

**LIGHTSHIPS, LIGHTHOUSES,
AND LIFEBOAT STATIONS**

**LIGHTSHIPS, LIGHTHOUSES,
AND LIFEBOAT STATIONS**
A Memoir and History

Bernie Webber



Universal-Publishers
Boca Raton

*Lightships, Lighthouses, and Lifeboat Stations:
A Memoir and History*

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To generations of lightship and lighthouse men and women, their devotion to duty while anchored in harm's way, or amid a lonely, hostile, sea environment providing the beacons that guided mariners to a safe passage, their service should be ever remembered.

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FOREWORD

**by Michael J. Tougias, co-author of
*The Finest Hours***

Understanding the necessity of lightships and lighthouses and the merging of those duties into lifesaving services known as the Coast Guard are important parts of American history. At these remote stations men had dedicated careers, persevering through significant hardships and making lasting friendships.

In the beginning of this book Bernie asks the following question of the men who served on lightships: “How did they cope with the isolation, constant loneliness, boredom, fear, or just plain sheer terror? All were part of life on board a lightship. Rough seas tossed the ship about, rearing up and down on the anchor chain. Isolation, noise from operating machinery, blasts from the powerful foghorn that went on for hours, sometimes days at a time.” Bernie answers that question in the following pages, drawing on a combination of personal experience and fascinating historical research. Discussions of men going mad, of lightships being run down

by larger ships, anchor chains breaking and lightships cast upon shoals are offset with humorous stories and the author's reflection on his best days at sea.

Bernie Webber explains some of the heroic action of a few lightship men over the years, but also points out that they received no recognition at the time. It was almost as if the men were cast off and cut off by society, and the isolation was almost as bad as Alcatraz. The crews learned to make do with what they had, such as taking steam baths by lying on the steel grating above the boilers! Sometimes their first contact with the outside world was too close for comfort, such as the response when a friend once asked Bernie for an example of a situation that caused him distress during his service on a lightship. Bernie responded as follows: "I felt terror when, in foggy weather, a radar target would be observed, heading directly toward us on the lightship. As it got closer you could hear its engines, and soon out of the fog – so close you could spit on it – would appear a great ocean liner."

Bernie's service at lighthouses was not as harrowing, but equally as isolating. He describes how he would often read a book nestled in with the giant light, as he spun round and round with the rotation of the beacon! Reading Bernie's experiences helps answer why lighthouses fascinate so many of us, how lifeboat station

men saved lives, and what service on a lightship was all about.

Lightships, Lighthouses, and Lifeboat Stations is a gem of a book for maritime history buffs and those who want to be transported to days gone by.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bernard 'Bernie' Webber, a native of Milton, Massachusetts, went to sea for more than forty-five years. He was sea-scout at age 13, then enlisted in the U.S. Maritime service at age 16, serving in Atlantic and Pacific oceans during WWII with the U.S. Merchant Marine. Later he joined the U.S. Coast Guard and remained for a career of more than twenty years serving on cutters, lightships, and at lifeboat stations.

He and his crew of three were awarded the Coast Guard's Gold Lifesaving Medal for their rescue of 32 sailors from the *Pendleton*. After retiring from the Coast Guard Bernie owned and operated a fishing boat, *Sinbad*, out of Rock Harbor in Orleans. From there he took on a job as warden/marine superintendent at Hog Island Maine, working for the National Audubon Society.

His next challenge was as head of the marine department for Hurricane Island Outward Bound School in Maine. Tired of cold Maine winters he accepted a job captaining tugboats for Belcher Oil in Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Bernie sailed on just about every type of vessel imaginable and reached the following conclusion: “For the saltiest of sailors, a tour of duty on board an American Lightship would be a humbling experience. Lightships were not your typical way of going to sea and for the Lightship sailor it was an unusual existence.”

Bernie met and married Miriam Pentinen, a native of Wellfleet, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, some 56 years ago while serving at the U.S. Coast Guard Chatham Lifeboat Station. They have a son Bernard Jr. and a daughter Patricia.

Bernie passed away in 2009. The Coast Guard honored his many years of service by naming the first Fast

Response Cutter the *Bernard C. Webber*, which was launched in 2012.

Previously published work of the author:

Into A Raging Sea: A Memoir (first published as *Chatham, The Lifeboatmen*)

The book chronicling Bernie's rescue of crewmen from the *Pendleton* is *The Finest Hours: The True Story of the Coast Guard's Most Daring Rescue*.

PREFACE

For the saltiest of sailors, a tour of duty on board an American lightship was a humbling experience. I say this after some 45 years of sea-going adventures. Lightships were not your typical way of going to sea and for the lightship sailor it became an unusual existence.

As “Sentinels of the Sea Lanes,” lightships played an important role during the development of the United States. They are all gone now except for an occasional novelty historical display. Those who knew what the lightship life was really like have written little that it seemed fitting that I share the experience as one who served during the era of lightships.

Lightships as aids to navigation were the beacons that marked entrances to channels and provided for the safe passage around hazardous shoals. Remaining on stations year round, lightships faced the harshest of weather and sea conditions.

I look back on my association with two of these vessels and realize it was a privilege to serve during this historical era. However, at the time I did not see it in quite the same way.

—Author

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Special thanks go to Captain Russell Webster USCG (Ret) and Theresa Barbo, their review and constructive criticism gave me the direction needed to complete the project.

Warrant Officer ‘Bernie’ Webber USCG (Ret)

INTRODUCTION

“A Lightship’s mission is to make her known by horn or light to approaching traffic.”

—U.S. Navy Publication 10149

The main character in this story is the lightship built for the Nantucket Lightship Station located about 100 miles off the mainland coast of Woods Hole, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The ship spent practically its entire life far out to sea in the Atlantic Ocean. However during World War II from 1942-1945 it served as an examination vessel at Portland, Maine and was equipped with a 3 inch gun.

The vessel also operated as a Relief Lightship from 1958-1960. As a Relief Lightship, it moved about the waters of New England from Maine to Rhode Island relieving the regular lightship station so they could go into port for annual maintenance and repairs.

Fourteen different lightships served on the Nantucket Station during 129 years of service from its establishment in 1854 until it was discontinued in 1983. This particular lightship, designated LV (lighted vessel)

112 by the U.S. Lighthouse Service was later designated WAL534 by the U.S. Coast Guard. Designation change resulted from a 1939 convention; referred to herein as either the LV112/WAL534 *Nantucket* and/or the *Nantucket/Relief*.

The other lightship that was part of my experience was the *Cross Rip* Lightship built in 1917 and designated as LV (lighted vessel) 102 by the U.S. Lighthouse Service and later designated WAL525 by the U.S. Coast Guard in 1939. At the time, the lightship served on Cross Rip Station located in Nantucket Sound, Massachusetts.

PART I:
LIGHTSHIPS

LIGHTSHIPS: WHAT WERE THEY?

There has always been a mystique about isolated and desolate places, more so about the people who resided therein. Offshore lightships and lighthouses were no exception.

At one time, lightships were one of the major aids to navigation in the United States; they remained on station year round through weather fair or foul. They were floating lighthouses located where the conditions made it impossible or impractical to build a permanent structure. The ships marked the approaches and entrances to many of the principal harbors and coastal sea-lanes of the United States used by both coastal and transoceanic traffic. In many cases they were used to warn vessels away from shoals near important traffic routes.

The lightship era in the United States lasted for 165 years, beginning in 1920 when the first lightship station was established off Craney Island in Chesapeake Bay. It ended in 1985 with the withdrawal of the last lightship from Nantucket Station located 100 miles or so from Woods Hole, Massachusetts, which was replaced by a large steel navigational buoy.

For the millions of immigrants and other world travelers to the United States it was the vessel on duty at