

Return To Duty

By

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I stood alone, caught between that rendezvous of day and night, and gazed toward the hills that surrounded this lost corner of Oregon at Winchester Bay. A unique chill permeated the air, foreign yet familiar. It felt surreal to stand there, again, where dormant memories resurfaced and old recollections aroused by sights, sounds, and the aroma of low tide were powerful forces that stirred deep within me.

To my right, a rusting trawler moved ever so slowly through the channel, her engine grumbled with a muffled burp, her crew securing gear as she glided across the surface of the harbor toward her mooring.



CG47218 – Heads for open water as she leaves Winchester Bay.

Across the way the crew of Coast Guard Station Umpqua River traversed the gangway, downing that last cup of coffee before shoving off, and prepared themselves for night ops. The surfboat CG47218 was already warming up at idle, her engines burped, her hull vibrated, as the diesels stirred within her flanks with the power of a thoroughbred. Like those before them, this single crew of Umpqua River, are about to begin what they trusted would become an uneventful patrol across the notorious Umpqua River Bar.

With the final line cast off, the 47218 idled away from her mooring as the warm glow from a setting sun cast a pale aura across the harbor. I stood there and watched alone, remembering those days thirty-four years removed when I too strolled across that same walkway and motored toward unknown rendezvous' aboard those venerable workhorses of the Coast Guard lifeboat service; the CG44303 and CG44331. Watching one of the newest of the surfboat fleet pass through the glare of the evening sun, a part of me three and half decades from the past, separated from obscurity and connected with the moment. If only in spirit, I knew that a special part of me went with them into harm's way.

Sometimes events and opportunity pass our way and we fail to grasp the moment until years later. The months and years I spent at Umpqua River, so long ago, were no exception. Only now am I beginning to understand how the emotions, personal connections, and the chance happenings I experienced then, affect me now.

On this evening, as I did then, I stood on the front edge of a timeline almost three and half decades removed...and watched a part of my past materialize in front of me.



CG47218 underway – crosses the setting sun.

Mixed emotions stirred deep inside searching for that elusive something that connected across the boundaries of time. In so many ways, I'm not the same person I was then, but, I realize if not for those days I would not be who I am now. I'm not sure why I really made this trip. My excuse was to show my fourteen-year-old son something about my past, to connect with him in a unique way, hoping to make up for neglected time together. But, now that I stood alone on that pier, I began to wonder if there was a deeper reason why I was there. It was as

though I was called back to find an answer to some unknown question. Over the next few days I sought answers to reconcile those emotions. The riposte I uncovered lifted me onto another plateau of understanding, with a warming sense of confidence, and an elevated measure of respect for the current young men and women of the lifeboat service. A respect they so mightily deserve.

They call them *Wave Warriors* these young people who challenge the treacherous waves along the edge of a continent. For good reason as the coastline of Oregon and Washington is home to some of the most dangerous waters on the planet. The lifeboat units of the 13th Coast Guard District have garnered a rightly earned unique place in history as a result of their efforts. Often overlooked, rarely spoken of outside the confines of their respective locations, these brave young men and women, place themselves at risk virtually every day, standing ready to save those placed in jeopardy by the whimsical nature of the Pacific Northwest.

This is less a story about my return and more a revelation about how a select few young men and women find it within themselves to perform a difficult and often dangerous job far above what the average person would ever experience. It is in essence an untold story rich with adventure, laced with humor, and often scarred by tragedy. It is a narrative about young men and women who are willing to tote a fine line, to risk it all. It is about courage, honor and dedication...about life experiences only a few ever confront. Theirs is a unique history amongst the rich histories of the U.S. Coast Guard Lifeboat Stations.

U.S.C.G. Station Umpqua River
Winchester Bay, Oregon

November 1973

We were a good crew...a diverse crew...with unique histories and motivations, hopes and dreams, searching our way through good times and often-difficult times alike. We numbered around 20 in head count and ranged in age from teenagers to the old timers who were in their thirties. Search and Rescue operations kept us busy. As a unit, we averaged well over 400 SARs every season. We came from all over the country...Oklahoma, Louisiana, California, Utah, Tennessee, Arkansas, Alaska, Washington and Oregon to name a few. We were friends and competitors. We shared our lives and borrowed from each other's emotions. We griped and grumbled, drank and smoked too much, and served with low pay during the end of the Vietnam era when morale hovered at the low end of the scale, but we never failed to answer the call when the time came. We were brothers of a sort, and like brothers often do, we held each other accountable when one of us listed a bit too far to one side, and we knocked each other around when our behavior crossed certain self-imposed boundaries that fell outside the military protocols.



CG44331 – Underway inside Umpqua River Bar...circa 1975.

We loved and hated our job at the same time. We were young and searching and often foolish, but just as often, we were amazingly resourceful. We had to be. As different as we were, we discovered one common trait between us; we longed for adventure and even though we dared never to acknowledge it verbally...circumstances often carried us into that realm of high adventure where the searching, inexperienced-lives that we were, became young men forced to deal with difficult and sometimes tragic life and death situations. Under challenging circumstances we performed our jobs well, and whether we wanted to admit to it or not, we did so with a sense of purpose and duty.

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Winchester Bay – May 2007

When I met the current commanding officer of Station Umpqua River, Chief Warrant Officer Michael Russell, I couldn't help but make the comparison between him and the two COs I served under from 1973 to 1976; Chief Boatswain Mate Dan Whalen, and Chief Boatswain Mate Don McMichael.

Chief Whalen took over command of the station from Tom McAdams a couple of years before my arrival, and he was exactly what you would expect from a Coast Guard Chief. He looked and acted the part. A large

man with a gruff expression, he was firm but fair, competent, decorated, and experienced, always cool under pressure, and light-hearted when appropriate.

Chief McMichael was different in a lot of ways. He performed the role as well as any Chief who served there. He was a competent, cool, and decorated surfboat operator, but he tended to be more light-hearted and certainly appeared more reserved. It must have been the artist in him as he was, and is now a highly regarded and a very talented painter who specializes in whale and whaling art.

Although I didn't serve directly under the legendary Chief Tom McAdams, I did run across him a time or two, and what a character he was, the perfect embodiment of a boatswain mate with the earned reputation to go along with it. He wrote the book on how to handle a 44 in heavy water.

It was watching Chief McAdams operate those wonderful 44s through the surf on the Umpqua River bar while featured on the *Lassie* episodes "Tempest" in the late 1960's that originally captured my imagination about the Coast Guard. Little did I realize that a few years later I would end up stationed at the same unit.



CG47218 – Idles away from Station Umpqua River

CWO Russell struck me as being cast from that same mold. Fair and competent with an understanding of what it took to nursemaid a young crew into a team of talented and courageous wave riders. He was gracious and accommodating, taking time out of his busy day to welcome me back to the old unit even with his right knee in a brace from a recent dirt bike accident.

January - 1974

On January 20th, 1974, the reality of what it meant to serve at Umpqua River thrust its life and death saga into my world. The trawler Holmes with three onboard was one of five trawlers attempting to cross the hazardous Umpqua River Bar, when she was rendered inoperative by a rogue breaker that caught her just outside the entrance to the main channel. She was hit multiple times and lost her engine and with her wheelhouse destroyed, she was helplessly tossed to the south side of the south jetty into monstrous surf and dangerously close to the jagged black rocks which could rip her hull apart. The CG44331 with Wayne Bauer at the helm and crewmen SN David Mobley and FN Ed Brauzy, engaged the massive surf blocking the entrance to the bar, broke out, then circled around and reengaged the surf to make several precarious attempts to pull alongside the foundering Holmes. With daring skill, one by one, two of the crew of three was extracted under extremely hazardous conditions. A young boy still in his teens was caught in a state of near panic and hesitated to make the leap across to the 331. A massive breaker bore down on them and Ed Brauzy

grabbed the boy under the arm and slung him across with one arm while holding onto the handrail with the other, then pinned him against the rear compartment as the breaker slammed into them nearly rolling the 331. Wayne Bauer, with professional skill and daring, maneuvered back through the surf into open water away from the foundering vessel and deadly rocks with all three crewmen from the Holmes safely aboard.

I was part of a shore crew positioned on the jetty so we could render whatever assistance we could, should anyone go into the water. A moment after the last member of the Holmes was extracted, a large breaker slammed the doomed vessel against the black rocks and the cracking and splitting of her hull reverberated above the roar of the surf as she crumbled into kindling. After running along the top of the jetty, jumping from boulder to boulder, I stopped not more than fifty feet away from that moment, and watched as the last few seconds of her life melted into the unsympathetic dark waters that engulfed the whole of the jetty. I stood there in disbelief and awe, with a degree of admiration for what Wayne Bauer and his crew just pulled off.

With the wind howling into my face and the roar of the surf drowning all other sounds, the seriousness of our mission became all too real at that moment and the debris that washed up on the beach over the next few days served as a vivid reminder of why we must always be ready. More than once during my tenure there, we were thrust into that life and death reality and forced to face the demons of fear and uncertainty that challenged who we were as members of a Coast Guard search and rescue unit.

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Winchester Bay and the Umpqua River Station changed in appearance and size over the years. One of the more obvious changes was the retirement of those magnificent 44's and those few remaining 36 footers, and the arrival of the new high tech 47-foot surfboats that replaced them. One of the last wooden hulled 36 footers served at Umpqua River during my tenure there. The 36498, old even by 1975 standards, was a classic vessel, but we had to maintain a bilge pump running inside



her because she leaked so much because of her age. It was a fun ride though, albeit a rather exposed and wet ride at times. BM1 Michael Dobbins took special pleasure in running the 36498 and more than once Chief McMichael had to slow him down and rein him in a bit as he took license to run her through the surf whenever the opportunity presented itself, an operation for which she was much too old. She's now on display down at Port Orford, Oregon, mostly remodeled and given a new life reminding those who see her about the rich history she was a part of.

The 44's were the brawlers of the surfboat fleet, designed to bulldog their way through the surf using their muscle power and dogged maneuverability to slug it out amongst the unpredictable and dangerous surf conditions. The new 47's are a remarkable piece of engineering, designed to meet the demanding requirements found along the Oregon coast. They are fast and maneuverable and packed with comforts

we who served on the old 44's could have only dreamed about; autopilot, enclosed coxswains flat, air conditioning, GPS, and padded seats for the crew...we never knew such luxuries. They are designed to use their speed to great advantage to avoid the breakers by outrunning them and riding over the swells before they get caught. Even so, they are tough and capable vessels in the surf. Both the 44's and the 47's must experience the same surf conditions; each was designed to use a different approach to completing the job.

Summer - 1974

We received a call from the trawler Midnight Sun about 10:00 pm. They had come across a cabin cruiser sitting dead in the water about 15 miles out. Somehow during the evening, the occupants of the cruiser had killed their engine and upon trying to restart it, discovered their battery was dead. With no electrical power, they were unable to call for assistance. By good fortune and chance, the Midnight Sun, came along. BM1 Myron Dale, EN3 Dan McKean, and myself, readied the CG44303 and shoved off a short time later. It was a calm evening with long swells and light winds. Overhead a moonless, clear and bright evening sky filled with stars, and the phosphorescent glow churned by the props created an eerie sight as we headed into open water. On the surface, a thick layer of fog drifted on the currents of air. We could see stars filtering through the haze straight overhead, but visibility on the surface ranged from about a quarter of a mile to less than fifty feet. After adjusting course to account for their drift and taking a couple of radio beacon readings from the Midnight Sun, we rendezvoused with them just before midnight and took the cabin cruiser in tow. At times the fog was so thick our tow appeared as a faint apparition floating on currents of air behind us.

When we were approximately two to three miles from the bar, Myron requested that I check the radar to give him a more exact bearing to the entrance. As I adjusted the range on the screen, it suddenly went black and no amount of tinkering could bring it back to life. He checked the radio and it was dead as well and he tried to home in on the Umpqua River lighthouse beacon to no avail. All means of communication were dead. Dan McKean climbed below deck and checked the circuits. Nothing appeared out of order, but we had lost virtually all power to our electronics except for the fathometer, which for some reason was still operational.



With no way to communicate with the station and no radar to guide us through the fog, we were functionally blind. Our only course of action was to head due east until we reached the fathom line that corresponded to the depth of water found at the end of the south jetty, turn north and run that line until we came upon the end of the jetty, then swing around it and into the main channel.

When we reached the correct fathom line, we shortened the tow and brought our cabin cruiser in tight behind us and turned north not knowing for sure how far it was to the jetty nor did we know what the unpredictable Umpqua River bar looked like. Dan stood on the bow and I stood in the lower well; both of us straining to see through the fog and the black of night. From my vantage point, I could barely see

Dan on the bow the fog was so thick. Myron must have had ice running through his veins as he kept his composure throughout and continually assured us all was well. Still he wanted regular updates on what we saw. It was a long and spooky few minutes as we, at idle, approached where we knew the jetty must be not knowing for sure what kind of conditions we'd find. As we idled forward, we could hear the long rolling swells washing across the rocks at the end of the jetty, but we could not see anything. A few seconds later Dan, on the bow, frantically shouted and waved,

"Whoa...Jetty on the right..."

A second later I spotted the jetty as well, and it was much too close for comfort. Myron cut the engines to stop our forward momentum as I took up slack in the tow line. He stood in the saddle to get a better look, rotated the wheel to port, and then slowly applied power turning us sharply to the left passing by the end of the jetty by fifty to sixty-feet. We circled about fifty yards before turning inside the main channel and rolled across the bar. I kept waiting for a breaker to sneak in behind us, but none came. The fog lifted once we entered the river channel and our approach into Winchester Bay was uneventful from that point on. It was well after 2:00 am before we were able to secure the cabin cruiser. As we secured our tow, her skipper approached me and began a conversation that eventually led to the question of why we came so close to the jetty. Maybe I should not have mentioned that we had lost electrical power and were operating on blind luck and a prayer because after doing so, the color drained from his already fatigued face.

BM1 Dave Chapman, from Roseburg, Oregon, a long time Coast Guard veteran, was our escort for the day and walked us around the station. I was to discover many cosmetic changes, but was most impressed with the new state of the art maintenance facility where they could roll out a crane and lift an entire 47 out of the water and roll it back inside. They have two 47's (47218 & 47229) and one 25 foot RBS (Response Boat Small).

The Umpqua River crew compliment is also larger now with about 45 or so, which includes men and women. I was soon to meet a few of them.



**BM1 - Dave Chapman
inside engine room of
CG47218**



BM1 Clark Bates explains the 47's capabilities to 14-year old Christopher Bridgman

Walking down the gangway and onto the fuel dock transported me to another day, another age when the old 44's were tied up and refueled on that same pier. CWO Russell had arranged for my self and my son to take a ride on the CG47218. It was a granted wish I never thought possible, but one that I enjoyed immensely. BM1 Chapman put together a special crew for us. Our skipper, BM1 Clark Bates from St. Louis, Missouri, reminded me of one of my former crewmate, BM3 Randy Bates, as he was the spitting image of him. To his knowledge, there was no relationship.

BM3 Ben Mandsager from Stillwater, Oklahoma was at the helm. It's a small world indeed, as he hails from my home state, and not far from my hometown of Okmulgee. SN Jon Ansloski, from Pekin, Illinois, and MK3 Sierra Shadd from Astoria, Oregon rounded out our crew. Our run across the bar and out past the second buoy on a beautiful sunny and rare calm day brought back memories long dormant as the sights and sounds caused events from the past to resurface.



BM3 – Ben Mandsager



SN Jon Ansloski



MK3 – Sierra Shadd

I'll never forget my first run on a 44 in November 1973. BM3 Alan (Red) O'Neil, Dan McKean, and myself were to stand-by inside the bar waiting for several trawlers to come across as a nasty series of breakers worked their way from one side to the other. It was very sloppy that day and it wasn't long before my insides began to float around and my head started to spin from all the motion. Red, I was to learn, was a real character and he smarted off, "You're looking a might peek-ed around the gills there Sport...what you need is something on your stomach to settle it down."

Being the naive rookie that I was, I didn't know any better and accepted the bologna with mayonnaise sandwich he tossed over to me. One bite was all it took and over the side I leaned to feed the seagulls with exceptionally intense intestinal fortitude, much to the delight of Red and Dan...and the seagulls.



Crew of CG47218 keeps watchful eye on trawler

As the 47218 crossed the bar and we headed into open water, I glanced at my son's eyes and noticed a smile and spark on his expression not always readily demonstrated. I knew this moment was special for him, and consequently, for myself.

I was greatly impressed with the entire crew, but was especially impressed with BM1 Clark Bates as his demeanor, countenance, and ability to communicate were sharp and clear. He took a noticeable interest in my son taking time to explain the capabilities of the 47.

The Textron Marine & Land's 47-foot Motor Lifeboat (MLB) is a rugged, highly survivable, all-aluminum rescue boat that significantly enhances the United States Coast Guard's ability to perform search and rescue operations. The MLB design uses many technological innovations. It's lightweight, marine-grade aluminum hull is significantly faster than the old 44's and can withstand impacts from 20+ foot-breaking waves at three times the force of gravity. Like the old 44, the 47's design has an inherent self-righting capability. When pitch-poled or rolled into swells, the 47 will self-right in less than 10 seconds - with all machinery remaining fully operational. To me, the 47 seemed to have a stiffer ride than the old 44's I remember. The 44's rolled around like an old bathtub balanced on a one legged stool, while the 47's seemed to float across the surface and with each undulating impact there was a more noticeable jerkiness in its movement.

Once we were back inside the channel, I was offered a turn at the helm. What a treat those few moments were as we swung in behind a returning trawler and followed it up river. BM3 Mandsager then took over again and gave us a demonstration of the maneuverability of the 47; her speed and agility were indeed impressive. I took time to ask each of them if they were going to make a career out of the Coast Guard. With time still left to serve on their initial enlistments, Sierra and Jon were still contemplating the idea. Ben had plans to pursue a career in environmental engineering after his stay. Clark summed it up best by saying,

"I have the best job in the world..." His career objectives were very clear, and I also believe, a solid understanding of his purpose in life.

America needs young people like these who are committed and resourceful and who know not only who they are, but where they want to go. I've often wondered about the metal and resolve of our country's young people. I am convinced now more than ever, that our best and brightest are those who now serve their country. From what I saw at Station Umpqua River, a good share of those best and brightest have taken the torch handed to them from past generations and turned it into a guiding light all generations of Americans could learn from.

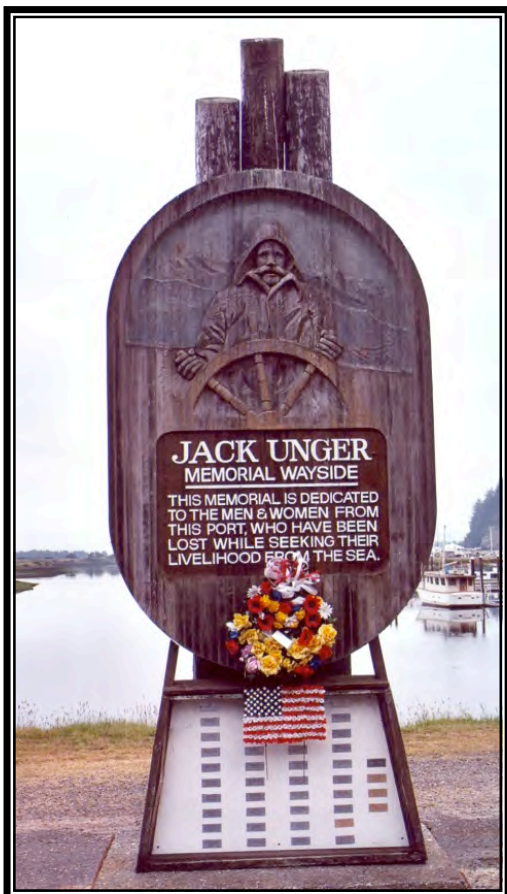
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August 17, 1975

Hundreds of boats were out that bright and warm summer day. BM2 Michael Dobbins, FN Michael Cullimore, and myself were on a routine bar patrol when we received a call from the station about a heart attack situation on the fishing vessel Poky. Communications were complicated because the Poky only had a CB radio onboard, but eventually, we found them amongst the hundreds of other boats outside the bar. On the Poky were three adults, one young child, and an older man who was the heart attack victim. I discovered him unconscious and not breathing. The Poky was a small double ender and was very cramped, so before I could begin CPR we had to reposition our victim. A young man about my age was on board and he helped me move the older man. As I stood to situate myself, the boat rolled to port and I instinctively reached for something to keep from falling over the side, which happened to be a dangerously exposed engine exhaust that extended about three feet above the engine cowling. In an instant, my right hand was severely burned generating an intense pain that shot up my arm. I was almost in shock from the pain, but the crew of the Poky were in a state of shock themselves not knowing what to do. I began CPR as best as I could, eventually recruiting the young man to help. It seemed like forever that we worked on our victim, and eventually we transferred him to the 303 because the Poky was much too slow and was taking too long to return to Winchester Bay. Cully and I continued with CPR until we reached the fueling dock at the station where we transferred his care to an ambulance crew. I continued on with the ambulance providing assistance to the EMT until we reached the hospital in Reedsport.

Once there, our heart attack victim eventually began breathing on his own and my burned hand was treated. I was to discover later that all of our efforts came to naught as the older man succumbed to the stress of it all a few days later.

Dobbins, Cullimore, and myself were eventually to receive commendations for our efforts on that difficult day, but the events that transpired on that tragic summer date in 1975 became more than just another event at Station Umpqua River; it became the defining moment of my Coast Guard career.



Professionalism and positive demeanor was a common virtue at today's Station Umpqua River. That's a reflection of their leadership and a statement about their discipline. Our crew from thirty-four years ago was a rag-tag often undisciplined group of kids just trying to do a difficult job on low pay and virtually no notoriety. Even though thirty-four years ago, we used the technology we had on hand as best as we could, we

depended less on high tech equipment and more on our ability to adapt to a situation out of necessity and instinct. We performed admirably and in some cases heroically, but we were more often than not held together by the stern will of our Commanding Officer. That's simply the way we were. We were different, not better, not worse. Our leaders at the time recognized what was required to do the job at hand and they did what was necessary to accomplish it.

Today's Coast Guard crew at Umpqua River seems much the opposite of who we were in that regard. They appear to have a unique sense of duty that is quite obvious and that equates to a positive demeanor that anyone could recognize in short order. They have a mastery of the newest high-tech equipment, are highly motivated and well trained, and recognize within themselves their own sense of purpose with a measure of self-discipline that my generation found difficult to grasp. Maybe it was the era in which our window of opportunity opened; maybe we were simply motivated by a different set of circumstances. Even so, what became apparent during my return to duty wasn't so much the thirty plus years of differences, but the thirty plus years of common bonds that connected us. Courage, discipline, adaptability, honor, brotherhood, friendship, and purpose, things that remain constant even across the generational boundaries of time, are the traits that truly identify a Coast Guard Lifeboat Station.

I wanted my 14-year old son to see first hand not only what I experienced all those years ago, but to witness a professional group of young men and women at their best, taking charge of their lives, willing to place themselves above their own natural fears, and face the trials of life few ever venture to see. By taking time to bridge that 30-year gap, we bonded in a special way. Even though he is very reserved by nature, I saw in him a change. The experience gave him an exposure to something far greater than he would have ever seen had we not taken the trip. He caught a glimpse of a world where traits such as passion, courage and honor, and self-discipline are as important as ability and training, and that's a life lesson discovered only through experience.

By the time we left Winchester Bay, I came to an understanding of sorts, the kind of understanding that provided at least a partial answer to why I made that trip, for you see, I discovered that it was less about the past, and more about how those days created the thirty-plus future years that I experienced as a result. It seems clear now...for when I cast a line across the flowing waters of a favorite fishing stream, or when I glide across the surface of a favorite lake in my canoe; when I see adventurous traits reflected through the eyes of my son, or when I feel that pride of being an American as Old Glory parades by...I do understand, indeed...that it's not the person I am today who experiences these things...but, the young man who dared to seek those days of adventure all those years ago, and lived a moment of time full of challenge few ever chance. I see now why those days of my young adult life at Winchester Bay and Station Umpqua River were so important, for they reflect not only the evolution of the searching and often uncertain young man I was then, those days echo across time to who I've become today.

Why bother to search for such an understanding some may wonder. Why not...indeed, when I can now witness the subtle respect my son carries in his eyes that wasn't there before, and to see him walk a bit taller with an air of confidence he never

showed before, and to have discovered once again that what I experienced during those few short years were a truly part of something extraordinary...well, why not indeed.

Someday, when I am long gone, the memory of those days will continue to linger with my son. I'm sure he will remember that great ride across the Umpqua River bar on that magnificent 47218, and the walk on the beaches where his dad entertained great adventures in his younger days. I trust memories such as these are not unlike when I was growing up, hearing stories about the exploits of my grandfather in World War One as he maneuvered across France in 1918 and about my dad during World War Two as he fought on the shores of Leyte and Okinawa in 1944 and 1945. Maybe someday, my son will retell stories about his dad to his children, and through all of his days he just might retain a greater understanding of what courage and honor...and self-respect really means.

I once heard Dewitt Jones, a National Geographic photographer and motivational speaker say something to the effect,

"...before we can soar to greater heights, we must face those moments of difficult change in our lives. Only by placing ourselves at the point of greatest potential and risk will the thermals of life offer to carry us higher. Even so, it is not only the external challenges of our lives that we must confront, but the internal fears within us that we must continually challenge so we can recognize and discover the difference between desiring success for ourselves and discovering significance in our lives. To soar above that edge, to press our lives to a higher plane, we must concentrate not on just what we do...but who we are...not to be simply the best in the world, but the best for the world..."



**Winchester Bay – Salmon harbor
at Sundown - 2007**

The young men and women of the United States Coast Guard exemplify that concept...the crew of the Umpqua River Lifeboat Station, past and present...have often bravely faced that edge where they dared to spread their sails and soar on the thermals of a life filled with significance. This opportunity presents itself to only the few who are courageous enough to accept the challenge not only physically, but emotionally as well. Together, these *Wave Warriors* search for that elusive desire to find purpose in their lives. In time, I trust they will realize that because of that search, they lived part of something extraordinary, and discovered within themselves...how to be the best for the world...so that others may live.