

"SAINTS IN SOU'WESTERS": The U.S. Life-Saving Service

These poor, plain men, dwellers upon the lonely sands ...took their lives in their hands, and, at the most imminent risk, crossed the most tumultuous sea..., and all for what? That others might live to see home and friends.

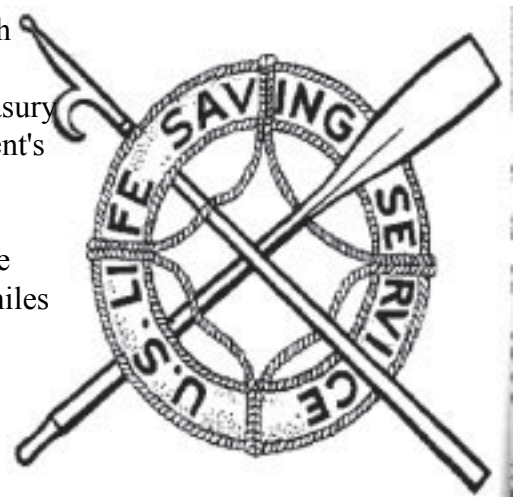
-Annual Report of the Operations of the United States Live-Saving Service, 1885



Imagine yourself patrolling a deserted open beach on a winter night with the sound of the surf pounding in your ears. Your job is to cast a weather eye upon the angry sea for any sign of a ship in distress. There is little light to guide you on your patrol. Suddenly, a sound makes you stop in your tracks. The cries of distress from a ship in danger is your call to action. As a United States Life-Saver it is your job to get back to your station and alert the rest of the surfmen. You and the rest of the crew will do everything possible to save those aboard the periled vessel. This was the mission of the United States Life-Saving Service.

The United Saving Life-Saving Service was formed in 1871. Prior to that time there had been an unofficial service. This service provided sheds with some life saving equipment and a volunteer crew, but it proved to be so unreliable that in 1871 Sumner I. Kimball was appointed to head the Treasury Department's Revenue Marine Board, which ended the federal government's experiment with a volunteer life saving service.

With Kimball's leadership the basic foundations of the Life-Saving Service were laid. Kimball determined that stations should be no more than five miles apart. Regulations stated that the life-saving crews had to practice every week with their equipment. The crews quickly became proficient and professional in their rescue operations.



In 1874, the life-saving network was expanded to the coast of Maine and to ten locations south of Cape Henry, Virginia, including the Outer Banks of North Carolina.



Cape Lookout Life Saving Station

Three life-saving stations were built on what is today Cape Lookout National Seashore. The Portsmouth (1894), Core Banks (1888) and Cape Lookout (1896) stations were all staffed by surfmen. These stations were more than five miles apart so the surfman's patrol was conducted on foot and later with the use of horses. Surfmen were directed to conduct their beach patrols on foot, and the horses were ridden only to alert the station of a shipwreck.



"Hours and hours
of boring
routine with
a chance of minutes
of sheer terror."

a lifesaver's comments on his job.

Each day that a lifesaver was on duty was spent doing drills. Sumner Kimball believed that only training and repetition sharpened your lifesaving skills. That belief still exists today with rescue teams.

A lifesaver's week began on Monday with training in the Beach Apparatus Drill including the firing of the Lyle Gun. Tuesday was devoted to boat practice, including the righting of surfboats. The crew practiced signal flag techniques on Wednesday and repeated the Beach Apparatus Drill on Thursday. On Friday the crew could be found practicing first aid and rescue breathing techniques. On Saturday, everyone pitched in and cleaned the station and their quarters.

Practicing the Beach Apparatus Drill meant the Lifesavers worked as a team to bring back victims from ships that were stranded or were sinking close to the shore. The drill had to be done in five minutes or less. The crewman who was found to be delaying the Drill's execution could be fired on the spot by one of the Service's inspectors. Kimball Sumner once stated he had seen a drill done in two and a half minutes.

In addition to practicing daily drills each surfman walked a four hour beach patrol in the evening. During this time they kept a watchful eye on the ocean looking and listening for the sounds or signs of a ship in distress. Each surfman carried a beach check that he would exchange with another surfman from a neighboring station. The check system enabled to surfmen to demonstrate that he had completed his patrol.



Lifesavers on the East Coast did not work year round. Most surfmen began their duties in the fall and worked till spring. On the Outer Banks of North Carolina the season would begin in October and ended in late March or early April.

The unofficial motto of the surfmen was that you had to go out, but you did not have back. Many surfmen risked their lives to save shipwreck victims. Some of the surfmen received Life-Saving Medals from the Government for performing their duties under extreme conditions. The Keeper and Surfmen of the Cape Lookout Station (Keeper Gaskill and his surfmen Kilby Guthrie,

Walter M. Yeomans, Tyre Moore, John A. Guthrie, James W. Fulcher, John H. Kirkman, Calupt T. Jarvis, and Joseph L. Lewis) received Gold Lifesaving Medals of Honor for saving the six lives from the wrecked schooner *Sarah D.J. Rawson* in February 1905. The crew endured the dangers of smashing waves, deadly floating pieces of wreckage and a cold soaking night on a surfboat to save the lives of the sailors stranded on a vessel that was breaking apart on the Cape Lookout Shoals.

Perhaps this poem by Joe Lincoln sums up a Life-Saver:

*He's a rigger, rower, swimmer, sailor, undertaker,
And he's good at every one of 'em the same,
And he risks his life for others in the quicksands and the breakers.
And a thousand wives and mothers bless his name.
He's an angel dressed in oilskins, he's a saint in a "sou'wester,"
He's as plucky as they make, or ever can.
He's a hero born and bred, but it hasn't swelled his head,
And he's jest the U.S. Government's hired man.*