guess it was just one of those things, the way things happen," says Naomi Hester, 58, Herb Collins' sister and grand-niece of surfman Dorman Pugh.

Righting a Wrong

But for four people who knew the story, that was insufficient. Coast Guard Cmdr. Stephen Rochon, 15-year-old Kate Burkhart of Washington, North Carolina, and two men—David Wright and David Zoby, who are now college teachers—all learned about the Pea Islanders and the *Newman* through different sources.

Wright and Zoby came across the story while traveling in North Carolina and developed a slide presentation on the station, which Burkhart eventually saw. Rochon learned of the story while researching a presentation on African Americans in the Coast Guard. Wright and Zoby were the first to discover that the Pea Island crew did not get recognition for the famous rescue. All felt the Pea Island crew's rescue of the *Newman* had been unjustly overlooked. Burkhart appealed to Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) for a posthumous Gold Lifesaving Medal, while Rochon sought

the same through Coast Guard channels using Wright and Zoby's research.

And after years of research and effort, dozens of Pea Island descendants attended a ceremony at the Navy Memorial at which Kramek presented the award. Another ceremony, on the 100th anniversary of the rescue in October, installed the medal at the nearby North Carolina Aquarium on Roanoke Island, Etheridge's gravesite. After months of searching, Rochon and his staff also found Capt. Sylvester Gardiner's grandson, Daniel Gardiner, who attended the October gathering and met the descendants of the men who saved his family.

William Bowser, 81, grandson of surfman William Charles Bowser, who left the station a year before the *Newman* rescue, says the medal has helped heal his bitterness about what he saw as discrimination when he served in the Coast Guard briefly during the 1930s and '40s. "When I looked at this crowd of people, I saw credit was given to those who deserved it."

Capt. Dwight Meekins, whose family now can count four generations in the U.S. Life-Saving Service and the Coast Guard, says people should not dwell on negatives, real or imagined, in the 100 years it took to get the medal. "It was a good day for...the old Pea Island crew, the descendants, and the Coast Guard."

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WENDY MITMAN CLARKE of Stevensville, Maryland, writes about maritime issues.