

The 1973 crew transfer experience recalled by Paul M. Sabo, former *Nantucket Lightship LV-112* USCG crew member

“Between the end of March and the middle of November the *Nantucket Lightship* remained anchored on station, 53 miles Southeast of Nantucket Island, regardless of the weather conditions. The Lightship had a crew of 22, but only 11 were required to be on the ship to perform all the necessary duties while anchored. Accordingly, the crew was split in half and while 11 members of the crew were on the ship the other 11 were ashore on leave. Every two weeks the crews would be swapped. To do this, those on shore would rendezvous at the Lee Side Bar & Grill, which was across from USCG Base Woods Hole. We would have a good meal and a few drinks before the trip out to the lightship.

At midnight, we would board one of four ships for the six-hour journey. This would have us arriving around sunrise. The largest of the three ships was the buoy tender *USCGC Hornbeam*. Any supplies such as food, water, fuel and anything else were carried out to the lightship along with the 11 crew members. Two weeks later, the next crew swap would be done using one of the smaller boats. They were the USCG’s 82-foot boats, the *Point Bonita* and *Point Jackson*, and the 95-foot *Cape Horn*. Only the crew and strictly necessary items were taken on these trips. Going out on the *Hornbeam* was relatively smooth. At 180 feet, she was slightly larger than the nearly 150-foot lightship. However, when on one of the smaller USCG vessels, the ride could get quite rough. We would travel out to the lightship in anything up to 20-foot seas.

During rough seas many of the crew would return their beers and meals to the sea. For some reason Captain Perry and I never got sick. When we arrived on station, the lightship would put its 26-foot motor lifeboat into the water. This was the larger of our three lifeboats that had an inboard diesel engine with a center console. Also, the Jacob’s ladder was placed over the side of the lightship. This ladder was made of rope and had wooden rungs. The crew on the lightship had to climb down the ladder and jump into the lightship’s lifeboat. This wasn’t too bad when the seas were calm. However, in rough seas with the lightship and the lifeboat both going up and down, the vertical distance between the two boats could be 20 feet or more. You had to jump at just the right time to avoid a long drop and a hard landing.

The lifeboat would ferry the crew over to the Coast Guard cutter waiting with the replacement crew. Crews would swap places. Getting on and off these boats next to the cutter was easier since their decks were closer in height to each other. Then the lifeboat would head back to the lightship. One by one we each risked our life jumping from the bobbing lifeboat onto a rung of the Jacob’s ladder hanging off the lightship. Timing your jump was difficult. Not only did both the lightship and the lifeboat bob up and down, but the lifeboat would also slam into the lightship and the ladder. So as soon as you jumped onto the ladder, you had to quickly climb up to avoid the lifeboat smashing into your legs. While no one ever got badly hurt, there were bruises and scrapes.

One time we had a much different experience. The buoy tender *Hornbeam*, was the ship bringing out the crew. When she arrived the sea was flat calm. Yes, 100 miles out to sea and throwing a rock into the water made ripples! So slowly, the *Hornbeam* came right alongside and tied up to the lightship. We were able to pass everything over the railings from one ship to the other.”

This article written by Paul Sabo is the first of two parts, describing of his USCG assignment and experience on *Nantucket Lightship/LV-112*. Part 2 will recount his horrific experience climbing to more than 70 feet on both of *LV-112*’s mast peaks during rough seas to make an essential repair. Part 2 will be in the next issue of the *U.S. Museum eNews*.