

The Leadership of the LILAC

Several alumni served on this former lighthouse tender and the last Coast Guard vessel to operate on reciprocating steam.

By Mary Habstritt, Museum Director, Lilac Preservation Project



CGC LILAC underway while under command of LT John E. Midgett, ca. 1952-53. Courtesy of the family of LCDR Robert Burke.

The Coast Guard Cutter LILAC is the oldest and most intact American lighthouse tender surviving and the last Coast Guard vessel to operate on reciprocating steam. She is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and open to the public seasonally as a pierside museum operated by the non-profit Lilac Preservation Project. Her crew of volunteers is restoring the ship to operate as an educational excursion vessel.

In the early days of LILAC's active duty, she was typically under command of a merchant mariner who worked his way up through the ranks or, later, an officer who earned his commission in some other way than by attending the Coast Guard Academy. This reflected the transfer of the ship from the civilian Lighthouse Service. Near the end of this historic ship's career, however, a few of her commanding and executive officers were Academy graduates in their first or second assignment after graduation. Tenders were often an early assignment that provided inexperienced officers with sea time to prepare them for command

of larger vessels or for more technical assignments.

LILAC was built for the U.S. Lighthouse Service at the Pusey & Jones shipyard in Wilmington, Delaware. Her keel was laid on 16 August 1932 and she was launched on 26 May 1933 in a ceremony attended by George Putnam, Commissioner of Lighthouses, and Dr. John Dickinson, Assistant Secretary of Transportation. She was assigned to the Fourth Lighthouse District and her original base was at the Lighthouse Service Depot in Edgemoor, Delaware. LILAC's first captain was Andrew J. Davidson, a veteran of the Lighthouse Service, who was appointed Master of the ship while it was still under construction. He remained at her helm until his retirement in 1938.

Charles L. Lewis was the ship's second commanding officer. He had previously served on several Lighthouse Service vessels, including the ORCHID, HOLLY and SPEEDWELL. He took the helm at LILAC on November 1, 1938 and less than a year later, on July 1, 1939, the Lighthouse Service merged with the Coast Guard. Lewis was one of several masters who had to be given some kind of rank that recognized their experience but did not raise them to the level of a commissioned officer. He was made a Chief Warrant Boatswain. As part of the transfer to the Coast Guard, family lore has it that Lewis was ordered to not only remove all Lighthouse Service emblems, including the buttons on his uniform, but to "throw them over the side." Fortunately, for our non-profit, Lewis was unable to bring himself to dispose of LILAC's bronze bow emblems and his family recently donated these back to the ship.

Lewis was in command of LILAC when the Coast Guard was ordered on 29 March 1941, as part of America's impending entry into World War II, to



LILAC Commanding Officer LT John E. Midgett on the LILAC, ca. 1952-53 U.S. Coast Guard photo.

seize German and Italian vessels in ports of the United States. Chief Boatswain Lewis assisted in the seizure of the *Mar Glouco*, *Santarosa*, and *Antoinetta* and was responsible for taking into custody the 77 officers and crew of the three ships and turning them over to the authorities at the Immigration Center at Gloucester City, New Jersey. Chief Boatswain Lewis retired on 1 September 1941, likely wishing to return to civilian life. We have fragmentary information about the commanding officers who succeeded Lewis.

In 1948, the Immigration Station was transferred to the Coast Guard and it became Base Gloucester City and home to LILAC. It was at about this time that John E. Midgett, one of several members of the legendary Coast Guard family who served on LILAC, became her executive officer. John Edward Midgett had received a wartime commission and served as executive officer with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade until 12 May 1949. LT Midgett returned to LILAC on 2 June 1952 as the ship's commanding

officer and stayed on until 27 August 1958, far longer than the normal tour of duty. He pulled strings to remain with his favorite ship.

For most of the time that Midgett was in charge of LILAC, C. E. Olds was executive officer, but we know little about him. Our knowledge of LILAC's COs and XOs gets spotty again after LT Midgett departs. W. G. Kincaide was CO in 1960 and 1961 and Guy P. Clark '61 was LILAC's XO from December 1962 to 1964, after a brief assignment on the FIREBUSH.

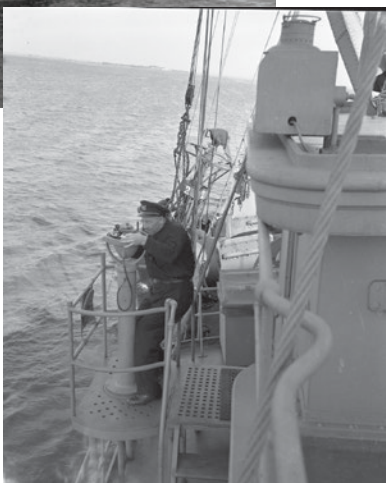
Clark remembers his COs as Robert J. "Bob" Hanson, a "mustang" lieutenant, and David G. Howland '53. Hanson believed in hands-on experience as the best teacher so Clark spent most of his time as XO on the bridge of LILAC servicing buoys with Bob looking over his shoulder. Hanson went on leave in the spring and Clark, at only 23 years old, found himself in command with no one at his shoulder to guide him. He credits a BMC old enough to be his father, an experienced engineer, and a very good yeoman for getting him through. He went on to become an ATON engineer.

Homer A. Purdy, then a Lieutenant, was LILAC's CO from 1967 to 1968. He received his commission by attending Officer Candidate School (OCS). Before he passed away in 2018, he contacted the Lilac Preservation Project to arrange the return of the ship's original wheel. According to his version of the story, he was ordered to replace it with a pipe wheel because it had developed a bad wobble. He tried to get the old inlaid wooden wheel put on display in the offices at Base Gloucester City, but when he was refused, he took the wheel home and turned it into a dining table. Like CO Lewis, he just couldn't throw away a piece of history.

Joseph Hibbs '65 was LT Purdy's XO and Jim Fetters '67 succeeded him, serving from 1968 to 1969. Fetters may have been followed by Robert Giudice, who had been Chief Warrant Bos'n under Bob Hanson's command in 1962. All we know about the next XO is his last name: Tomaczak. But, LILAC's last XO was LTJG John G. Williams. He received his commission from OCS and remembers that his initials resulted in the nickname,



Clockwise from top left: USCGC LILAC underway, ca. 1969; volunteers at work on the Boat Deck painting the skylight and ventilators; Operations Chief Luke Gayford preparing for installation of LILAC's original wheelstand, which was recently returned to the ship (the original wheel, returned by former CO Homer Purdy, is shown mounted on a salvaged stand); Unknown commanding officer on the bridge wing, CGC LILAC, ca. 1944-46. U.S. Coast Guard historical photos.



“Lieutenant (j.g.) J.G.” Williams attended LILAC’s decommissioning ceremony in Gloucester City and traveled with LILAC to the Curtis Bay shipyard where she was prepared for donation to the Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship operated by the Seafarers International Union at Piney Point, Maryland.

Williams served under LILAC’s last CO, LT R.W. “William” Allison about whom we know nothing beyond his name and that he was the last link in this chain of command. John C. “Jack” Midgett ‘61, a classmate of Guy Clark, preceded Allison as CO of LILAC. He was the first in the Midgett family to graduate from the Academy. (The first Midgett to attend the Academy was John E. Midgett Jr., also known as “Jack,” who opted to leave the Academy after his first year due to severe motion sickness.) Jack C. Midgett remembers bringing his baby daughter on board when his wife

Elizabeth was busy away from home. He brought the girl’s crib on board and put it in the ship’s office where the job of babysitter was added to the yeoman’s duties. Jack C. Midgett ‘61 was the last member of the Midgett family to serve on LILAC.

For additional information, and more sea stories, see www.lilacpreservationproject.org. We welcome Coast Guardsmen for visits. Senior people experienced in maritime matters are sought as volunteers and advisors, such as LILAC board member Brian Flanagan ‘77.

Mary Habstritt has served Lilac Preservation Project as its Museum Director since 2009. She oversees the physical restoration of Lilac as well as educational and cultural programming on board, all with the assistance of a dedicated crew of over 20 volunteers. Her devotion to maritime and industrial history follows a career as an academic librarian.