

More About the 1918 Attack on Orleans

The Coast Guard and the Rescue

When the U-boat attack occurred, the US Coast Guard (as we know it today) was only about three and one-half years old. President Wilson had signed the law creating the Coast Guard by combining the US Lifesaving Service (USLSS) and the Marine Cutter Service on January 28, 1915. The law placed the Coast Guard under the Treasury Department in time of peace, and the Navy in time of war. 1918 was war, so the Coast Guard was under the Navy.

The Coast Guard Station in Orleans, which was abreast of Pochet Island on Nauset Beach, was called Station 40 by the Coast Guard. It was built in 1872 as one of the nine original lifesaving stations established on Cape Cod by the USLSS. Most of the crew members at Station 40 were veteran lifesavers, or surfmen as they were called, from the USLSS days. This was true of the commander, or "Keeper" of the Orleans Station.

Robert Francis Pierce, son of a Wampanoag Indian was born in 1866 in Harwich. He grew up on fishing boats and in 1890 passed the required tests and entered the USLSS. His first duty station was Monomoy Point. In 1898, he was transferred to Old Harbor Station and was appointed "number one surfman", which was the term used for the second-in-command of a lifesaving station. In 1911, he was promoted to Keeper, and was assigned to Gay Head. He was assigned as Keeper at Station 40 in Orleans on February 22, 1918, just five months before the attack. He continued to command the Orleans Station until 1921, when he was transferred to an out of state station.

During the morning of July 21, Number One Surfman William Moore was in the watchtower of Station 40, and noticed a tugboat with four barges in tow making its way south along Nauset Beach, about three miles out. There was nothing unusual about that. However, at about 10:30 am, the sound of a "loud thump" was heard, and Moore was joined in the watchtower by Surfman Reuben Hopkins. In Hopkins' words *"A little further offshore, perhaps a quarter mile from the tug, I could discern a submarine lying low and broadside to the beach. She was difficult to see because of the haze. I had barely taken all this in when I saw the flash of a gun on the submarine. The shell landed in the water aft of the tug, which by now had come to a dead stop. The tug then took a direct hit to the pilot house."*

Moore climbed down from the watchtower and notified Keeper Pierce, who instinctively ordered that the surfboat be dragged out of the station. He notified the Chatham Naval Air Station by phone with a short and to the point message "Tug and three barges being fired on, and one is sinking three miles off Coast Guard Station 40." He then rushed to join Moore and the other surfmen who were in the process of launching the surfboat. As the surfboat approached the tug, the concussions from the U-156's deck guns blew the hats off two of the surfmen. Learning that the crew and families from the barges were safely in their lifeboats heading for shore, Pierce headed for the badly damaged tug. Bill Moore transferred to the tug and was later credited by doctors for saving the arm of one of the injured crewmen. Moore and the Perth Amboy's crew came ashore in the tug's lifeboat.

The act of heading out in a 26 foot surfboat into an area being shelled by an enemy submarine shows remarkable bravery and dedication to duty. There were people in the water that needed help and it was the Coast Guardsman's duty to rescue them, and that's what they did. It gave a whole new meaning to the unofficial motto *"you have to go out- you don't have to come back."* If you saw the movie *The Finest Hours*, you saw another Coast Guard hero, Bernie Webber, utter this line before the stunning rescue of the Pendleton crew in 1952. Fortunately, some traditions never die.

Major Harris and the Militia

The militia was a strong and essential tradition in New England dating back to the original Plymouth Colony. Nearly every town organized one or more militia companies to protect the home turf or, if necessary, band together with neighboring units in larger military operations. The militia in New England is probably best exemplified in the battles in Lexington and Concord at the outset of the Revolutionary War.

Orleans was no exception. In 1814, our two militia companies were called out to repel the British landing force that came ashore in Rock Harbor during the War of 1812. Our slogan “defiant and self-reliant” stems in part from the swift and decisive action of our militia on that day.

In 1918, the militia was still in existence and ready to protect its home turf. It had evolved since the early days and was now known as the State Guard. Its local commander in Orleans was Major Clifford Harris, a veteran of the Spanish American War. Around Town, he was always referred to as Major Harris, never Mr. Harris.

Harris heard and saw the U-156’s first shots from his home overlooking the beach. He noted how and where several of the shots struck the shore and beyond. At the time, no one knew what the full extent of the attack would be or what would happen next. Was the sub’s activity preparatory for a landing of troops? Harris considered that possibility and took action by going to his phone and mustering his troops.

After assembling the company on the beach, Harris deployed his troops behind a row of parked cars on the bluff overlooking the beach, rifles at the ready. From this vantage point, the sentinels kept a protective watch on our shore. The militia proved ready again, “Defiant and Self-reliant” to the core!

A postscript- After the attack, Harris wrote to military authorities in Washington to request that an artillery piece be sent to Orleans and mounted in his yard for use in any future attack. The request was denied.

The Navy and the Counterattack

When the US entered the war on April 6, 1917, naval aviation was in its infancy. There was only one base at that time, a training facility in Pensacola, Florida. The crew manning that station consisted of 48 officers, 239 enlisted men, 54 airplanes, and three balloons. That was the extent of US Naval air power just 15 months before the attack on Orleans.

From the outset of the war in 1914, Congress and the military were keeping a wary eye on world events and assessing the US level of war preparedness. However, the anti-war sentiment prevalent in the country, the belief that this was Europe’s problem to solve, and the notion that the US was protected by the vast Atlantic Ocean combined to prevent much in the way of any meaningful action in the early war years. This was to change as events occurred.

- On May 7, 1915, the Lusitania was sunk by a German U-boat, re-emphasizing the effectiveness of submarine warfare.
- On July 9, 1916, the merchant submarine Deutschland arrived in Baltimore with commercial cargo, proving that Germany had an advanced type of submarine capable of trans-Atlantic operations.
- On November 1, 1916, the Deutschland made a second US appearance in New London, Connecticut, proving its continued reliability. (All seven subs in the Deutschland class were converted to military attack subs. This class included the U-156.)

- On October 7, 1916, the fully armed U-53 appeared unannounced at the Newport Naval Base, apparently for propaganda purposes. It stayed three hours, then left to sink one Dutch, one Norwegian, and three British steamships off the New England Coast.

Any doubts as to the ability of the Germans to carry out military operations off the US coast were effectively eliminated, and the government and military got into gear. It still took until the early Spring of 1917 for the Joint Army and Navy Board of Aeronautic Cognizance to make final recommendations to establish several combination seaplane and blimp bases on the east coast. The list of seven bases originally included Provincetown, but that location required extensive and expensive modifications, so Chatham was substituted.

Construction of the Chatham Naval Air Station began on August 29, 1917, just eleven months before the Orleans attack. By the end of 1917, construction had progressed to the point that the base was considered livable but not operational, and the base was commissioned on January 6, 1918. The initial contingent consisted of 87 enlisted men and 5 officers. Two obsolete planes were sent to the base in late January, but when they were uncrated it was determined that they were of no use and were not assembled.

In March of 1918, the first four planes arrived at Chatham railroad depot in crates, just four months ahead of the Orleans attack. They were Curtiss R-9's, which were originally training planes converted for anti-submarine warfare. They were flown by a two man crew, and were armed with a Lewis machine gun and could carry two Clark Mark IV bombs. Usually only one bomb was carried to keep the weight down. It had a maximum speed of 82 mph. The planes were uncrated, assembled, and the engines tested. The first flight took place on March 25. Four more R-9's were received in April, and four more in May.

As a sidelight, none of the planes delivered were equipped with bombsights, so one of the Chatham aviators, Waldo H. Brown, designed and constructed one for use until the official Navy ones could be distributed for general use. The Navy took note of the accuracy of Brown's design and circulated his blueprints and his compensation tables for wind, speed, and altitude to the other air stations.

In late June 1918, four Curtiss HS-1L "flying boats" were delivered in crates by train to Chatham. This plane was manned by a crew of three, and was equipped with what was considered by many to be the best airplane engine to be produced during World War One. Delivery of these planes occurred a little less than one month before the attack, and one of them was to play a key role.

Anti-submarine patrols were now being flown from Chatham on a regular basis from Cape Ann to the north to the Nantucket Shoals to the south, and to the edge of George's Bank to the west. The primary purpose of the patrols was to protect shipping in the area. Planes would pick up a ship at a pre-determined point and fly continuous circles over it while watching for submarines. If no shipping was in the area, the patrols would search for U-boats using a "spider web" pattern developed by the British.

On July 21, when the base was notified of the attack, the only planes on the ground were two of the new Flying Boats that had not been fully tested. A third plane was under repairs and not flyable. The first plane to respond to the attack was one of the flying boats, piloted by Ensign Eric Lingard, with Ensign Eric Shields as assistant pilot, and Chief Special Mechanic E.H. Howard in the bow cockpit at the bombsite. Lingard had the plane in the air within thirty minutes of the commencement of the attack and ten minutes from the notification from Station 40.

Lingard made the first bomb run at the U-156 at 800 feet. The site was directly lined up amidships of the sub, but when Howard pulled the bomb release, it did not function. A second run was made at 400 feet, but the release failed to function again. Howard then climbed out on the lower wing and while holding on to a wing

strut with one hand, manually released the bomb with the other. The bomb landed within a few feet of the sub, but did not explode. Since the Mark IV bombs were designed to do fatal damage within 100 feet of a target, this one would have destroyed the sub.

Captain Philip Eaton, the commanding officer of the Chatham base was the second plane on the scene. Eaton had just returned from a five hour search for a blimp that had gone missing, and responded to the attack about forty-five minutes after it started. Flying solo and evading the sub's anti-aircraft fire, Eaton made a bombing run at 500 feet and released his bomb. The release worked, but the bomb did not explode. As the bomb landed within 100 feet of the sub, it would likely have destroyed it had it worked.

The determination of these pilots is demonstrated by the fact that operating procedures called for bombing runs to be made at altitudes not less than 1000 feet. It was deemed that the blast from the bomb explosions could cause severe damage to the plane's lower wing. The three bomb runs on the U-156 were made at 800 feet, 400 feet, and 500 feet respectively.

The arrival and attack of a second plane was apparently enough to cause Feldt to submerge and leave the area. Ensign Lingard flew another mission that afternoon in hopes of finding the departing U-boat. Spotting an oil slick that might indicate the sub's presence below, he dropped his Mark IV bomb on it. This bomb also failed to explode.

The failure of the bombs and the release mechanism did not escape notice locally, and speculation and conspiracy theories abounded. Talk of sabotage and the presence of spies and agents arose. Even Eric Lingard came under suspicion by some due to his German Background. Any objective assessment of Lingard, his background and his performance before and after the attack reveals a true all-American to the core, but those were the times. People were panicked, and unrealistic fears emerged.

The Navy was well aware of the poor performance of the Mark IV since at least June and was working to correct it. In fact, thirteen of these bombs tested at Chatham in the weeks prior to the attack had failed to explode. Considering the infancy of naval aviation and the extremely short time frame in which operations at Chatham had been stood up, the performance of all on July 21 is nothing less than spectacular.

That's not to say that the Navy did not learn from the attack. The night after the attack, a new shipment of bombs was rushed to Chatham. Tests conducted revealed that these exploded properly. Secondly, ten of the newly produced HS-21 planes were shipped to Chatham. Finally, newly modified Davis guns were shipped to Chatham to be installed on the Flying Boats. These were essentially small artillery pieces installed in the front cockpit which gave the planes the ability to fire six-pound shells into enemy subs. And finally, the US Government took over the Cape Cod Canal two days after the attack and as a direct result of it.