

Our "Little White Navy"—Must It Go?

By AARON HARDY ULM

HOW many persons know that the United States Government operates a "Little White Navy" for humanitarian purposes? It is the first and oldest organization in the way of a navy the country has possessed. It is a navy and it isn't. Ships make up its chief equipment and they are always prepared and ready for a fight, and in war time they become regular fighting vessels like those of the martial navy. But a fight is about the last thing that our "Little White Navy" looks for or engages in, for its prime purpose is to save, rather than destroy, life and property.

Our "Little White Navy" is known officially as the United States Coast Guard, which it became in 1915 when the United States Revenue Cutter Service and the United States Life-Saving Service were combined in a single organization. Each branch is an adjunct of government peculiar to this country, as nothing exactly like either of them is maintained by any other government. And because of that and other reasons, a fight is being made for the abolition of the Coast Guard, by letting it be swallowed whole by the regular United States Navy. In fact, the outlook for further long continued life for the historic Coast Guard isn't very good, as tremendous support has developed for the movement looking to its extinction.

The question presented is, however, of much interest, for it involves the future of a branch of government that is of more sentimental quality probably than any other branch. It also involves a problem of national policy, the militarization of a governmental activity that ordinarily has nothing to do with war—which, indeed, represents on the whole the very antithesis of war, that is, humanitarianism.

But the Navy wants the Coast Guard and most of the Coast Guard wants to get into the Navy; so if the dominant sentiment in officialdom prevails there will pass, before much longer, one of the most picturesque organizations in the world. Whatever the merits of the controversy, many who are informed on Coast Guard history will grieve to see the records closed on that organization as a separate and distinct unit of our governmental machinery.

The Coast Guard, now insignificant in strength as compared with that of its big fighting brother of the sea, is an older institution than the United States Navy itself. In the early days of the nation there was no navy, excepting the few fighting ships sent forth during the Revolution. In truth, early sentiment in the United States was rather opposed to the existence of either a navy or standing army. But the government had to have some kind of armed force to look after the ports and prevent smuggling. Alexander Hamilton, first Secretary of the United States Treasury, recommended organization of the Revenue Cutter Service, which the First Congress authorized in 1790. The list of duties first given it reflect an age that has all but passed; chiefly those duties were to suppress piracy and prevent smuggling in bulk, two evils now almost unknown. The Revenue Cutter Service also looked after the enforcement of port regulations and shipping laws in general. Gradually there was imposed on the service certain humanitarian duties that came in time to engage the bulk of its activities. At first these consisted of lending aid to vessels in distress along the coast. Ours was the first government to provide for that and virtually the only one that makes distinct provision for it now. As the country grew there came to be imposed on the Revenue Cutter Service many other duties of like kind, such as the location and destruction of derelicts on the seas, the supplying of medical assistance to fishermen on the Grand Banks and in Alaskan waters and, in recent years, the maintenance of an international ice patrol in the North Atlantic.

The crude beginnings of a Life-Saving Service were developed in connection with the Revenue Cutter Service about the middle of the last century. Ours was the first government to provide such a service for persons who risk their lives in taking care of shipping along the coast, and is virtually the only one that attends to it wholly now.

The Life-Saving Service, after it was fairly developed, branched off from the Revenue Cutter organization and became a separate unit. Its organization on its present basis is due very largely to a man now living, Sumner I. Kimball, who directed it for a period of nearly a half century. Mr. Kimball, though now in a situation of semi-retirement, is one of the oldest officials of the government, his services dating from the early sixties.

Kimball's long row of annual reports probably contains the records of more and finer adventure and heroism than will be found in imaginative form in all the novels of W. Clark Russell, Joseph Conrad and J. Fenimore Cooper. It was his custom to include a description of the chief life-saving incidents that were participated in by his men during each year. Many fiction writers have gone to his reports for material, of which he recorded enough to keep a half dozen romancers busy for a lifetime.

The Life-Saving Service evolved a code of firm traditions that will compare with those of any organ-

ization in existence. The chief one is that when other life is endangered, those in the service shall hold back from no sacrifice involved in giving relief. There are many recorded stories like that of the life-saver who served at the Shark River Station, New Jersey. There was a wreck off-shore and many sailors were on the verge of water graves. The life-saver was helping to launch a boat to go to their rescue, when a relative hastened to his side.

"Your brother is dying and wants to see you right away," said the messenger.

"Sorry, but I can't go to him now," the life-saver responded as he leaped into his boat.

One life-saver at an inland station on the Ohio River near Louisville saved more than 500 lives during his several terms of service.

Long periods of service was and still is largely customary in the Life-Saving Service. In many sections families have engaged in the work for several generations. In the Cape Hatteras area, where dangerous waters require the maintenance of many stations, members of three families have made up most of the personnel of all stations for the last fifty years.

It was from one of those stations that among the most daring of recent life-saving exploits took place. It occurred during the late days of the war when the British tank steamer *Mirlo* was torpedoed by a German submarine just north of Cape Hatteras. The crew had just time to leap into a couple of lifeboats before the vessel sank. Thousands of gallons of oil released from the shattered tanks, spread over the surface of the sea, caught fire; and in a moment acres of water

limit, have the right to hail and board, and even to use force when necessary. Small guns are carried by the revenue cutters which are operated along military lines.

They look after the enforcement of regulations governing the importation of opium and assist the immigration authorities in keeping Chinese from coming into the country. One of the singular duties now imposed upon it is the prevention—so far as it can—of the clandestine importation of liquors as barred by the Eighteenth Amendment. This requires the operation of special coast patrols in several sections of the country, particularly around the Florida peninsula, on some portions of the Great Lakes and on parts of the Pacific Coast.

National prohibition to an extent has revived the ancient art or evil of smuggling in bulk. They are now using Eagle boats and submarine chasers in patrolling those coasts that are most favorable to the ways of the blockade liquor runners who, during the last year, have become quite numerous. Several vessels loading with prohibited drinkables have been overhauled as they sneaked toward obscure landing places. From one more than \$4,000 worth of cognac was taken and confiscated, a few months ago.

The Coast Guard has its own fleet of vessels. They are small craft, constructed specially for the policing and rescue work they must render. They are so constructed, however, that in war time they may be taken over and operated as a part of the Navy. In fact, on the declaration of war the Coast Guard automatically becomes a part of the naval forces. It so served in the recent war during which the greatest single naval disaster involved a Coast Guard vessel, the *Tampa*, which was sunk by a submarine while doing escort duty in the English Channel. Every one of its 110 officers and men was lost.

The good record of the Coast Guard in the war gave impetus to the long-standing demand that that service be merged with the Navy in peace as well as war time.

The Navy people are almost unanimous for it. They contend that all government activity having to do with things that float, that is with the sea, should be under a single head, while in peace time the Coast Guard is an adjunct of the Treasury Department. They claim that the Navy could take over the Coast Guard equipment and, together with its own, render the same service more capably and cheaply.

The Navy is supported in its contention by a majority of the Coast Guard personnel. They claim that Coast Guard officers would have more opportunity for development, certainly more for advancement in rank, if they were naval officers.

But there are many people in the Coast Guard and outside of it who do not favor the merger. They claim that the question transcends the mere matter of economy and goes into fundamentals.

Military organizations, no matter how capable as such, are not noted for enthusiasm over or great success in any kind of practicable peace-time work that does not bear on preparation for war. Every time somebody suggests that naval vessels be employed in peace time for cargo-carrying, or other practical work, the professional naval men seem insulted. When the Navy was directed to use warships in bringing American soldiers back from France, it is said many naval officers considered it a "desecration" for a warship to be turned temporarily into an army transport.

Former Secretary of the Navy Myer opposed the absorption of the Coast Guard by the Navy on the ground that the Navy's sole business in time of peace is to prepare for war, and that peace time duties of a practical nature would weaken it as a war machine.

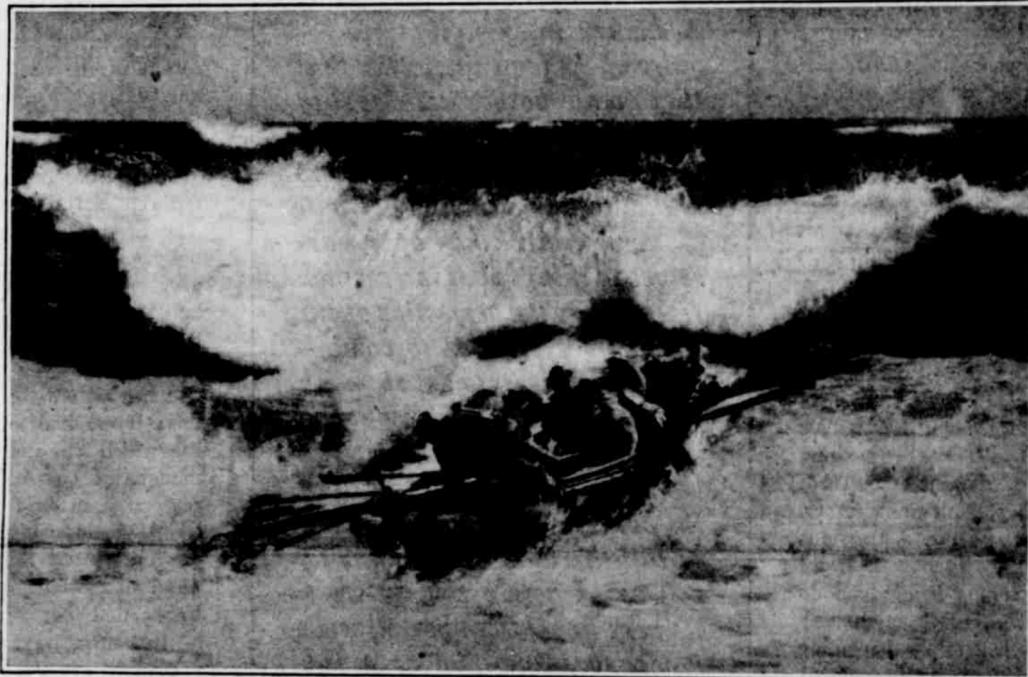
The Navy might not comprehend the fine humanitarian point of view that has become a tradition of the two branches of the Coast Guard; for humanitarianism and war are not very harmonious.

But the absorption of the Coast Guard would give the Navy a practicable and constructive claim on popular support, for it would then be able to point to money-saving and life-saving duties it performed during peace time intervals.

And it would give Coast Guard officers chances of high promotion they do not now possess; for the highest rank in the Coast Guard only parallels that of a lieutenant-commander in the Navy.

This Congress may decide the question, as hearings on a pending bill providing for the merger have been held. Though the question is still pending, it is one of the oldest having to do with government activities. The merger was proposed almost concurrently with the beginnings of the Navy nearly a hundred and fifty years ago and has been renewed regularly ever since.

If it finally prevails one of the most interesting, picturesque, historic and singular of government institutions will cease to be as an entity separate from war-making activities.



A Coast Guard crew going through the breakers on its way to a shipwreck. When a vessel strands close to the shore the breeches buoy is ordinarily employed to effect a rescue.

were covered with roaring flame. Into the cauldron a United States life-saving crew, which had hastened to the spot from its station ashore, drove a power boat and rescued every endangered sailor.

It was also a surferman belonging to the life-saving branch of the Coast Guard who drove a sled across the Seward Peninsula in the early winter of 1918 and carried relief to native communities that but for the help would probably have been depopulated by the influenza epidemic.

And it was the officers and crew from the Revenue Cutter *Unalga* that in the spring of the following year saved the population of Unalaska from destruction by the "flu."

One of the firmest traditions of both branches of the United States Coast Guard is that, though they are required to relieve only such distress as occurs on the navigable waters of the country, no call of humanity reaching it shall ever be ignored.

Hence the kinds of relief both branches give on land as well as at sea veritably run the entire gamut of distress. Life-saving crews often turn physicians and doctor persons who are stricken along the coast remote from regular physicians. They put out fires, and even pull the automobiles of careless tourists out of the mud, and never fail to take in and care for any wanderer in need who passes their way.

The property saved by the revenue cutters in the way of wrecked merchant vessels or ships in distress along the coast, totals in the tens of millions every year. The service they give is always free which means a lot to the shipping served; though they have the right to make salvage charges in cases wherein the government is imposed upon. The lives rescued from distressed vessels number in the hundreds every year. And the persons rescued from peril by the life-saving crews occupying the hundreds of stations scattered along our more than 5,000 miles of coast line are almost innumerable.

Though its humanitarian and salvage work comprises most of its activities, the Coast Guard performs many law-enforcing duties. These have to do chiefly with the Federal revenue and shipping laws. They keep order among all vessels within the three-mile