

The Coastal Guardians

HC presents another fascinating story about our equestrian history.

This painting depicts a Coast Guard Mounted Beach Patrol base during WWII. The Coast Guard provided manpower, horsepower and "man's best friend" to guard the coasts of the United States during WWII from enemy invasion. Painting by James Dyekman.



It never ceases to amaze how much the horse has given in service to this country and its citizens. We all know the sacrifice that horses, dogs, and mules made in the wars here and overseas, especially World War I when the Army relied on horses long before tanks and trucks became the means for which soldiers and equipment were transferred to and from the field.

In fact, horses would have never had to answer the call of duty after World War I if not for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II. And unbelievably, it was not the Army that would use these horses but the Coast Guard!

James Dyekman

THE U.S. COAST GUARD USED MORE HORSES THAN ANY OTHER BRANCH OF THE U.S. MILITARY DURING WORLD WAR II.

The United States, following the initial shock of the attack on Pearl Harbor, had to now fight a full-scale war with the Germans across the Atlantic to the east and the Japanese to the west.

The various branches of the military were, for the most part, ill equipped and unprepared for such a sudden undertaking and the military was painfully aware that there was a couple of thousand miles of virtually unprotected and unpatrolled United States coastline, susceptible to landing parties or penetration by aircraft.

For the most part, any kind of large invasion from the Japanese wasn't expected, but sabotage and the mere presence of the enemy on the shores of the United States could easily cause panic and a loss of morale for the population at large.

Radar still hadn't been fully developed, necessitating the need for organized shore patrols and lookouts on the East, Southern and West Coasts. This job fell to the Coast Guard, the smallest branch of the military.

Beach patrols were normally done on foot, going back as early as 1871, when the Life-Saving Service, a predecessor of the

modern Coast Guard, used foot patrols to watch the coastlines for ships in distress. The service did use a few horses to haul boats from storage sheds to rescue crews from ships run aground.

Sailors on Horseback

The U. S. Coast Guard Beach Patrol protected the continental borders of America from enemy invasion starting in June 1942. Faced with thousands and thousands of miles of coastline (much of it rugged, especially on the West Coast) the need for horses and dogs was apparent. Using horses would allow the patrols to cover far more territory faster and more easily than men on foot, and dogs always made the best sentries.

Horses were immediately authorized for use by the beach patrol and within weeks, orders for 3,222 horses were fulfilled by the Army Remount Service along with all the tack required. You can imagine the apprehension and confusion of many Coast Guard cadets who had visions of sailing the seas, until asked to gallop the beaches.

A call quickly went out for volunteers with equestrian experience and a quirky mix of people responded. Polo players, cowboys, former sheriffs, horse trainers, Army Reserve cavalymen, jockeys, farm boys, rodeo riders and stunt men applied. Training for the mounted patrols took place at Elkins Park Training Station in Pennsylvania, and at Hilton Head, S.C., where dog training schools already existed. The mounted units soon became the largest segment of the entire beach patrol, with about 3,000 horses assigned to the Coast Guard.

The beach patrols gained importance as security forces with three basic functions: to look for and report on any suspicious vessels operating in the area; to report and prevent attempts of landings by the enemy; and to prevent communication between persons on shore and the enemy at sea.

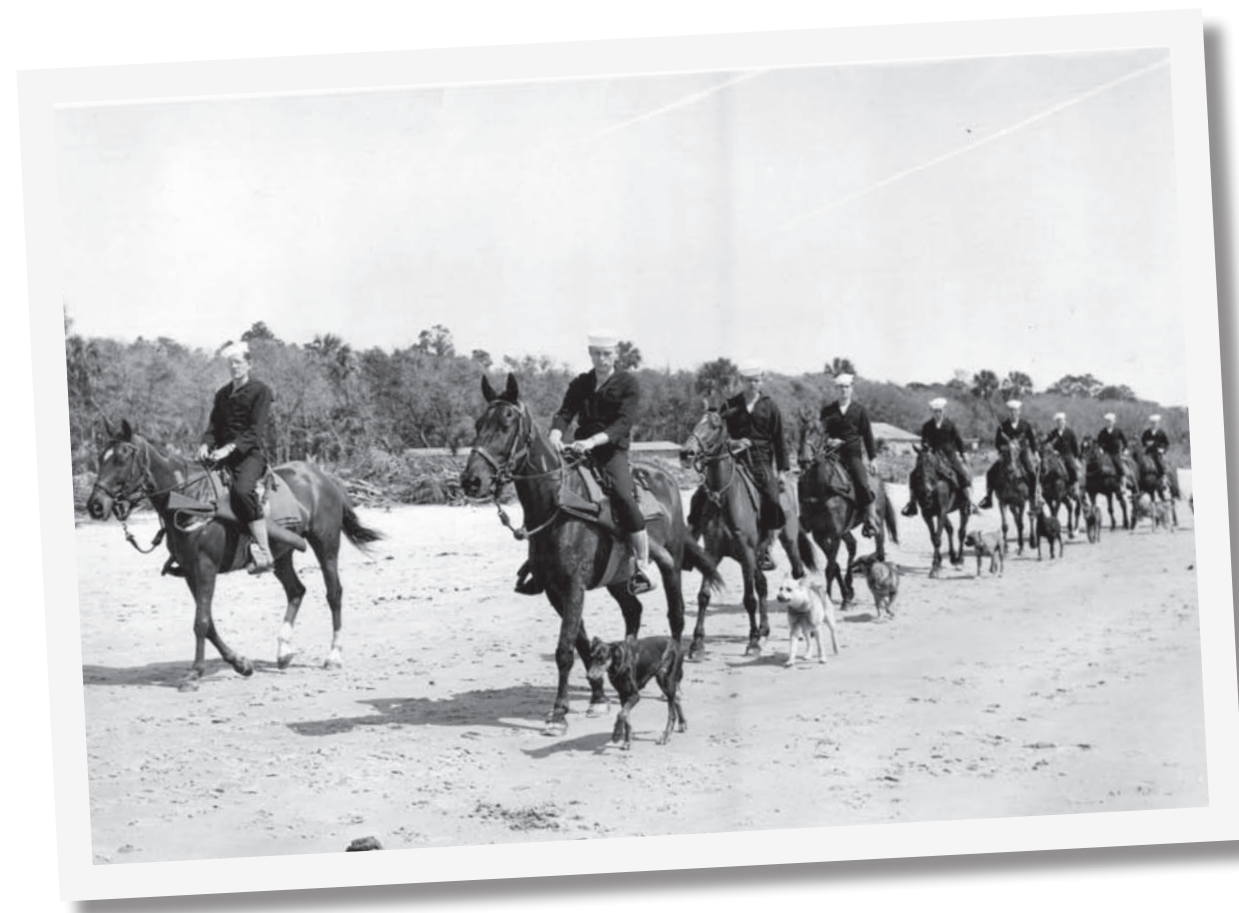
"While it was not their mission to repel an invasion from the sea, the Coast Guard beach patrols performed a vital function insofar as the morale of the American people was concerned," said Chris Havern, a Coast Guard historian. "The beach patrols provided a presence that reassured the American home front that they were being protected by a vigilant armed force."

The mounted patrols worked exceedingly well on the beaches in Florida and New York, discovering two Nazi saboteur teams put ashore by German U-boats in 1942. The vantage point atop

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—CHRIS HAVERN,
COAST GUARD HISTORIAN

Two guardsmen and their horses patrol the coast at Long Beach, Washington. Photo by Charles Fitzpatrick



Members of the Mounted Beach Patrol team up with their canine companions to show off the results of their training. The combined superior senses of the horses and dogs could alert the Coast Guardsmen to unseen persons in the dark or behind obstacles. Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.



Members of the Coast Guard's Mounted Beach Patrol cross an inlet during their patrol on the West Coast. The use of horses allowed Coast Guard personnel to cover wide stretches of beach more quickly than on foot. Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.

a horse permitted a good view across large and crowded areas such as the mid-Atlantic beaches. The horse patrols also worked well on the Texas and Oregon coasts but not all beaches were suitable for mounted patrols. New England beaches were deemed inhospitable in the winter months and some beach areas around the country had insufficient water and food for the horses.

A Soldier's Best Friend

In the areas that weren't accessible by horses the patrols on foot continued, often with dogs. These were trained attack dogs that could only be handled by one man and were not to be fooled with by anyone else. The majority of these dogs were German shepherds.

The use of dogs, with their sensitivities to their environment, added to the patrol's ability to detect persons or situations that might not be immediately observed by the patrolmen. At Oregon Inlet, N.C., a German shepherd named Nora found an unconscious Coast Guardsman in an isolated part of the beach. The 18-year-old serviceman had passed out while

on patrol and would have succumbed to hypothermia during the night if Nora hadn't found him. A few months earlier, the patrol had purchased Nora for 50 cents from a local family. Nora went on to receive the bronze John P. Haines medal at the 78th annual meeting of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in New York City.

A Duty Fulfilled

By 1944, the threat of enemy landings on U.S. shorelines began to wane and the mounted beach patrol started to wrap up its two-year run. The horses were sold at various prices at public auction in several coastal areas. The highest price received for any of the horses was at a sale in Tillamook, Oregon where 49 mounts brought an average of \$117 each. The dogs were mostly kept around and used for sentry duty by the Coast Guard.

The work of beach patrols—either on foot or on horseback—could be hard but they were a strong group of men, highly motivated to do their part for the war effort. A declassified report about the

beach patrol from 1945 provides a glimpse into the morale of these men:

"Despite the many difficulties encountered and overcome, the morale of the men was universally high. Where horses and dogs were used, consideration of the animals was often more important than the comfort of the men. Upon them, as much as upon the welfare of the handlers, depended the sustained vigilance of the patrols. The methodical tramp tramp of weary feet plodding their beats back and forth, amid fair weather and foul, stood as a constant reminder that the military duties on the home front are often as essential to victory as the more exciting activities to the far-flung battle line."

The Coast Guard never again used mounted patrols, and this fascinating piece of our equestrian history has remained largely unknown and forgotten.

If you were walking on a U.S. beach over seventy years ago, there is a good chance that you would have come across a mounted Coast Guardsman, galloping up and down the beaches on the one animal that has served man more than any other on the planet—the horse.

Nora the German shepherd receives the bronze John P. Haines medal at the 78th annual meeting of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in New York City. Coast Guardsman Evans E. Mitchell, right, fell unconscious while patrolling an isolated beach area near Oregon Inlet, N.C. Nora found Mitchell and alerted other Coast Guardsmen, saving Mitchell from dying from exposure on the cold beach. A few months earlier, service members had purchased Nora from a local family for 50 cents. Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.



These members of the Coast Guard Beach Patrol worked the beaches in the New Jersey area in all kinds of weather. Left to right: Seamen first class C. R. Johnson, Jesse Willis, Joseph Washington, and Frank Garcia. Photo courtesy of National Archives.



Riders from the Mounted Beach Patrol and Dog Training Center, at Hilton Head, S.C gallop across the beach. Jockeys, rodeo riders, polo players and stuntmen were among the skilled riders who responded to the Coast Guard's call for experienced equestrians to create the Mounted Beach Patrol. Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.