THE KEEPER OF BUG LIGHT

By Harry Salter

As the thirty eight foot Coast Guard picket boat rounded beach point and headed into the outer-channel, I got a first hand look at my new home, The Duxbury Pier Light Station, commonly known as "BUG LIGHT." By no stretch of the imagination would it win any beauty contest. It stood out in the middle of nowhere, completely surrounded by water. On the seaward side of the light a wooden boat was hanging on it's davits high above the high water line.

"The Bug" was painted a depressing dark brown which also added to the foreboding look of the whole picture. It meant only one thing, to escape any boredom that might arise here would mean an hour and a half row into Plymouth harbor for a break, that's if the weather and tides were kind to us.

The boat pulled up alongside the metal hull of the light as I scrambled up the steel ladder with my sea bag and orders. Atop, the deck I came face to face with the keeper of the light whom I was to replace, Chief Bos'n Mate Cole. With a big generous grin and hand shake, the first question asked was, how had I screwed up to be assigned to this God-forsaken place?

The time was tight and the story long. Seeing the boat circling impatiently below, I didn't feel I had time to fill him in on my sad story. Being in such a rush and happy to get out of there, he tossed his sea bag over the side, nearly missing the boat completely. Luckily, it was caught by an agile sailor on board. Breaking into a large grin, something like a kid who had just won a pair of tickets to a Red Sox game, he jumped to the ladder and climbed aboard the relief boat. I watched him wave, then disappear.

I introduced myself to my new, second in command, Seaman first class Jovie, an easy-going, happy-go-lucky kid from Brooklyn NY. Since he'd been stationed here for six months and knew all the ropes, I was offered an inspection tour. As we started at the light tower, I decided to mentally familiarize myself with these new surroundings.

I was very impressed by the fine imported glass that made up the light, and was surprised to hear that during war time, the only source of light in the beacon was a kerosene mantle lamp placed inside the highly polished glass prism reflectors. This made the output less bright, enabling the light to be used only for local navigational purposes.

We worked our way down through the sleeping quarters, to the large galley and living section, that led to the hold that housed a large cistern made to catch the drinking water from the roof when it rained. Unfortunately it was mixed with the sea gull crap and shells that rinsed off the metal roof with the water, *making it our only source of calcium.*

My second man, Ellis Woods was presently on liberty so I couldn't meet him until the following week.

I made notations in the log that I had taken over the command of this light station, while Jovie fried some eggs and hamburgers for supper.

After cleaning up after the “meal," the ice was broken as we launched a conversation about who we were, and where we had been. In the course of the evening, Jovie told of his past civilian life in Brooklyn. Like all the other city kids, he’d hung out with one of the local gangs. It was tough growing up there with an older brother, who had been hit in a gang-related shoot out, that had left him a paraplegic, doomed to a wheel chair for life. Jovie had been paying for his brother’s upkeep, until his draft number came up, which caused him to join the Coast Guard before the Army could get their hands on him. He was sending an allotment to care for his brother for the duration.

Now it was my turn. I told Jovie how I had been raised on Cape Cod, then because I’d worked a few years in coastal shipping after high school, I decided to enlist in the Coast Guard. The recruiting officer was influential in my getting a decent rank. I found myself further explaining how I’d gotten into this present situation or “Screwed up” as Cole had asked before he’d taken off.

All the good duty I’d rung up in the past three years since I had been in the service, such as flying search planes out of Salem Air Station on anti submarine patrol, running the crash boat at the station, then later being in charge of a eighty three footer patrolling the Atlantic waters, was now all going down the drain as I surveyed my limited environment.

During the years of 1943/44, at the height of the U-boat campaign, we were briefed on the fact that German subs were sneaking in close to shore, out of the shipping lanes, in the darkness of night, to charge batteries and get some much-needed rest and fresh air. We were told to break out of patrol periodically and check in shore for the chance of spotting one, laying under the cover of the high shore line. We were ordered, if a contact was made, to challenge it but not to approach too closely, then call in our grid position to C.G. Radio, (Nan Mike Fox)

Late in August at 23:00 hours., as we came inshore, close to Biddeford, Maine from a routine patrol off the coast of Nova Scotia, we spotted the low dark silhouette of a vessel a couple miles off shore. With a back lit skyline, you could just make out the low outline of a ship with a bright phosphorescent glow at the water line.

Not daring to approach any closer, I flashed the first challenge, with no answer. On the second, nothing. Not satisfied that they were friendly, a burst of fifty caliber tracers were fired over it’s hull. Still nothing.

By this time we had loaded the “Fifties” with live armor-piercing ammo, then pumped a few rounds into her amidships. All hell broke loose! Lights glared everywhere! Men and women ran around like crazy! To sum it all up I had run into four high-ranking

"Hanky Panky" officers from the First Naval District, partying it up with some women, all drunk and apparently in the sack at the time we showed up.

Luckily, no one was hurt except me. Being outranked, in the course of the cover up, I was ordered to remove any reference to the incident from my logs, and that my papers were being processed for a transfer out of the first naval district.

It was later discovered I was about to be Shanghaied to a radio transmitter in Newfoundland, to get me out of the way.

My C.O. stood behind me just as he said he would if I got into any trouble following his orders. We both were transferred to Plymouth, he to the Plymouth Captain of the Port duty, and me to the "Bug".

After hearing all this, Jovie looked up and said "Harry you're really going to like this place once you get used to it." I couldn't see it for the likes of me, this quiet, old man's job, after all the action I had done before, but because of his words, I made up my mind to make the best of it.

We stayed up half the night enjoying this friendly bull session, talking about just everything.

I was awakened at day break by the whistling of a strong North East gale that was to keep us home-bound for the next three days, with no electricity, no radio and very little decent reading material.

The days dragged on endlessly. Finding some of the old light house logs and records dating back to the middle eighteen hundreds, was so interesting, it provided enjoyable reading for the cold winter months to come.

Jovie and I hit it off right from the start, but now his liberty was to start tomorrow morning if the weather would hold out for us to make the transfer safely. The day dawned clear and without wind. Jovie all "spit and polish" in his dress blues waited for his relief to show. After three long hours of fidgeting and now missing his New York train connections, the relief boat was slowly heading toward us.

Now it was my turn to meet Ellis Wood Seaman first Class, "Woody" for short. From all outward appearances, he seemed like a good Joe, but it was apparent that he had a trend to stretch out his liberties as long as he could if no one spoke up to him. He also had a slight tendency to be a mamma's boy, living in Plymouth with his wife and new little baby.

The liberty for this type of duty was fourteen days on and seven days off, making two accountable men on board at all times and one ashore. With Jovie well on his way ashore, it was now Wood's turn to spend two weeks standing watches at night, plus doing

all the daytime lighthouse chores, such as chipping paint and rust, cleaning the light and lamps, cooking meals and doing maintenance work in general.

Woody was an avid reader of hunting and fishing magazines. One of his favorite stories was about a cook at a logging camp who made enormous sized batches of pea soup in the winter time. First he froze it, then chopped off a chunk at a time to heat and serve his men. Woody got so enthused, he tried it on me! About ten gallons worth!! After the third day of eating this "green crap" at chow time and unable to face one more day of this, I strolled around to the cold side of the cat-walk where it was being stored and kicked it overboard. To this day, I get a retching feeling in my stomach when the words "pea soup" are uttered in my presence.

The three of us got through the winter, none the worse for wear, including the annual visit of a red-suited Santa Claus named Edward Rowe Snow, a man famous for flying presents at Christmas time to the light houses in New England. He arrived by plane, making two or three passes over the light to attract our attention, then air dropped our goody bag, but missed by a country mile. Unbeknownst to Santa, the roast turkey and presents floated then slid into the briny deep, as he dipped his wings in a final adieu and flew off to his next target. "Sea clam chowder" was the second choice on the menu that day, but in spite of it all, it was damned delicious.

A long awaited spring brought new things to cope with. All kinds of shipping were around us. Heavily loaded cargo ships headed into the Plymouth Cordage Company with hemp to be manufactured into rope for the war effort. They were continually steaming by us, sometime lying to in the "Cow Yards" waiting for a high tide in order to negotiate the shallow channel to the plant.

During spring I made friends with a beautiful white and gray, one legged seagull. Three or more times a day, he would light atop the fog bell, gulping long strips of raw bacon I'd hand feed him as he balanced on his one leg. I gave him the new name "Pete," short for peg leg Pete. After a while we became inseparable.

One day I rowed over to Brown's Bank to do some sea clamming, with Pete, wings outspread cleverly balanced on the stern of the row boat. After I climbed out and started digging, Pete became a little pesky and got right in the middle of things by trying to help me pull the smaller ones out of the clam flats. He'd then fly aloft, dropping them on rocks to get the meat from the cracked shells. He thought this was real fun! I honestly think he got his limit as fast as I did.

A strange thing about Pete was his recognition of me. In all my dealings with him he'd never seen me wear anything but a pair of trunks or jeans. Yet, on one particular Sunday as I was returning from a liberty in my top-down convertible, I parked next to a tourist-crowded state pier to catch the picket boat for a ride out to the light. A noisy flock of seagulls was just flying in toward shore, when one among them peeled out of the flock to light on my shoulder.

How had Pete known it was me in a crowd and in full uniform? He squawked noisily into my face, scolding, for being left alone for that past week. The tourist's cameras were flashing away. The kids on the pier were getting a big kick out of Pete, but both of us being very shy, and me, blushing like crazy, parked the car in my spot then headed for the relief boat. Pete thought twice about taking the boat out to the light with me so I left him there on the dock hamming it up for the crowd. By the time we arrived at the light, the winged wonder was perched atop the fog bell waiting for his bacon strips.

As spring progressed into early summer, it brought hoards of small craft plying the outer channels. One weekend, a large group of high school kids went on a beach party at Saquish Neck. After having a great time sunning and swimming for the day they realized, too late, they'd overstayed the fair tide back home, yet still decided to start the long row home against a strong head tide.

We on the light weren't aware of what was going on until we saw the large flotilla of overloaded skiffs beating against the roaring current, heading in our direction. They appeared to be making no progress at all. A couple of local lobster men had taken a few boats in tow, but the rest were struggling to reach the light. If they couldn't reach us to tie onto the light, they would get swept out to sea!!

There was little we could do to help them, even if we put our boat in the water, which would put us in the same fix as they. I got the bright idea of fastening lines to the light to let them drift in amongst their boats. The kids could then tie the rope to the boats and we could pull them alongside. The plan worked, in a short time, they were scrambling up the side like a bunch of pirates boarding a ship. In twenty five minutes, we had taken on board forty three sun-burned and physically burnt out kids!!

Knowing their parents would start worrying about their whereabouts I climbed to the light tower to light a red lantern, placing it in the light, to show a standard distress signal. By the time it was noticed in Plymouth, and they had a boat sent out to pick up the kids, our larder had been cleaned out of two weeks food supplies!! The thank you notes we later received from the kid's parents made it all worthwhile.

Speaking of kids! In this, my "*summer of 44"* I had a pleasant surprise visit from five high school senior girls who spent the day on the beach with me. We enjoyed innocent light hearted fun, sunning, picnicking and swimming until late afternoon then, begrudgingly, they headed back on the long walk home. The next sunny warm day, like magic, the cute quintet reappeared, shouting for me to row over for a second party. We invited Jovie to join the group, but for his own reason, he chose a Spartan existence. Not I.

The mischievous fillies shared a big bagged lunch, with everything from soup to nuts, after which we smathered on suntan oil and dove into the high tide. One girl then pulled a camera out of her bag to take snapshots of me with each of the girls in a series of romantic type poses.

And I thought this was supposed to be a punishment detail!!!

Even though these happy little frivolous creatures realized our age difference, they continued to visit throughout the month of August on their daily trek from “Berts” restaurant to beach point.

After a long fun filled summer, the parting was kind of tough when the time came to say our good-byes. The Eden-like atmosphere, with all that previous gay chatter, was no comparison to a now lonely existence with one sailor and a seagull.

Labor day was now behind us and a touch of Autumn zapped the early morning air. My summer darkened skin was fading. It was time to clean up the “old girl” with a coat of paint in readiness for winter, while the weather was still mild.

We chipped paint, then spot-primed her with zinc chromate. By the time we had her ready for the finish coat, she resembled a fat kid with a bad case of chicken pox. Now it was our job to cover it up with a new brown dress again. At last the little old bug was presentable.

Woody and I then took the skiff down for a little R and R and rowed over to Clarks Island for a break. We pulled our four lobster traps, which by the way, didn’t hold our anticipated ocean side dinner, resulting in a hasty scavenging up something for chow.

Our search was halted by the picket boat coming along side to hail us. The skipper shouted that a strong hurricane was working its way up the coast toward us. “Pack and be ready to evacuate if it becomes a serious threat," he warned. Two hours later, he returned with orders from our C.O. “The light must be manned throughout this crisis. Keep the beacon lit, secure the deck and dog down the water tight doors. Ride out the storm!” The skipper’s picket boat disappeared in the direction of the sheltered waters in Duxbury harbor, as Woody and I looked at each other in astonishment, not knowing quite what to expect.

We had no radio to rely on for any further news of the oncoming storm. The estimated time of arrival, was all we had to go on. We lashed down and secured every thing that was loose on deck, then, when all was shipshape, we went inside dogging down the doors behind us to wait it out. The air became very humid and quiet, almost dead, in anticipation of what was to come. Less than two hours later the torrential rains started, pounding away at the noisy metal roof. Every once in a while, a strong gust of wind would slam the rain in sheets against the metal doors.

It was now total darkness outside. The wind velocity was increasing by the minute. The seas were churning up, coming directly due east from Cape Cod, with twenty five miles of open water to build up in, before smashing into us. The gigantic waves were hammering this stout little light station unmercifully. It shook so bad we had trouble keeping the oil lamps lit, and the pounding was shaking the fragile kerosene mantles to dust !!

I checked the barometer earlier, it had read a low of 29.12 inches and falling. With the watertight doors dogged down, the main compartment on the first deck was airtight, yet the heavy battleship linoleum on the deck was lifting crazily and slamming back down right in front of our eyes! The puffs of our cigarette smoke bounced in tight little puffy clouds around our space from the barometric pressure being exerted inside this area. The brutal force of the hurricane was now fully upon us!!

In frightened anticipation, Woody donned two life jackets, one on correctly, the other backward, *in case he went over the side!!* Ellis Wood wasn't much of a sea-man and this night proved it to a T. Give me Jovie any day for companionship at a time like this.

The heavy seas on the east side were striking against the light, then crashing up under the catwalk and tearing away at our boat that we had previously lashed high on the davits. It had taken such a beating that one end had torn loose.

To try to save the boat from getting stove in, I made a quick decision, throwing on my fowl-weather gear and Mae West, I exited on the lee side, then worked my way around into the windward, tying my lifeline to the railing.

The screeching wind buffeted my body as I lashed up one end of the boat as high as I could. In an attempt to get to the other end, a tremendous wave hit the side of the light and slammed open the trapdoor in the catwalk between the pair of boat davits! Because of the darkness, I was unable to see that it was now open, and plunged down through the opening!

Luckily, the next wave thrust me back against the ladder, which I gripped for dear life!! Between each terrible wave I climbed a few rungs at a time, until, gasping and clutching, I finally pulled myself back on deck. I took one short look at the boat getting torn apart, said "to hell with it" and went inside.

After drying off and getting my head on straight, I lit up a smoke and climbed up the light tower to see what things looked like from that vantage point.

The scene was wild and unbelievable! Thirty foot waves were hitting us, then wrapping high around the body of the light into the lee, forming a huge rooster's tail, which in turn would slam back into us from the West, giving us a double whammy.

The hurricane screamed unabated until 01:30 hours. then it quickly eased down. Unbelievingly, both the torrential rains and wind, ceased.

Stepping outside for a quick look around, I was surprised to see a beautiful summer night. There wasn't a cloud to be seen. A full moon shone down on a still, hot and humid night. It was as if I had stepped out into a science fiction time warp. The calm, however, was short-lived.

In a short fifteen minutes all hell broke loose again as the eye-wall had finished passing over us. The wind and rain were whipping at us now from a westerly quadrant, seemingly trying to even the score. The tempo built up and up until it matched its previous velocity.

What our lee had been before was now turned into our windward, but not in time to stop the destruction of our boat. The storm blew itself out after another two hours.

Feeling totally exhausted and lucky to be alive, Woody and I were still curious enough to go on a tour to survey for damage and found plenty.

The forlorn boat davits stood empty, and on the west side, the fog bell mechanism was completely gone. Worst of all, our favorite outdoor reading room, the old out-house, was amongst the missing, totally ripped away.

We looked at one another, grateful we weren't casualties of the storm.

Bright and early next morning the picket boat came along side to see if we had survived the "The Hurricane of 44." *I thought that was real considerate of them*. Pete the seagull, was another one of the storm's statistics, never to be seen again.

Three weeks after the storm I received my orders for transfer. Now, sea bag all packed and on deck, I stood waiting in anticipation for my replacement.

I soon spotted the relief boat making the turn at beach point heading our way. It's progress seemed like an eternity, but it finally reached the "Bug." My feelings were ambivalent. At first, came an enormous release of responsibility for having to protect the lighthouse from catastrophes such as the one we'd just survived-and yet--as I looked back over my shoulder, I realized not all men are granted the privilege of this unusual experience. "The bug" was not just <u>any</u> structure, it had been my home.

THE END