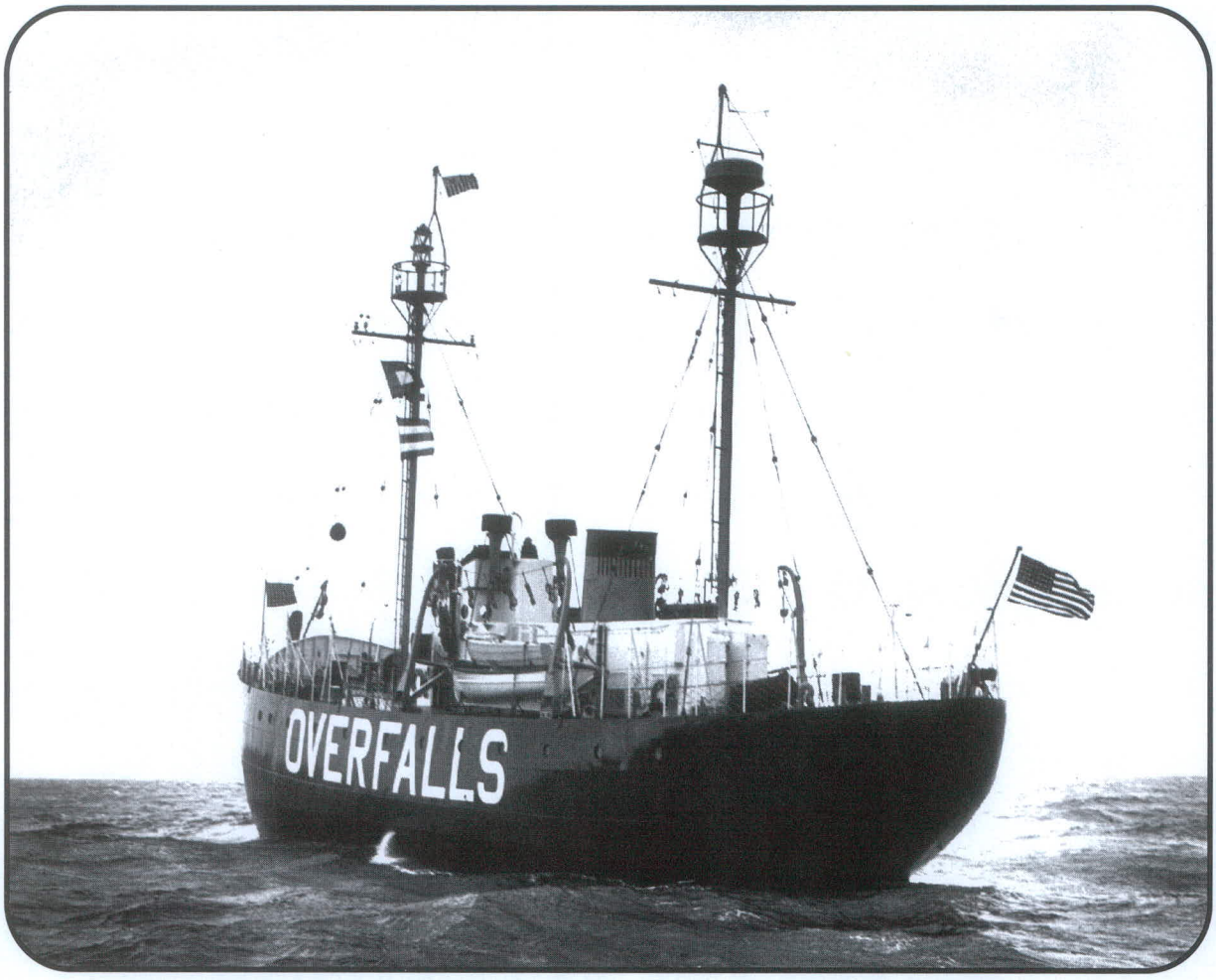
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The *WAL 605* shortly after being launched in 1951. Photo courtesy of the Rice Brothers Shipyard.

Delaware Welcome Mat

U. S. Coast Guard Magazine Visits the *WAL-605*

The following article appeared in the now defunct *Coast Guard Magazine* in 1955 and concerns the lightship *WAL 605* which is now owned by our Society.

Although the article states she was built in 1950, it wasn't until 1951 that the ship was launched. After serving on the OVERFALLS station for ten years the ship was transferred to the west coast where she served for ten years on the BLUNTS Reef station and then acted as a RELIEF lightship for all west coast light stations for six years.

The Society acquired *WAL 605* in 1985 and has completely restored the interior and exterior portions above the waterline. We are about to go to the ship yards and refurbish the underwater portion of the hull. The ship has been declared a National Historic Landmark.

Three miles off the low, surf-swept beaches of Cape Henlopen, the lightship OVERFALLS *(WAL 605)* dips and plunges through the endless swells. Inbound traffic makes a sharp turn at her moorings and heads up the Delaware Bay Channel. Most outbound traffic turns north and heads out past the FIVE FATHOMS Lightship towards European ports.

The OVERFALLS acts as a mid-channel marker with safe water on each side. Good pilots learn to keep close to mid-channel markers, but sometimes they get too close. Many a cold foggy night the crew of the OVERFALLS, awaking to the scream of the general alarm, has had to dash for the weather deck and stand barefooted in skivvies as a monstrous black shape slides by only yards away. Under such circumstances, the profanity is choice. The memory of last October's collision is still fresh in the minds of all hands. Having your bow stoved in by a large tanker, and being knocked a full quarter mile off station in the process, is hard to forget.

The OVERFALLS' crew of 15 is headed by CH BOSN R. O. Hall. ENC Buresch heads the engineering department, and BMC Walter Midgett is in charge on deck. CS2 James Keels, now serving aboard his third lightship, handles the SD and CS duties along with CS2 Evans. EM2 Spivak and Chief Buresch team up to keep the ship's electronics gear in service (no ET aboard). In the absence of the chiefs, BM1 Howard and EN1 Landon fill in as division heads. Five seamen make up the bull gang.

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With the beach (Lewes Lifeboat Station) only a 20-minute run by 40-footer, the OVERFALLS' personnel roster is broken into a three section liberty arrangement. As long as compensatory leave holds up, her crew operates on an eight day off, 21 day on set-up.

The seamen watches run on a four hour on, eight hour off schedule and the engine watches average about the same. One seaman and one engineman are on watch at all times. The mid-watch gets to sleep for a spell each morning, but the rest of those off watch turn to routine cleaning and maintenance.

The ship's main power plant (eight cylinder Atlas Imperial, 550 HP) is secured when on station except for the weekly trial. As a result, the engine watch is strictly an auxiliary affair. The boiler, three generators (Cummings A.C.), air compressor, and refrigerating motors must be looked in on from time to time, but on the whole, the engine watch is peaceful and routine.

For a look at the deck watch routine, your reporter rolled out with the mid-watch and shadowed seaman Murphy as he covered his appointed rounds and duties. This mid-watch started off about like any other — a handful of cold water in the face and a cup of hot coffee. EN1 Landon was puttering around the galley fixing a can of mushroom soup as he came off the eight to 12 watch. EN3 Sidney had just relieved him. Things were kind of stuffy below, and it felt good to step into the cool night breeze. The decks were wet from the light rain that had been falling, but the visibility was good. The breakwater lights were flashing four miles off the stern. Running lights could be seen moving left off the bow. A moderate swell was coming in on the port beam, but the OVERFALLS was not rolling. (Her 45,000 gallons of fuel and her rolling chocks give her a terrific amount of stability.)

In the wheelhouse things were dark and quiet. The engine order telegraph gave off a dull yellow light that shined off a dozen brass fixtures. The noise of the seas outside was muffled by the dull rumbling of the ship's blowers. Murphy was propped against the chart table looking over the log entries of his predecessor.

At one corner, the surface-search radar was in operation and its PPI scope showed several targets in the area. Murphy explained that if a ship gets close and is on a collision course, he shifts the set to the 1.5 mile range scale to better observe its movements. If it keeps coming in and gets within half mile, he sounds the general alarm. This gives the crew a chance to make it topside and grab a life jacket in case they are about to be hit. Since no one wants to be trapped below during a collision, the men don't mind an occasional false alarm.

The radar is also used for position checks (ranges on the shore and on nearby buoys are used). During periods of good visibility, the skipper uses a sextant for more accurate checks.

Checking the main light was no problem. Its light, blinking on ten seconds and off five seconds, reflects off the spray shield on the bow and back into the wheelhouse through the ports. The half hour check on the radio beacon is more complicated. After taking a good look around for nearby ships, Murphy went below to the radio room. Under normal conditions, the beacon sounds every half hour (on the 1st, 4th, 7th, 31st, 34th, and 37th minutes). During periods of low visibility, it sounds every three minutes. Murphy got a time tick from the radio and synchronized the three beacon time clocks, then sat back to listen for the dot dash dot at the appointed minutes. The ship's fog horn is also tied in with the beacon's timing device. When operating, it is on 1.5 seconds, silent three seconds, on 1.5 seconds, and silent 14 seconds. The horn is plenty noisy on deck, but is fairly well muffled below decks (though still loud enough to be irritating).

Other duties of the deck watch are: handling storm signals, making fire and security rounds, and keeping an eye on local aids to navigation. All in all, the seaman's watch on a lightship has as much responsibility connected with it as any seaman's watch in the Coast Guard.

Built in 1950, the *WAL 605* is one of the service's newest lightships. Her length, 129 feet, is about average, but her 30-foot beam is wider than usual. Her crew unanimously agrees that she is more comfortable and stable than her predecessor, though they miss the old foc'sle arrangement (whereby the seamen slept two to a room). Her CO and her Chiefs have private staterooms aft, but the rest of her crew bunks in a single berthing deck. The bunks have individual lights and the ventilation is good. Full length lockers are available for each man. A very comfortable recreation deck with a TV set is just aft of the mess deck.

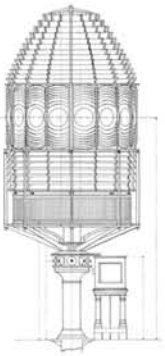
The head is forward. The ship has plenty of hot water for showers (the Coast Guard Cutters *Sassafras* and *Gentian* supply her regularly). There are no water hours. A hobby shop and a laundry are just off the head.

Chief Buresch established one of the first amateur (ham) radio stations in the Coast Guard, K3CGA, and this is a great morale booster. For example, by contacting a local ham in the Wilmington area, Buresch can talk to his wife for hours. Others on the OVERFALLS can make similar calls, and K3CGA has proved a blessing in dozens of ways.

The most recent addition to the ship's recreation facilities is a movie projector. In fact this new projector came out on the same boat as your reporter. This projector means additional records and reports for the OVERFALLS' skipper and indicates his willingness to work for the welfare of his men.

Lowell Bernette was fresh out of Cape May boot camp, so your reporter was interested in his general impressions of lightship duty. His comments were somewhat typical. He thought the duty was pretty rough during the winter months, but was very happy over the eight-day liberty parties (which allow him to make it all the way home to Wisconsin). He's striking for Boatswain's Mate, but hasn't quite made up his mind whether or not to ship over. When asked about the general deck force routine he commented: "The work's not too hard. We seem to work well together. There's not much griping." In that lightships are considered by many to be the worst duty in the Coast Guard, these comments kind of speak for themselves, and indicate that the crew of the OVERFALLS is doing a good job of making the best of it.

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Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

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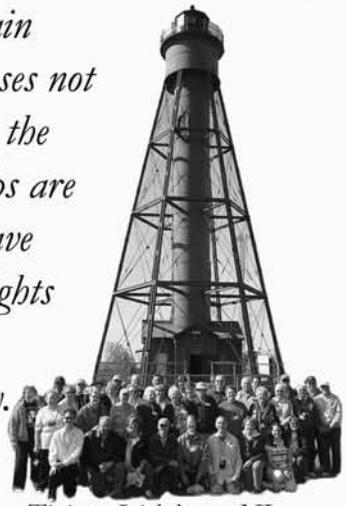
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