



## World War II at the Ponce de Leon Inlet Light Station

By Ellen Henry

**I**n 1938, the Coast Guard opened a new station on the south shore of Ponce Inlet, FL, opposite the lighthouse. The United States Lighthouse Service was being absorbed into the Coast Guard, and the Ponce de Leon Inlet Light Station would now be manned by Coast Guard personnel from the new facility. The lighthouse keepers were given the option of enlisting in this service, and Edward Meyer, the last civilian principal keeper at Ponce Inlet, chose to join and retain his job as Officer-in-Charge at the lighthouse.

Even before the official transfer of the Lighthouse Service to the Coast Guard, plans were made to establish a radio beacon at the Ponce Inlet Lighthouse. All branches of the military were beginning to respond to the unrest in Europe, and many light stations were being supplied with radio beacons to serve as additional aids to navigation.

A document from the Superintendent of Lighthouses of the Sixth District dated September 9, 1938, gave the characteristic of the new radio beacon for Ponce Inlet as an operating period of one minute, beginning on the second minute of each third and sixth ten minute period of the hour. This meant that the radio beacon would be broadcast at 22 and 52 minutes after the hour. The signal was the letter "L" or dit dah dit dit in Morse code. During foul weather, the one-minute signal would go out every three minutes. The beacon was a low power or class C station with a range of 10 to 50 miles, operating at 5 to 50 watts on a frequency of 290kc. It was

timed to operate in conjunction with the radio beacon at the Cape Canaveral Light Station, providing a cross bearing to help vessels navigate in the vicinity of Hetzel Shoal off the Cape. The operation of the beacon in the tower and the invisible radio beacon would comprise the main duties of the men stationed at the Ponce Inlet Lighthouse.

It did not take long for signs of the European conflicts to reach Florida and Ponce Inlet. In a keeper's log entry of October 21, 1939, Chief Meyer wrote: "Sighted what appeared to be a Sub from tower at 5:15 pm. Bearing E.N.E. from tower and about 12 miles off shore, weather very squally – Saw craft for about 5 minutes. Did not appear to be underway. Reported this to Mr. Harris (*Aubrey Harris was in charge of Coast Guard Station Ponce*) at Coast Guard Station." Later entries do not reveal if this submarine was a German U-boat or an American boat, but German subs worked close to the Florida coast during much of the war.

In February, 1940, the lighthouse tender *Althea* arrived with supplies and radio beacon equipment. The specific equipment used here is not completely known. Records indicate that two Seth Thomas mercury pendulum time clocks arrived, along with two radio beacon transmitters, two receivers, an antenna, and other related supplies. The equipment was set up with the help of the tender's crew. The location of the first radio room is also not known, but the first assistant keeper's dwelling is the likely place.

Prior to the entry of the United States into



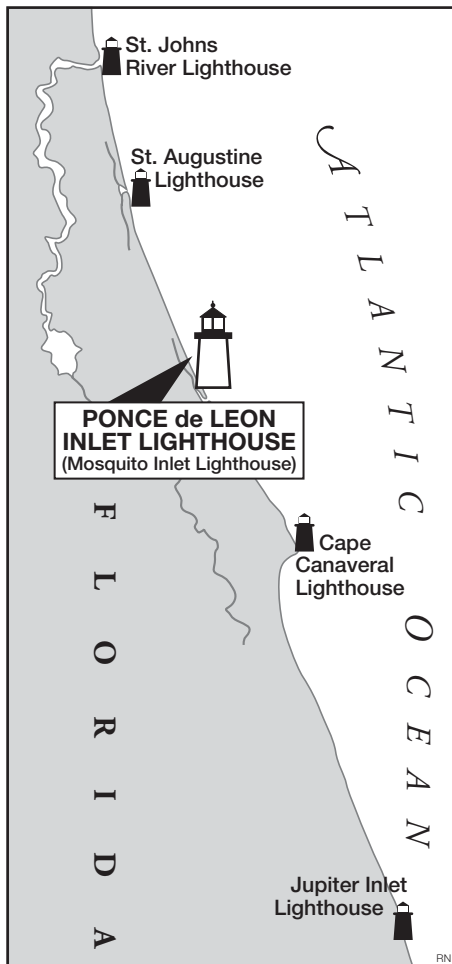
**Principal Keeper, later Chief Boatswain's Mate, Edward L. Meyer. Photo courtesy of Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association.**

World War II, Edward Meyer and his assistant and their families were the only residents at the light station.

Shortly before the arrival of the radio beacon, the relief keeper and his family had moved from the first assistant keeper's dwelling to the second assistant keeper's house, possibly to make way for the radio equipment.

In May of 1940, two Kohler generators arrived to provide power for the light station and to charge an array of glass batteries that could be used for power as well. Keeper log entries mention constructing a concrete pad for one of the generators in the woodshed side of the woodshed/privy for the first assistant keeper's dwelling, and the generator and pad still remain there today. Another entry mentions installing an antenna mast "behind the house" but, again, the exact location of the antenna is not known. The radio beacon finally went into official operation in August of 1940, having been put out of commission earlier in the summer by generator problems and a lightning strike.

With the radio beacon finally operating with some degree of consistency, Chief Meyer could turn his attention to clamping down on pleasure boaters who tried to use the light station dock, local residents whose cars blocked the road, and tourists making unauthorized visits to the property. A regular duty for men at the lighthouse was helping motorists whose cars got stuck on the beach.



The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, changed life for everyone in America, including Ponce Inlet. On December 12, the light station was closed to the public, and unauthorized persons were not allowed on the beach. (Eventually, civilian guards would be stationed to check every car that crossed the bridges onto the peninsula.) The two keepers at the lighthouse were ordered to stand eight hour watches to spot possible enemy activity, and on December 29th, the Coast Guard decided to require round-the-

clock watches. Men to stand these watches would come from the Coast Guard Station and were to bunk in the principal keeper's dwelling, which was quickly converted into a barracks. For most of the war, twelve men would be stationed here. In February, 1942, the light station and the entire nation converted to National Daylight Time to save energy.

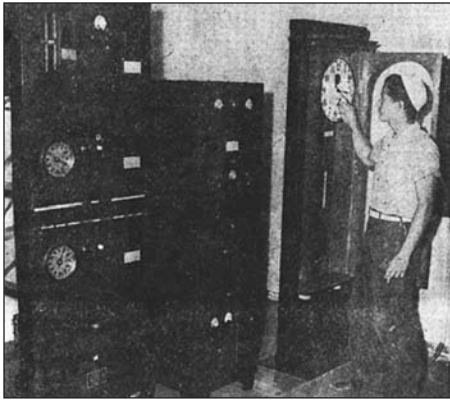
Neil Robinson, stationed at Ponce Inlet early in the war and before the lighthouse barracks were created, wrote to us about the lighthouse and life at the Coast Guard Station,



Principal Keeper John Lindquist and his wife Ella Pomar Lindquist circa 1900. Photo courtesy of Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association.



A Coast Guard family in 1945 at Ponce Inlet Light Station. Photo courtesy of Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association.



**Above – Coast Guardsman in the 1940s radio room.**

**Below – Coast Guardsman changing the lamp in the Third Order Fresnel lens. Photos courtesy of Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association.**



referred to as the Surf Station in his letters:

*In general, we learned how to work and do a good job of it. Most of us had not been away from home for any length of time, so at times it was a frightening experience. Life was not always too good, either. There was a shortage of men. The war was only six months old, so we did not get to enjoy a trip to town very often. Our time was taken up with watch duties, station chores, and sleeping. The watches were divided between beach patrol on foot, beach watch tower lookout, and lighthouse lookout. Beach patrol consisted of two men armed with a .45 automatic and one signal flare. We covered 10 miles of beach in 4 hours. If we encountered trouble, the man with the gun would advance to investigate the trouble while the man with the flare would hang back about five yards. If the man with the gun got into real trouble, the other man would light the flare and run down the beach. The theory being that the beach watch towers were situated so that the patrol's signal could*

*be seen and someone would be sent to check out the trouble. Later the two men were to be replaced by one man and a dog. The lighthouse watch was from dusk to*

*dawn, as was the beach patrol, and two men would be taken from the Coast Guard Station by boat over to the lighthouse and for a period of four hours. One would patrol the*



**A view of the tower in 1945. Everything appears to be very shipshape. Note the keepers on the gallery. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard.**

catwalk at the top looking for any trouble at sea and also reporting all plane movement by phone to the Mayport Naval Station in Jacksonville. The other man would act as guardian around the base of the lighthouse. One thing I will not forget was the four hours at the top of the lighthouse listening to the constant dit-dah-dit-dit coming from the radio transmitter. Small wonder that one had a tendency to become sleepy.

(Even though the radio beacon signal was sent out only several times each hour, the men who worked here during the war reported hearing the Morse code signal constantly. Others reported that the sound was actually a time signal or "tick" being sent out from Washington, D.C., to make sure all beacons were operating on the correct time. Or, perhaps the men on watch were monitoring other radio beacon transmissions, especially those from Cape Canaveral.)

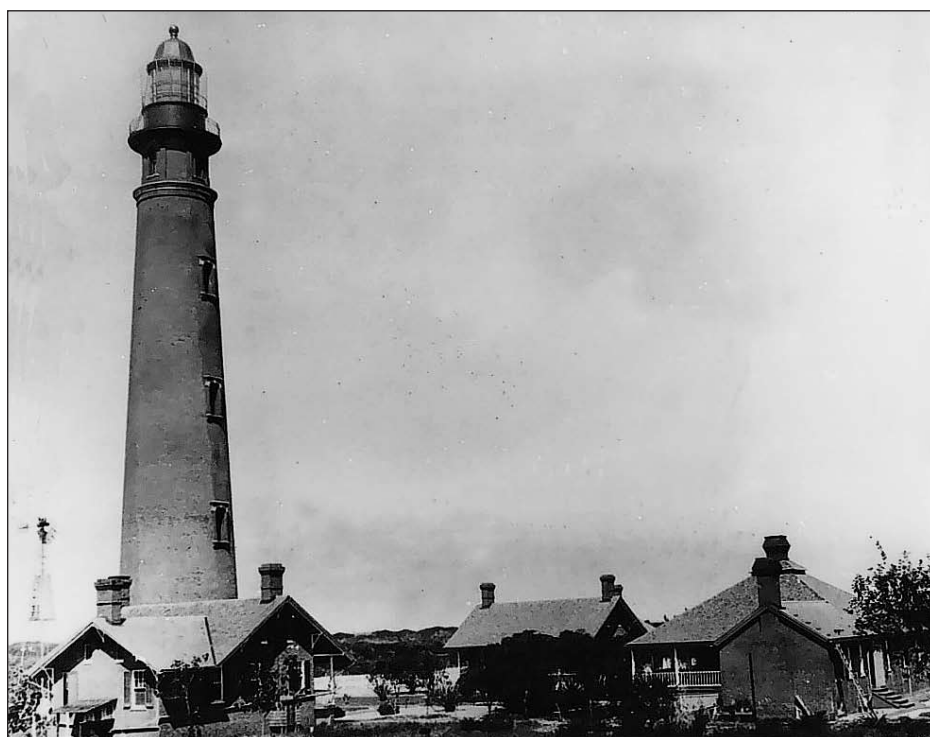
*Both the lighthouse and the watch tower each had one of those little round clocks... that we had to punch on an hourly interval, and heaven help us if the Chief found a punch missing the next day when he took out the little circular disk that was inside.*

*Living conditions were not the best, either. At that time, all of the men ate and slept at the Surf Station. It was very warm while I was there so during the day, the sun would bake the building. It was situated behind the sand dunes so there was no evening breeze. We slept upstairs and at that time there was no such thing as air conditioning, so we just suffered with it. To top that off, the building was infested with rather large rats. Those who were going on watch at midnight or 4:00am would make a sandwich before going to bed and take it upstairs with them, but when they got up to go on watch the sandwich would be gone. Someone got the bright idea of taking the station's cat upstairs and closing the door so the cat couldn't go downstairs. About five minutes after we turned out the lights we would hear a loud squeak and then we would lie and listen to the crunch of bones as the cat ate the rat.*

During 1942, many dramatic events occurred offshore, including the April 10th sinking of the tanker *Gulfamerica* by the German submarine U-123 just off Jacksonville Beach. On April 3, Chief Meyer reported hearing heavy gun fire at sea. On May 5, Meyer described a convoy of tankers passing the lighthouse with the lead ship firing her guns. On



Left – The tower in 1898. Note the bushes which are gone in subsequent photos.



Below – Ponce de Leon Inlet Light Station circa 1910. Principal keeper's dwelling at right, assistant keeper's dwellings left and center. Windmill at left was added in 1907 to pump water. Photos courtesy of Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association.

May 10, barrels of oil began washing up on the beach.

As German submarines continued to attack ships along the coast, Americans realized that coastal lights were silhouetting ships and providing perfect targets for the U-boats offshore. Blackouts were ordered to protect the ships, but the lighthouse tower was too important to coastal navigation to shut off completely. Instead, the beacon was dimmed from a 500 watt to a 50 watt lamp. The keeper's log records that the men drove up the beach to see the newly dimmed beacon, which could still be seen for a distance of 14 miles out to sea.

By mid-1942, Coast Guardsmen were being

sent regularly to and from the light station. The enlisted men spent their days and nights standing watch in the tower and with the radio beacon, doing light station maintenance, patrolling the beaches, and training for war. Eugene Lange reports that while he was stationed here, the men were required to improve their swimming skills. They were carried out into the ocean by a Coast Guard launch and dropped off to swim back. They were given the option of swimming to shore and walking to the Coast Guard Station, or swimming in through the dangerous inlet and avoiding the walk. Men also spent time learning Morse code, "blinkers" or visual Morse code, semaphore flag



Post World War II view of the Ponce de Leon Inlet Light Station: Starting at the left center is the principal keeper's dwelling. The assistant keeper houses are between this and the tower. Each dwelling has a privy/woodshed located behind it. The small structure attached to the principal keeper's kitchen is a laundry shed. The privy is at a little distance from the house, and you can see a walkway but not the privy itself. The first assistant's privy/woodshed, partly hidden by the tower, was enlarged in 1943 to accommodate the radiobeacon equipment. The building at the right with the ventilator on the roof is the oil house. The other structure nearby was a garage which has since been torn down. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard circa 1951.



Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse from across the inlet, 1910. Photo courtesy of Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association.

signals, called “wig-wags,” international marine signal flags, first aid, and seamanship. Most of the men remained at the lighthouse for only a few weeks or months before being transferred to other locations.

Chief Meyer ran the light station by the book, and the conduct of the men was an ongoing concern. Because the location was so remote, men were sometimes more lax than military in their bearing, and the Chief did not appreciate this attitude. They refused to wear their uniforms, played practical jokes on each other, got into trouble for roughhousing, and more than once a man walked on freshly painted and wet floors. And, of course, men often fell asleep while on watch. Chief Meyer was not sympathetic to the situation and, according to Neil Robinson, actually purchased a pair of high-top sneakers so he could quietly climb the tower and catch men napping.

A visit from members of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (later to become the WACS) brought a pleasant start to 1943. There was a large encampment of these women volunteers in Daytona Beach, and the men must have enjoyed seeing some of them at the lighthouse. Chief Meyer, in an effort to help morale, had a load of oyster shell hauled in to use in creating a basketball court. In the spring, an addition was built on the privy/woodshed behind the first assistant keeper’s dwelling. This served as the new home for the radio beacon equipment. But most of the year was devoted to the endless watches, maintenance, and training. In October, a body was found on the beach along with airplane wreckage, and a chaplain was brought in to help the men deal with this reminder of the consequences of war. In November, a plane crashed into the ocean near the lighthouse, and the light station crew was again faced with the reality of war. At the end of the year, Chief Meyer was replaced by Chief T. T. Galloway, who remained in charge of the light station until 1945.

In 1944, the new Officer in Charge began the year by giving the men a day off. Judging from Galloway’s log entries, the year was much less eventful than any since the start of the war. The men continued their drills in signaling, seamanship, first aid, calisthenics, fire control, and hurricane preparation. They spent much of each day maintaining the lighthouse buildings and grounds. The beach patrols continued, and men from the station were also responsible for standing round-the-clock

watches in coastal watch towers #13 and #14, located to the north along Daytona Beach. And, of course, the men monitored nearby buoys, stood constant watch over the light station’s radio beacon, kept the light in the tower, and phoned in their four daily weather reports to the Coast Guard Station across the inlet. The routine was broken by numerous visits from a local USO group that arrived regularly to boost morale by screening movies for the men.

Although the Coast Guard records for the light station have been thoroughly searched, the log books for 1945 remain missing. We do not know how the conclusion of the war was celebrated here, nor do we know exactly when the Coast Guard stopped using the principal keeper’s dwelling for a barracks. We also do not know when the lighthouse beacon was restored to its full power. Charner Smith took

over as Officer in Charge and lived at the lighthouse until his retirement in 1949. The radio beacon and the beacon in the tower continued to function as navigational aids, and the men who lived here continued to maintain the station much as they had during the war.

Today, the Ponce de Leon Inlet Light Station radio beacon house has been restored, and a re-creation of the radio beacon room has been completed. Included in this exhibit are artifacts and interpretive panels about World War II in Florida and at the light station, as well as weather monitoring equipment. On special occasions, visitors can enjoy the guided use of the lighthouse ham radio station and send out their own communications from the historic radio room.

**Present day Ponce de Leon Inlet Light Station. Photo courtesy of Ron Christopher.**

