

# *The Finest Hours*

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*The True Story of the US Coast Guard's Most  
Daring Sea Rescue, Michael J. Tougias and Casey  
Sherman*

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"O Lord, have mercy, Thy sea is so large, and my boat is so small." -Breton Fisherman's Prayer

*The Finest Hours*, by Michael J. Tougias and Casey Sherman is a superb, and brief, retelling of an extraordinary set of Coast Guard rescues off the coast of Cape Cod. The book itself is under 200 pages and features some extraordinary images from the rescues. Many of the Coast Guardsmen, especially Bernie Webber and crew, of the book emerge as modern American heroes. The work is well written and can be a valuable tool for a student of history. The book is an enjoyable read; reluctant readers might be initially overwhelmed by the multiple rescue operations, but experienced readers will have no trouble navigating the multiple and simultaneous rescue operations. All but one of the twenty one chapters, the sixth chapter describing the veritable maelstrom of the Chatham Bar, begins with a historical or literary quote. *The Finest Hours* not only describes the multiple disasters and multiple rescues of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of February 1952 but also offers an historical overview of the US Coast Guard, the Town of Chatham, US shipping and a very believable and accurate glimpse of local history of Cape Cod going back to before 1492 up through life on Cape Cod during the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The book opens with a description of a tiny wooden boat tied up to a dock on Cape Cod. “To the uninitiated, she is an unimpressive sight. She is just 36 feet long and almost looks like a toy compared to the larger boats in the harbor.”<sup>1</sup> And then the authors’ introduce the “Boatswain’s Mate First Class Bernie Webber.”<sup>2</sup> Bernie plays the leading role in one of the four rescues that are the focus of the work. The rescue commanded by Bernie is one of the Coast Guard’s most extraordinary, successful and unlikely rescue operations in US history; a rescue of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Finest Hours*, Kindle Locs. 88-95

<sup>2</sup> *The Finest Hours*, Kindle Locs. 127-133

absurd courage and fantastic luck. The authors' portray Bernie and many of the Coast Guardsmen in the work, as hard working, dedicated and, at their core, genuinely historic heroic models. The characters are believable and are not portrayed in an unrealistic light. The book pays particular attention to Bernie's family life, his interest in service and his romantic interests as young man stationed on the Cape. The authors' do a great job of humanizing Bernie as well as describing him as the very real American hero he proves himself to be in the rescue operation. The coastguard as large organization partly dedicated to saving lives and especially individual coastguardsmen are justly lionized in the work. The authors remind the reader of the, absurdly brave, unofficial Coast Guard motto, "You have to go out, but you do not have to come back."<sup>3</sup>

The book describes the condition of two tankers enduring a particularly brutal Nor'easter; quite simply a hurricane in the winter. The two tankers, the Pendleton and the Fort Mercer were built during the Second World War. As part of the war effort the tankers were built as quickly and cheaply as possible. They were both "T2 tankers" and much of their structure was welded not riveted, as this saved money and time.<sup>4</sup> Both the Fort Mercer and Pendleton were nearing the end of the careers and were in need of overhaul and refit. Due to the incredible seas and extreme cold of the Nor'easter; waves were confirmed to be as high as sixty feet and a number of experienced seamen on the water during the storm reported seas in excess of seventy feet, the two tankers broke in half. "On the bow, in large white lettering, was the name PENDLETON! When he radioed what he has seen, everyone in the Coast Guard was

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<sup>3</sup> The Finest Hours, p. 35

<sup>4</sup> The Finest Hours, p. 14

stunned. It was almost too much to believe that a second vessel, just thirty miles from the Mercer, has also split in two.”<sup>5</sup> The authors’ adeptly describe the brutal and unforgiving seas and the completely mercenary nature of shipping companies. T2 tankers were poorly constructed, “...the hull of the Pendleton was most likely put together with ‘dirty steel’ or ‘tired iron,’ in other words, steel weakened by excess sulfur content. This put the ship at great risk in high waves and frigid ocean.”<sup>6</sup>

The authors do a fantastic job of individualizing each of the four rescue operations; the bow of the Pendleton, stern of the Pendleton, the bow of the Fort Mercer and the stern of the Fort Mercer. Each of the four operations had varying members of success. The rescue of the men on the Pendleton stern is the most successful. The other three rescues, or rescue attempts, achieved varying degrees of success. The book constantly returns to the awesome power of the ocean and the, often, futile efforts of human technology to overcome its power. The majesty, fury and completely unpredictable nature of the seas combined with the brutal cold and powerful winds create a sense of frozen unrelenting terror. The book doesn’t end with the rescues but actually follows a number of events both in US shipping law and policy and the careers and lives of the crew under the command of Bernie Webber. The rewards and consequences of participating in such events are honestly and simply portrayed in the work.<sup>7</sup>

The book is very good and would be great a supplemental addition to a US history course on the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book’s description of the life of a Coast Guardsmen in the 1950s and great abbreviated history of Cape Cod provide useful and relatable historic content.

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<sup>5</sup> The Finest Hours, Kindle Locs. 510-514

<sup>6</sup> The Finest Hours, Kindle Locs. 317-324

<sup>7</sup> The Finest Hours, p. 172

The book's description of Cape dwellers called *Wreckers* is not to be missed. There a number of other incredible rescues, or attempted rescues, described in the work. Students would be able to talk about the role of government in regulating marine commerce, fishing and the responsibility our government has toward protecting the lives of mariners. The book makes very little mention of the Korean conflict or of the Cold War, but does offer an interesting contrast and students may be better able to make clear connections to powerful storms and the power of the ocean. The terrible Nor'easter of 1952 and the ensuing mayhem created dominated the news, in the Northeast certainly, and the troubles of a conflict in the Far East were pushed aside to celebrate the heroics of local sons fighting extreme conditions to save lives. The rescue boat crewed by Bernie Webber and his three companions is restored and available for viewing and students can actually go aboard for a hands on approach to history.

### Bibliography

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