

ACROSS THE COUNTRY



In a Treacherous Corner of Washington, a Classroom With 40-Foot Waves

One of the most challenging water-rescue training programs in the world is run by the Coast Guard on the Columbia River when the conditions are at their roughest.



The Coast Guard's National Motor Lifeboat School trains in an area where the Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean, a crossing known as the Graveyard of the Pacific.

WHY WE'RE HERE

We're exploring how America defines itself one place at a time. Shipwrecks over the last two centuries have shaped towns on Washington's southern coast in more ways than one.



By Kirk Johnson Photographs by Ruth Fremson

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CAPE DISAPPOINTMENT, Wash. — Metal clinked on metal as three small groups of U.S. Coast Guard students and their instructors clipped canvas waist belts to both sides of their 47-foot rescue boats, vital lifelines for staying onboard when the big waves come.

And on these waters, they always come.

The Columbia River, the fourth largest in America by volume, surges into the turbulent tides and currents of the Pacific Ocean here at a spot called the Columbia River Bar, where two far-west corners of Oregon and Washington meet at the river's mouth to form a pincer. Waves 30 to 40 feet high are common in winter as river energy and ocean energy collide and then perversely recombine, swirling in complex patterns driven by tidal surges, winds and storms.

More than 2,000 boats and ships over the last two centuries have sunk or split apart on the sands and rocks around what locals simply call "the bar." At least 700 lives have been lost, as vessels attempted to find a way through the unmarked and often fog-shrouded crossing, known as the Graveyard of the Pacific. Cape Disappointment itself was named by a sea captain in the late 1700s who searched in vain for a way through it.



Victoria Hansen, left, orients Coast Guard students to the area at the beginning of the Surfman Course.



Students of the course gathering at North Head Lighthouse at Cape Disappointment.



Docked boats are serviced at the Cape Disappointment Coast Guard Station.

But to the United States Coast Guard, all of that hazardous, churning turbulence has become a prized asset too — as a classroom. The Coast Guard’s National Motor Lifeboat School was founded here because the danger of the water is so extreme that it is perfect for training.

“It’s a conundrum,” said Chief Warrant Officer Tim Crochet, the school’s commanding officer. “We want the weather to be nice and flat, so we have a safe maritime environment for those who choose to make their living or recreate here.” But, he added, severe conditions prepare the Coast Guard to fulfill its mission, which is to keep the waters safe.

Eighteen Coast Guard officers a year are accepted for enrollment in what maritime experts say is one of the most challenging water-rescue training programs on the planet — the monthlong Surfman Course — conducted only in late fall and winter when sea conditions are at their roughest.

What the students learn, in piloting boats, providing aid to stranded vessels and plucking people from the waves (though dummies are used for the passenger-overboard exercises), builds skills and confidence that can save lives when students return to their home bases around the country. And getting through the course is just the beginning; full certification as a surfman can take years after that in order to prove to superior officers that those skills have been mastered.

On the first day of the course in January, I went out with a training crew, suiting up in helmet, goggles and anti-exposure coveralls. What drew me partly stemmed from my family. An older brother kept a boat on the river many years ago, and his tales of the bar and its perils — and his dream, eventually realized, to one day cross it — enthralled me.



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Eighteen Coast Guard officers a year are accepted for enrollment in the course, which is held in the fall and winter.



In the area where the Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean, the forces of the two bodies of water collide and then recombine, testing both boats and their pilots.

After a few hours with the class members, I was wet inside my suit from the waves that smashed onto the boat and found a way down the back of my neck.

In many ways, the Columbia River Bar, which has no markers but the surf and breakers that surround it, has shaped this entire corner of America. The towns on both banks at the river's mouth — Astoria, Ore., to the south and Ilwaco and Long Beach, Wash., to the north — developed as places of assistance, refuge and, in past decades, economic opportunity in salvaging goods from the annual bounty of wrecks.

A haunting paradox sits at the heart of that cultural imprint: The thousands of vessels that successfully crossed the bar over the centuries sailed on into anonymity, while the great disasters left their names etched forever in memory. Peacock Spit, to the north of the river's mouth, is named for the U.S.S. Peacock, lost in 1841. Some businesses in Astoria have Desdemona in their names, for a trading vessel wrecked in January 1857. Waikiki Cove is named for the Hawaiian sailors who scrambled there after their ship foundered.

Tell Us About Where You Live

We're exploring the U.S. one place at a time. What's a distinct place, activity or tradition that defines your corner of the world? *

Tell us about something that's unique to your corner of America, whether it's a special slice of history or the beloved neighborhood restaurant that feels like home.

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Unlike the mouths of other great rivers, like the Mississippi and the Amazon, the Columbia has no fan-shaped delta to dissipate its force, and so it hits the Pacific in a narrow channel like a fire hose.

“The bar is one of the most difficult parts of the marine world on the planet,” said Coll Thrush, a professor of history at the University of British Columbia who is writing a book about the Pacific Coast. “And the lifesaving culture there is kind of distinct as well.”

Petty Officer Second Class Thomas Lewandowski, 37, joined the Coast Guard and this course specifically because of the work and training that are conducted there. He was in his early 30s, working as a salesman in New York, when he stumbled on some YouTube videos of the Surfman Course. The Motor Lifeboat School was founded in 1968, and the first class of students came through the following year. But the precursor to the modern Coast Guard, the U.S. Lifesaving Service, dates to the 1870s.



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“I just had this calling like I needed to serve,” Petty Officer Lewandowski said.

Petty Officer Second Class Melissa Hiatt, 25, who grew up on the New Hampshire coast and now serves at the Coast Guard Station at Barnegat Light in New Jersey, said that training here could be a source of humility and confidence at the same time.

“You don’t realize how small you are until you look up at this gigantic wave coming at you,” she said.

She and others in the January class said the cool heads of the instructors on the boats could feel like a natural wonder.

“They definitely have some ice in their veins,” said another student, Petty Officer Second Class Brock Kler, 24, who was born and raised in Oregon near the Columbia River. He grew up crossing the bar — at least occasionally, when conditions were calm — to fish for salmon in the Pacific with his family.

One of the first lessons the instructors impart is that piloting a rescue boat here means thinking like a chess player. Every block of space has energy and wave conditions that are unique to that space and time, which means that getting from point A to point B involves thinking three to four moves ahead, reading the wave conditions and often zigzagging around the worst threats.



The course instructors “definitely have some ice in their veins,” one student said.



Brass "surfman checks" on display at the National Motor Lifeboat School commemorate those who have completed the training required to attain surfman certification for heavy-weather boat operations. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



An old fishing cannery in Astoria, Ore. The towns on both banks at the river's mouth developed as places of assistance, refuge and, in past decades, economic opportunity in salvaging goods from the annual bounty of wrecks.

And be ready to improvise. Near the end of the course in early February, for example, the students were sent to handle an actual emergency rescue after the operator of a private boat that was foundering in 20-foot seas and high winds called for help.

“Every second, you’re making decisions,” said Petty Officer Second Class Bryan Rojas Lugo, 25, who grew up surfing off the coast of Puerto Rico, a skill that he said had helped him read the waters here as a student. “I’m going to go with this wave, turn in toward this one, take this one square up so I can take all this energy in the bow and then keep moving — it’s very dynamic,” he said.

But sometimes, when a wave hits with a force or from a direction that a pilot cannot avoid, the boat can turn over and capsize, pulling everyone onboard completely underwater, or the vessel can fall over to one side in what surfman instructors call a “knockdown.”

Students are prepared for that possibility — and told that their boats are engineered to right themselves in as little as 10 seconds, said one of the instructors, Chief Petty Officer Cameron Katelnikoff. He said he warned students that time itself seems different, though, when you are underwater and locked onto the boat by your belt clips.

“It can feel a lot longer,” he said.



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Ruth Fremson contributed reporting.