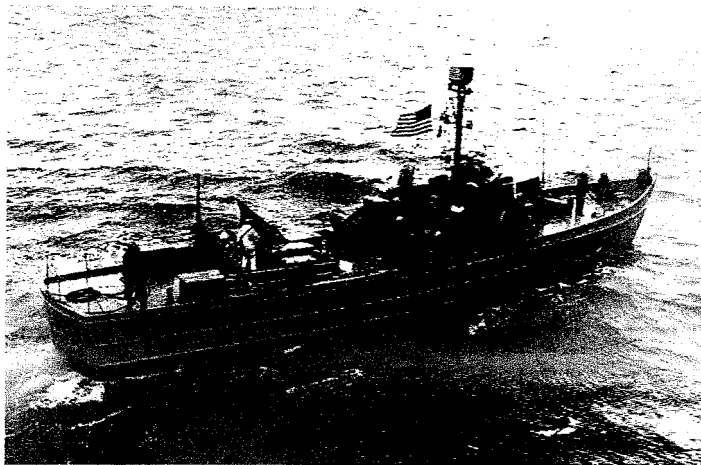# The Cutters

Rescue Flotilla One—better known as ResFlo One—was a minifleet of 83-foot cutters also called the "Seagoing St. Bernards" and the "Matchbox Fleet." Lieutenant Commander Alexander Stewart, U.S. Coast Guard Reserve, was in command. True to its tradition of saving lives, the U.S. Coast Guard answered the call to man the cutters, which were to rescue those who suddenly found themselves dumped into the Bay of the Seine.

Originally designed for antisubmarine warfare, they were built by the Wheeler Shipyard, Inc. of Brooklyn, New York. The full form was the round bilge type, single-planked.

Early units were fitted with Everdur bronze wheel houses, prefrabicated in Boston and sent by rail to the Wheeler yard. As the war progressed, the wheelhouses were made of plywood because of a bronze shortage. In addition, the 83-footers operating above Cape Henry, Virginia, had to be sheathed against ice.

The boats had two Sterling Viking II engines, were twin-propelled, capable of 20.6 knots, and carried 1,900 gallons of fuel. Their speed diminished with the addition of armament, radar, and sonar.

A typical cutter was divided into a forecastle—where most of the crew slept—a small cabin, a combination galley, mess hall, and lounge room, and the captain's cabin, occupied by the skipper and the chief boatswain's mate, who was second in command.

Crews averaged 13. Besides the captain and chief boatswain's mate, there were three motor machinist mates, one fireman, one radar-soundman, one gunner's mate, three boatswain's mates, two seamen, and a cook.

Before D-Day, all excess gear had been stripped from the decks in anticipation of the rescue operations.

E. Bishop

The swift 83-footers became welcome sights to survivors soon after the first wave at D-Day. Their decks filled quickly and their valiant crews were a real credit to the Coast Guard.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest J. King had ordered the Coast Guard cutters because they were fast. Now they and their crews would be put to the test off the coast of France. Coast Guard Reserve Lieutenant (junior grade) Raymond M. Rosenbloom briefed his crew the night before D-Day, 5 June 1944, with the following statement:

> We're going to have to be callous. That's going to be the hardest part of our job. When we get a load we're going to have to back away, no matter how many men are in the water. Don't feel sorry for a boy even if he has a broken leg and is screaming to be pulled aboard. As soon as we've unloaded one batch of boys on a larger ship, we'll go right back for another. If the boys in the water won't get out of the way we'll have to back right through them and they'll have to take a chance of being hit by the propellers. When you pull these men out of the water, they will have rifles strapped on their backs. You will not let them throw overboard either rifles or ammunition. The first thing you will let these men know is that the war is not over for them but that they are going to be put aboard another invasion craft.[1]

The original plan was to have five of the 83-foot Coast Guard cutters in positions between Navy transports and the Normandy beaches. Planners had anticipated that another 25 would stay near the transports, where they expected the most casualties. The U.S. sector of Omaha and Utah beaches had 30 boats (CGC-1 to CGC-30) assigned to them, while 30 more (CGC-31 to CGC-60) were slated to assist in the British assault area at Gold Beach, the Canadian objective at Sword Beach, and the combination British and Canadian objective at Juno Beach. That night, heavy seas contributed to a difficult voyage from England to Normandy for the cutters as well as problems with uneven speed in the transports. Currents in the English Channel were so great that courses sometimes shifted as much as 12 degrees. The rolling seas also

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At first, the 83-foot cutters stayed close to the large troop transports. But it soon became apparent that their services were needed more desperately closer to the beach. Not only were the rescues a challenge, debris floating in the water often fouled their propellers.

made the troops seasick as they approached the far shore.

Dawn's early light revealed that German shore gunfire was sinking many small craft, which indicated that the first rescues would be closer to the beaches than planned. The sky grew dark with aircraft, then lit up intermittently from tracer shells passing overhead. Shells from battleships contributed to the cacophony.

As landing craft proceeded to the beaches, the rescue cutters took up their places behind them. Each cutter's boatswain's mate and seamen did the steering, but all lent a hand if it was necessary to be on the stern to haul in survivors. All rank was forgotten in the heat of battle; each man was too busy doing his job to think about the danger.

Lieutenant Rosenbloom outlined procedures for treating the wounded and collecting the dead:

> You'll cut off one of his dog tags, put your foot
> ~~under~~ ... in live men as fast as you can. . . the wounded will be a problem. The damage and first-aid crew will handle them as best they can. The worst wounded will be given a shot of morphine, the others quick first aid.[2]

Landing craft had the right of way, which often hampered rescue efforts, forcing the cutters to back off and thus causing the loss of precious moments to bring men on board. The rescue operation began even before H-Hour, when the CGC-29, under the command of Lieutenant (junior grade) William H. Williams, rushed into action. Just before daylight, a marauding German motor torpedo boat

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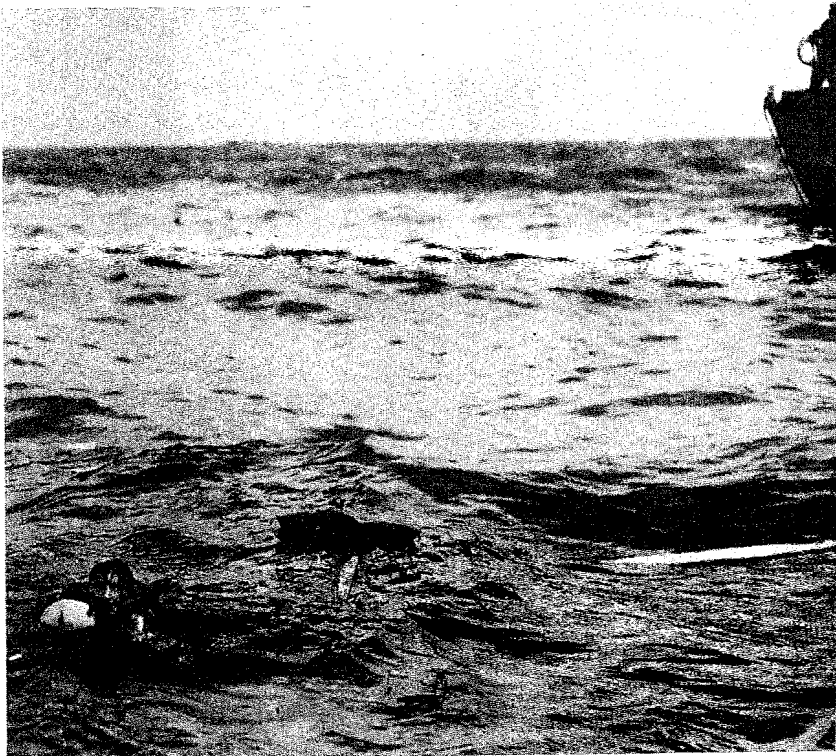
(E-boat) placed a torpedo into the side of one of a wave of English LCTs, amidships. The resulting explosion forward left only the craft's stern afloat, with men trapped on the blasted hulk. As other escorts chased the E-boat, the rescue cutter picked up 14 crewmen and two badly burned officers. Diverted from the convoy, the cutter sped to a British tank landing ship (LST), transferred the survivors, then rejoined the wave of LCTs on their trip to the French coast.

At the Omaha sector, many of the landing craft were hung up on submerged obstacles placed there by the Germans. Troops became bogged down; the landing craft continued to come in; rescue operations began. The men on the rescue boats tied lines around themselves and pulled the wounded aboard. The water was so cold that the soldiers could not reach up. Because they were so weighted down by their heavy packs, it usually took two men to haul in the soldiers. Motor machinists, boatswain's mates, seamen, and even the skipper, all helped in the rescues.

The person at the wheel would call out, "Over there." The boat would then rush the survivors, taking care not to tangle them up in the engine's propellers. Gas tanks filled with several thousand gallons of high-test fuel were amidships, adding to the danger.

Three Coast Guard-manned transports had delivered the troops and were anchored offshore to receive the wounded. The *Joseph T. Dickman* (APA-13), the *Bayfield* (APA-33), and the *Samuel P. Chase* (APA-26)—and many of the

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LSTs—were equipped with hospitals, doctors, and dentists.

The CGC-16, commanded by Lieutenant (junior grade) R. V. McPhail, rescued the most men on D-Day at Omaha Beach, and the CGC-34, commanded by Lieutenant (junior grade) Gordon W. Grafos, rescued the most men in the Eastern Task Force, which comprised the British and Canadian units at Gold, Sword, and Torch beaches.

McPhail's cutter went right in behind the landing craft at Red Beach in the Omaha Sector, where floating mines had sunk many of them. In addition, at about 0730, intense fire from the Germans ashore sank a landing craft that had been converted to an antiaircraft ship 800 yards off the beach.

Immediately, the CGC-16 sped to her rescue. No sooner were all the survivors picked up than a shell blew apart a patrol boat nearby. All 90 survivors from the boat were also put on board the cutter.

The relatively small boat could hold only about 20 wounded men at a time, and double that number often were taken aboard. But in one instance, 140 men shared 1,000 square feet. Casualties and unwounded survivors crammed the forecastle, pilot house, and engine room, and those incapable of going below lined the deck topside, side by side. Walking wounded were jammed into the tiny crew's quarters and piled into bunks in tiers of four.

The 140-square-foot pilot house accommodated eight men at a time. Many were so weak that they were incapable of standing, so they lay prone, complicating movement about the cabin. The engine room became the "thawing out" room, accommodating the most severely chilled men. Five more men crowded the space used by the motor machinists trying to answer engine signals from the bridge as the cutter tried to navigate at various speeds.

Storing survivors' gear and clothing also presented a problem. Fortunately, Allied air support had virtually eliminated enemy aircraft, making it possible to pile clothing around the 20-mm gunmount. The stockpile eventually reached five feet in height, ten feet in length, and ten feet in width, with heavy jackets, weatherproof clothing, underway coats, gas-impregnated coveralls, underwear, socks, helmets, gas masks, and dungarees.

Cutter crews gathered personal belongings, such as wallets, money, pictures, pocket-bibles, and identification cards. Rifles, carbines, and automatic pistols were stacked below.

Survivors were taken to the *Joseph T. Dickman*. Doctors boarded the cutter to help with stretcher cases. Those who were not wounded climbed the gangplank. The doctors declared one man dead and another beyond hope. The dead man and the dying man were placed in the lazarette until they could be buried at sea.

Crewmen in the transport lowered a piece of steel onto the cutter's deck. Upon return to the beach to continue the task of picking up more survivors, Coast Guard crewmen secured the steel to the dead body. Lieutenant McPhail appeared on deck with a Bible and for the first time in 40 hours, the cutter's engines were stilled. Men mustered by the rail of the boat and took off their steel helmets in silence. With the far off sound of gunfire, the skipper intoned, "For I am the life everlasting and the glory forever and ever, and do receive this body unto the sea." McPhail then paused, nodded his head, and watched two of his crew slide the body over the rail. As it disappeared into the green water, he said "Amen," and several men crossed themselves. A moment of silence followed, broken by the buzz of the bridge signal to the engine room for the engines to push ahead full speed.

During the ceremony for the dead man, the supposedly dying man stuck his head through the hatch and declared to the ship's company: "If you guys think you are going to do that to me, you've got another guess coming. How about some hot coffee but for God's sake gimme a cigarette." A half-hour later, he was transferred to a medically equipped LST.

After delivering the wounded man, an LCT was sighted sinking by the stern, 1,500 yards from the beach under enemy fire. The CGC-16 maneuvered alongside and discovered it was loaded with ammunition and on fire. The wounded made it off, but as the cutter was pulling away, one of the survivors told Lieutenant McPhail that a man with nearly severed legs was still on board the landing craft in one of the gun tubs.

Chancing the possibility of the ammunition exploding from the raging fire surrounding it, McPhail ordered the cutter to pull alongside again. Coxswain Arthur Burkhard, Jr. jumped over the side of the rescue cutter and quickly went to the man's aid, placing a line around his waist in spite of the smoke pouring from the LCT's hatches.

The man was so badly wounded he could not talk, but he still kept a grin on his face. As the rescuers cut off his clothes in order to administer morphine, the brave man even winked at those we were helping him. Burkhard tried

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Class George I. Banks, in charge of feeding the crew of the CGC-16, said, "The boys were too busy to get hungry, and so I didn't start any lunch that day. As a matter of fact, I was too busy myself tending wounded on deck to go below to the galley."

Most of the wounded had broken legs, split heads, sprained backs, and smashed ankles. Many cried out for medication. Banks propped lifejackets under their heads to keep them from knocking on the deck, as the boat bounced around in the water from the shock of shells from enemy shore batteries. He then took off their sopping, oil-soaked clothes. Finding it impossible to untie some of the knots, he went down to the galley, got one of his sharp bread knives, and used it to cut the wet clothes from the wounded. He then covered them with dry blankets.

By mid-morning, the ship's medical locker was open, and Banks began doling out first-aid supplies. Because the cutter could not speed directly to the *Joseph T. Dickman* until all the men in the water were rescued, Banks began to the give the more seriously injured a shot of morphine to reduce their suffering.

Banks remembers:

> There were packets of morphine syrettes in our medicine chest, and each syrette was good for one man. Before I'd inject a fellow, I'd check with the skipper just to make sure that the man's condition justified morphine. If the skipper agreed, and he did every time, I'd roll up or cut away the man's sleeve, and give him morphine in his upper arm. Then I'd mark on his forehead with a wax pencil 'Morphine.'

In addition, Banks applied tourniquets to those whose legs were dangling only by skin and muscle and were losing terrific amounts of blood from cut arteries.

Not until the cutter pulled up alongside the *Joseph T. Dickman* to unload survivors did the cook go down to the galley to brew some coffee, making his way for five minutes through clothing that blocked his way to the stove. The coffee began to percolate, and the cutter sped to a burning and sinking LCT that was also carrying ammunition. Men were trapped in a gun turret on her stern and included four soldiers with badly twisted limbs.

As soon as the cutter's crew rescued the men, Banks followed his routine and had them put on board an LST

unsuccessfully to lower him from the sinking LCT to the rescue boat, which was a smaller craft.

As the LCT dropped lower and lower, it was impossible for McPhail to keep his craft under her side, for fear of being pinned beneath it. Burkhard was forced to throw the wounded man off the LCT's deck into the water. In order to save him, he had the man pull himself hand-over-hand up the side of the rescue cutter which had towed him to the boat's side.

Burkhard in turn jumped from the LCT and made his way back to the ship. But he could not swim and was dragged by his shipmates. Two minutes later, the LCT sank.

All hands were involved in the rescue operation and in administering first aid to the survivors. Even Cook Second

For the unheralded U.S. Coast Guardsmen on duty at
Normandy, the scene often got grisly, as the killed and
wounded crowded the decks. This infantry landing craft,
LCI-85, took at least 25 hits from German shellfire and was
one of four Coast Guard LCIs lost to enemy fire on D-Day.

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Then he returned to the galley and cooked pork chops,
potatoes, peas, and raisin pie. The *CGC-16* had rescued
126 men—only one died. McPhail and his crew of 15 were
awarded the Bronze Star for their bravery.

Specialist First Class Carter Barber was a combat corre-
spondent who assigned himself to the *CGC-16*. As the cut-
ter approached the beach, he remembers, the noise was ter-
rific, and a nearby LCT took a hit.

> When we saw the LCT hit and rushed to her aid, I
> noticed plenty of men already floating face down in
> the water. They might have just been stunned, sure.
> But I had to agree with the skipper that we couldn't
> stop for them just then, but must keep on to get the
> other men floundering about.

Barber, also a Bronze Star recipient, started taking pic-
tures; after three minutes he went forward and began heav-
ing lines to the other men in the water:

> Two or three of them were screaming 'Oh save me.
> . . I'm hurt bad—please, please.' And I yelled back,
> 'Hang on, Mac, we're coming.' I watched one man
> from the bow. He shouted: 'I can't stay up, I can't
> stay up.' And he didn't. I couldn't reach him with a
> heaving line, and when we came toward him his head
> was in the water. We didn't stop, and went on to
> seven or eight men. . . we got them aboard.[3]

After what seemed like a long day of hauling men on
board, removing their wet clothes, tending to their wounds,
and ferrying them to the *Joseph T. Dickman*—with no
survivors in sight—the men of the *CGC-16* took a break.
It was 0930, and Barber soon began to write material to
fill his bags, labeled PRESS in red letters a foot high.

The intensive first-aid training the men had received at
Poole, England, began to pay off, especially during the
action experienced by the crew of the Coast Guard patrol
boat commanded by Lieutenant (junior grade) Gordon W.
Crafts, which doubled as a rescue vessel. After rescuing
badly wounded survivors from a sunken destroyer, Chief
Motor Machinist's Mate Spaulding E. Michot took over as
an emergency pharmacist's mate and laid the wounded out
on the galley table he used to operate. Standing in a
small compartment with the boat pitching back and forth,
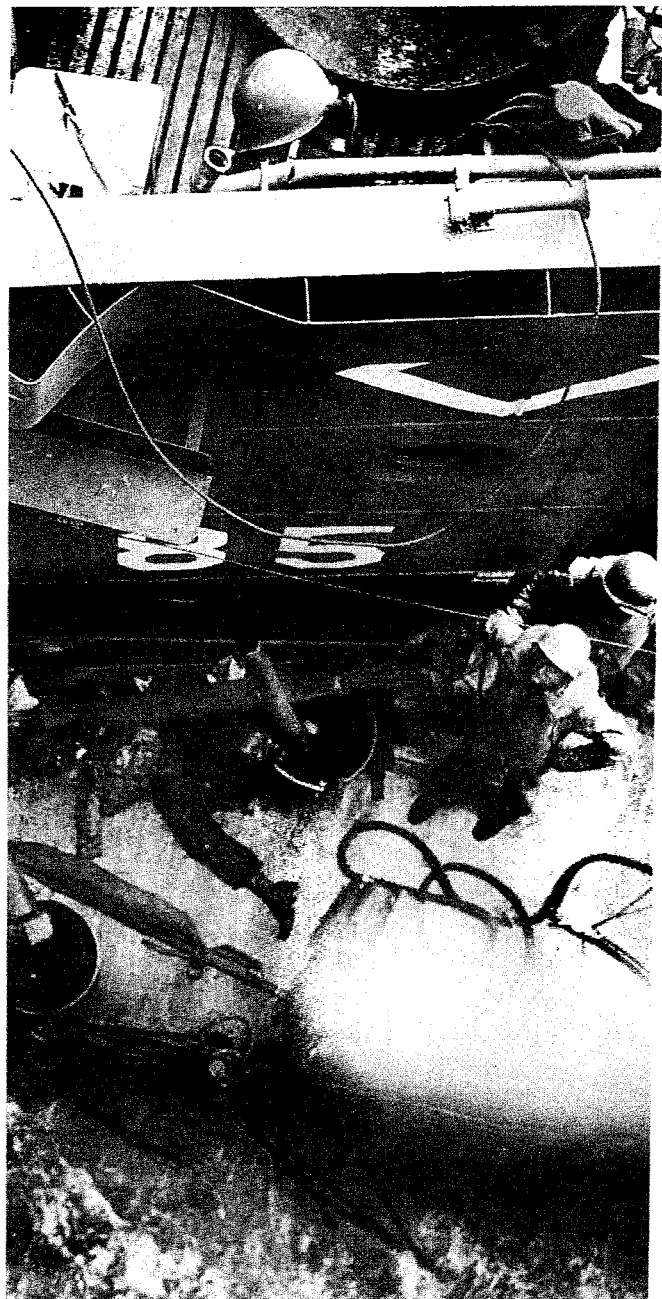
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he stitched wounds and splinted fractured legs, with blood-
smeared bulkheads as a backdrop.

The crews transferred the wounded from the rescue cut-
ters with skill and care. Rough seas still presented a real
challenge, crashing the smaller boats against the larger
ships. Litter cases had been covered with blankets in at-
tempts to protect them from the soaking spray as they
waited their turn for transfer. Straps were slipped under the
ends of the stretchers and quickly hoisted to waiting doc-
tors and corpsmen in the LSTs or transports equipped with
hospital facilities. Once on board, the men in stretchers
were taken to operating rooms below, and the less seriously
wounded received first aid in the wardroom. The LST crews
were pressed into service to cut off torn, soaked uniforms,

*The medical staff and crew worked for two days straight . . .
none of the wounded died before reaching England.*

. . . .

remove temporary bandages, and clean the wounds with disinfectants. Often the cleansing process involved the removal of sand, grass, and metal. The medical staff and crew worked for two days straight, performing amputations and closing chest and abdominal wounds; none of the wounded died before reaching England.

Ensign Bernard B. Wood, captain of the CGC-1, is credited for making one of the first rescues less than 2,000 yards from the German guns at Omaha Beach. Even though it was slowed by the constant problem of giving the right of way to assault craft, the CGC-1 brought 47 U.S. soldiers and British sailors to safety, just a few short minutes after H-Hour. Most of the survivors were Army tank crews, whose tanks had been destroyed before reaching shore. Shell fire surrounded the rescue craft, as the cutter searched and picked up survivors until it rescued every man in sight.

A few thousands yards away, the CGC-2, under the command of Ensign O. Tinsley Meekins, executed a daring rescue of the wheeled amphibious trucks (DUKWs) that had been swamped on their way to the beach. The surf was heavy, and underwater obstacles again presented a problem, but the crew was able to take nine survivors, including an unconscious man who was given artificial respiration. For his bravery, Meekins received the Bronze Star.

Lieutenant (junior grade) William J. Starrett brought the CGC-3 close enough to the beach to rescue the crew of a U.S. tank. Following this action, he spotted several Higgins boats in trouble, loaded with materiel and personnel. He took those craft in tow and got them close enough to the beach to allow them to make their landing.

Lieutenant (junior grade) James P. Smith faced a similar task with his CGC-4, when he noticed several landing craft loaded with three-inch field pieces that had been disabled by fire from the shore. The CGC-4 took the landing craft in tow and hauled them into shallow water where the gun crews were able to get the field pieces ashore, 30 minutes after H-Hour. The cutter rescued 24 men from the surf and transported them safely to hospitals.

King George VI decorated Lieutenant (junior grade) George Clark, Jr., captain of the CGC-35, for his bravery in rescuing the crew of a British LCT. The British vessel was carrying a large amount of gasoline when she struck a mine and immediately turned the water into a blazing inferno. Lieutenant Clark sped to the rescue and saved all the survivors. He summed up his report for the trip in the words: "Survivors rescued, five. Corpses, none. Com-

ments, none." The King awarded him the Distinguished Service Cross "for gallantry and devotion to duty. . .in the initial landings of the Allied Forces on the coast of Normandy on 6th June, 1944."

The CGC-5, under the command of Ensign S. G. Pattyson, made 34 rescues by noon of D-Day, 15 of them men from sinking amphibious trucks. Most involved the seriously wounded; the wooden decks of the cutter were so red with blood that even after returning to England the crew was still trying unsuccessfully to scrub away the stains. Pattyson received the Bronze Star for his actions.

One of the most difficult rescues was that achieved by the CGC-17, commanded by Ensign Alvis Dexter Arnhart, when an LCT hit a mine and began to sink on 6 June. The LCT crew was still either on board or clinging to nearby wreckage. The cutter's crew saved 22 men, but 19 of them were stretcher cases and severely wounded.

Almost the entire crew of 17 boarded the LCT to transfer the wounded; while tied up alongside, the LCT sank. Quickly, the cutter crew chopped the lines with axes and the 17 swung free just as the ship sank. The crew then administered first aid while the wounded were being taken to the nearest hospital ship. Ensign Arnhart also received the Bronze Star for his performance during this rescue.

The Coast Guard Rescue Flotilla was a great success. Some predictions were that two-thirds of the cutters and two-thirds of the personnel would be lost. None of the cutters and no personnel were lost. Even with shells zooming overhead, underwater mines looming, and surface gunfire booming, the Coast Guard proved its life-saving abilities could be surpassed by no other group.

The flotilla saved 1,438 from the English Channel during the invasion of France, half of them during the first 36 hours of fighting.   ⚓

¹*The Coast Guard at War, Volume XI*, Landings in France (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Coast Guard, 1948) p. 101.
²Ibid.
³*Log of Carter Barber*.