

# A Lighthouse Christmas

By John "Gibby" Gibbons

*The following is an actual eyewitness account by a Coast Guardsman stationed at St. George Reef in 1955.*

We were not planning on spending Christmas on "The Rock" that December, but our plan started to change real fast.

The year was 1955. The lighthouse was St. George Reef, better known as "The Rock" to the men who served on this lighthouse. St. George Reef is located 6 miles off Point St. George in northern California, almost on the California and Oregon border. The nearest city is Crescent City, California, which is about 12 miles away.

This is not only the most isolated lighthouse on the West Coast, but it was also the most dangerous lighthouse to get on and off. It took 10 years to build this lighthouse. At a cost of \$704,000, it was the most expensive lighthouse ever built. The light was put into operation in 1892.

Back in 1955, there were seven men assigned to St. George Reef Lighthouse, with three men on each watch. As I understand, in later years, it went to a four-man watch. We would spend 15 days on "The Rock" and then spend 15 days at Humboldt Bay Lifeboat Station. I was a second class engineman in charge of one watch. With me I had two first class seamen, James "Red" Griffin and John O. Jones. They were also first class lighthouse keepers. We were all single men.

On the other watch, there was Bill Hoffman, a second class boatswain mate who was in charge of the watch. With him were Duane "Fergy" Ferguson, a second class machinist mate, and Donald L. Pinion, a seaman. Both Hoffman and Ferguson were married and lived at Humboldt Bay Lifeboat Station.

Chief Boatswain Mate F.E. Swanson was in charge of the lighthouse. He was also married and lived at Humboldt Bay.

A few weeks before Christmas, Fergy was feeling sorry because his watch would have to spend Christmas on "The Rock" and we single men would be on shore. I told Fergy we would think of him when we sat down to a delicious Christmas dinner cooked by Bill Winsett, the cook at Humboldt Bay.

We relieved the watch on December 3,

1955. There were five of us together. Chief Swanson had decided to spend a watch with us, thinking he would be home by Christmas with his family. I also had a man by the name of McQuaw whom I was training to be an engineman.

We always liked having extra men on "The Rock" to talk to and play cards with. When there were only three men, you could soon run out of things to talk about. Red and I took turns cooking. There was plenty of food, and we served good meals.

I would call this one of the better watches that I spent there. I had no equipment breakdowns, the weather was good for that time of year, and we had very little fog—which meant no fog horns.

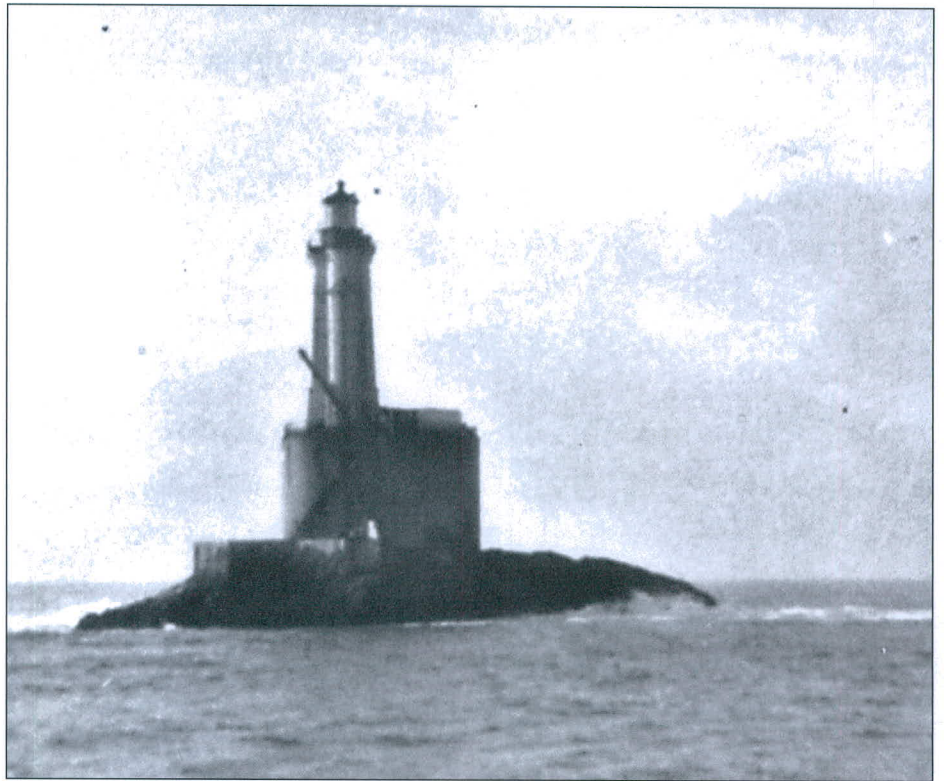
On December 17, we were all in a happy mood as we starting cleaning up the lighthouse from top to bottom in preparation of relief day the next morning. It was raining and the wind had started to blow

that morning. The rain and wind increased throughout the day, and the barometer fell faster than I had ever seen it fall. I knew we were in for a storm, but I did not know how big it would be.

By 1600 hours, we had unfavorable landing conditions, and we knew we would not be getting off the next day. At this time I had been stationed at "The Rock" for about 30 months. I had seen many storms, and I had been stuck out there a few times, but only for two or three days. I thought this would be no different; how wrong I was.

This would be the worst storm to hit the Northern California coast in a decade. Towns like Klamath, California, were completely destroyed. The men at Humboldt Bay were out on patrol and rescue day and night for two weeks.

Back then each watch was required to have an extra 10 days supply of food for three men; we had five men out there. After five



The St. George Reef Lighthouse circa 1955. Photo from author's collection.



Johnny Webb (left) and James "Red" Griffin (right) in galley at St. George Reef circa 1953. Author's collection.

days, Red and I took an inventory of our food; we had used up eight days of food in five days. When we told Chief Swanson this, he gave the order to go to one meal a day. The only thing we had left in the freezer were some loaves of old bread. When they were thawed out, they were all moldy. We found out that if we picked off the big mold pieces and then toasted the bread with a little

peanut butter, it was not too bad. We had one box of World War II C rations. In it there was some hard chicory that we boiled for coffee. There were a few other things as well that were fit to eat.

On Christmas Eve, the storm was still raging, and we knew we would be spending Christmas on "The Rock."

At the 1600-hour traffic check, Fergy got on the radio and wished us all a Merry Christmas. Then he said how sorry he was that we had to spend Christmas on "The Rock," and then we could hear him laughing.

Fergy told us to listen to the Crescent City radio station that evening.

That night we turned on the radio and the DJ told about us being stuck on the lighthouse and about the food supply getting low. He then mentioned all

of our names and dedicated a half hour of Christmas music to us.

With the wind still howling, the sea still pounding us, and the main light shining bright, we sat around and listened to the music. We were probably thinking of our families at home and wondering what they were doing that Christmas Eve.

When the station played the last song for us, it got very quiet in the galley that night, and there might have been a few wet eyes. The song was "Silent Night."

I cooked the Christmas dinner. We had not had any meat for two or three days. I had a surprise for the men. I had found a can of Spam and, to go along with that, two kinds of vegetables and, of course, our moldy bread. This was our Christmas dinner.

The storm finally let up on January 3. The other crew came aboard. We had been on "The Rock" for more than 30 days. We had about two days of food left.

The first thing we did when the other watch came aboard was to get a fresh loaf of bread and some bologna and make a sandwich.

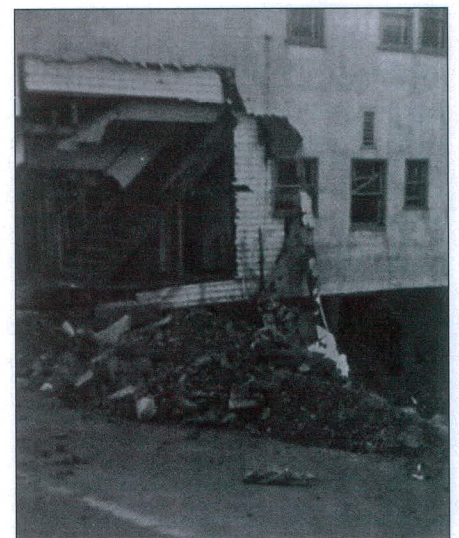
I left "The Rock" on November 4, 1956. I was supposed to leave on November 2, but a storm came up and I could not get off.

I spent a total of 39 months on "The Rock." This was the longest any Coast Guardsman ever spent on St. George Reef Lighthouse.

Many Christmases have come and gone, but I will always remember the Christmas I spent on "The Rock."



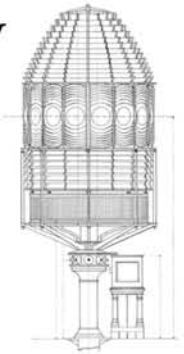
The author, in 1956, on the controls of boom landing men and supplies on the lighthouse. Author's collection.



Klamath, California in 1955, after the storm. Author's collection.



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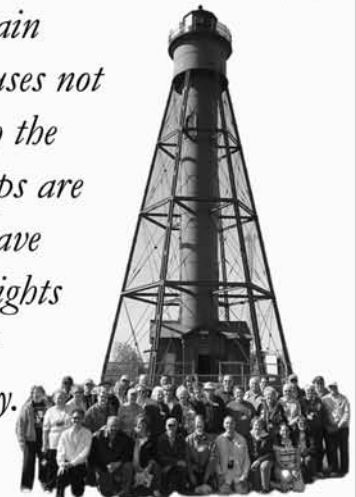
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