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## Chatham Lifeboat Station

*The sea is master here -- a tyrant, even -- and no people better than ours, who have gone down to the sea in ships so often in so many generations, understand the subtle saying... "We conquer nature only as we obey her."*

-- E. G. Perry, 1898

## Chatham, Massachusetts

### February 18, 1952

Boatswain's Mate First Class Bernie Webber held a hot mug of coffee in his large hands as he stared out the foggy window of the mess hall. The cup of mud wasn't half bad. It came from a three-gallon pot and was brewed by mixing the coffee with a couple of eggshells to help the grounds settle at the bottom. The minister's son from Milton, Massachusetts, watched with growing curiosity and concern as the storm continued to strengthen outside. The midwinter nor'easter had stalled over New England for the last two days, and Webber wondered if the worst was yet to come. He watched as windswept snow danced over the shifting sands and large drifts piled up alongside the lighthouse tower in the front yard of the Chatham Lifeboat Station. At one time, two lighthouses had stood here; together they were known as the Twin Lights of Chatham. All that remained of the second lighthouse was an old foundation, and on this morning it was completely covered by snow.

Taking a sip of his coffee, Webber thought of his young wife, Miriam, home in bed with a bad case of the flu at their cottage on Sea View Street. What if there was an emergency? What if she needed help? Would the doctor be able to reach her in this kind of weather? These questions were fraying his nerves and Webber fought to put them out of his mind. Instead he tried to picture the local fishermen all huddled around the old woodstove at the Chatham Fish Pier. They would be calling for his help soon as their vessels bobbed up and down on the waves in Old Harbor, straining their lines. *If the storm is this bad now, what will it be like a few hours from now when it really gets going?* he thought.

Webber, however, wouldn't complain about the tough day he was facing. The boatswain's mate first class was only twenty-four years old, but he had been working at sea for nearly a decade, having first served with the U.S. Maritime Service during World War II. Webber's three older brothers had also served in the war. Paul, the eldest, had been with the Army's 26th Division in Germany. The so-called Yankee Division had fought in the Battle of the Bulge, joining General George S. Patton's Third Army in capturing the fortified city of Metz. Bob, his next brother, helped protect the homeland with the U.S. Coast Guard. The third, Bill, had helped build the Alaska Highway as a member of the Army Transportation Corps.

Bernie had followed his brother Bob into the Coast Guard, but it was not the kind of life his parents had planned for him. From early childhood, Webber's father, the associate pastor at the Tremont Temple Church in Boston, had steered him toward a life in the ministry. The church deacon even paid for Bernie to attend the Mount Hermon School for Boys, located 105 miles away in Gill, Massachusetts, a small town hugging the Connecticut River. Established in 1879, the school boasted prestigious alumni such as *Reader's Digest* founder DeWitt Wallace and James W. McLamore, who founded Burger King. Needless to say, Bernie was something of an economic outcast amongst the prep school crowd. He arrived at Mount Hermon carrying serious doubts and wearing his brother's hand-me-down clothes. He was not a strong student and he privately questioned why he was there. Webber knew in his heart that he did not want to follow in his father's footsteps. He was thinking about running away from school when fate intervened; a childhood friend who had crashed his father's car came looking for a place to hide out. Webber obliged his buddy's request, ensconcing him in one of the dorm rooms and swiping food from the school cafeteria for him to eat. The two were caught after just a few days but they didn't stick around long enough to face the consequences. Instead they fled to the hills and cornfields surrounding the school and eventually made it back to Milton.

The Reverend Bernard A. Webber struggled to understand the actions of his wayward son as young Bernie quit school and continued to drift. A year later, at the age of sixteen, Bernie got an idea that would change the course of his rudderless life. He heard that the U.S. Maritime Service was looking for young men like him for training in New York. If Bernie could complete the arduous training camp, he could then serve the war effort on a merchant ship. After his father reluctantly signed his enlistment papers, he quickly joined up and was schooled on the fundamentals of seamanship at the U.S. Maritime Service Training Station in Sheepshead Bay, New York, where he also received training from former world heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey, then serving as a commander in the Coast Guard as well as the athletic instructor at the training station. When he was finished, Webber shipped out on the *SS Sinclair Rubiline*, a T2

oil tanker that ran gasoline from ports in Aruba and Curacao to American warships of the U.S. Third Fleet in the South Pacific. During this time, the young man realized that he would not spend his life in the ministry or any other job on dry land. Bernie Webber had been born to the sea. He enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard on February 26, 1946, and was sent to its training station at Curtis Bay, Maryland. In letters to recruits at the time, the commanding officer of the Coast Guard training station summed up the life and duty of a Coast Guardsman this way:

Hard jobs are routine in this service. In a way, the Coast Guard is always at war; in wartime, against armed enemies of the nation; and in peacetime, against all enemies of mankind at sea; Fire, Collision, Lawlessness, Gales, Ice, Derelicts, and many more. The Coast Guard, therefore, is no place for a quitter, or for a crybaby, or for a lying four-flusher, or anyone who cannot keep his eye on the ball. Your period of recruit training is a time of a test, hour by hour and day by day, to determine whether or not you are made of the right material. It is up to you, as an individual to prove your worth.

Webber was now on duty in Chatham, a tiny outpost at the elbow of Cape Cod. His worth and his mettle had already been tested many times in the unforgiving waters off the Cape. It was one of the busiest and most dangerous places for anyone who made their living on the sea. The director of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey made a point of this way back in 1869. "There is no other place in the world, perhaps," he wrote about the waters off Cape Cod, "where tides of such very small rise and fall are accompanied by such strong currents running far out to sea." In fact, seamen referred to the area as "the graveyard of the Atlantic," and for good reason. The sunken skeletons of more than three thousand shipwrecks were scattered across the ocean floor from Chatham to Provincetown. The first known wreck was the *Sparrowhawk*, which ran aground on December 17, 1626, in Orleans. The crew, along with colonists bound for Virginia, managed to get to shore safely, and the vessel was repaired. But before it could hoist its sails again, another devastating ocean storm came along and sunk the *Sparrowhawk* for good. The episode was detailed by Governor William Bradford in his diary of the Plymouth Colony. Two hundred years later, erosion brought the wreckage into view in a mud bank along the Orleans coastline. The famous HMS *Somerset* also met her fate in the treacherous waters off Cape Cod. The ship, immortalized in Longfellow's poem "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," was wrecked in the shoals off Truro during a violent gale on November 3, 1778. Twenty-one British officers and seamen drowned when their lifeboat overturned coming ashore. The ship's captain, George Ourry, surrendered to Truro selectman Isaiah Atkins on behalf of his 480-man crew. The survivors were taken as prisoners of war and were then marched to Boston, escorted by town militias along the way. (Paul Revere, who had once rowed stealthily past the *Somerset* to alert Lexington and Concord of the British invasion, was later given the ship's sixty-four guns to help fortify Castle Island in Boston Harbor.) As author Henry C. Kittredge observed in *Cape Cod: Its People & Their History* (1930), "If all the wrecks which have been piled upon the back-side of Cape Cod were placed bow to stern, they would make a continuous wall from Chatham to Provincetown."

Bernie Webber's baptism under fire had come during an evening in 1949 when he responded to his first distress call at the Chatham Lifeboat Station. The Gleaves-class destroyer USS *Livermore* had run aground on Bearse's Shoal, off Monomoy Island. Luck had sailed with the

*Livermore* up to that point. Her crew had managed to dodge Nazi U-boat wolfpacks while escorting convoys to Iceland bound for England in the months before the United States entered World War II. On November 9, 1942, the destroyer took part in the Allied invasion of North Africa, providing antisubmarine, antiaircraft, and fire support off Mehdia, French Morocco. The *Livermore* had survived the war relatively unscathed, a fact that some of her crew members ascribed to the fact that she was the first American warship to be named after a Navy chaplain, Samuel Livermore.

First Class Boatswain Mate Leo Gracie took Webber and a crew on a 38-foot Coast Guard picket boat over the treacherous Chatham Bar to where the *Livermore* lay with a Naval Reserve crew stranded on board. The ship rested high up on the shoal and was leaning dangerously on its side. Webber and the men stayed with the destroyer for the rest of the night as salvage tugs were called in. The next morning, the Coast Guardsmen assisted in several failed attempts to free the warship before finally achieving success and sending the *Livermore* safely on its way. Webber smiled as the *Livermore's* crew cheered him and his crew. The sailors had given him quite a different reception hours earlier when they pelted him with apples, oranges, and even eight-ounce steel shackles, because in their eyes the rescue mission was taking too long. It was all part of a friendly rivalry between the Navy and the Coasties. The Naval Reserve crew was no doubt a little embarrassed that its rescue came at the hands of the Coast Guard, or the Hooligan's Navy as they called it.

Yes, the life of a Coast Guardsman was often a thankless one, but Webber would not trade it for any other job in the world. And now, just after dawn, he gazed out the window of the mess hall, listened to the wind howl, and wondered what the day would bring.

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