

A Guiding Light

Posted by PA2 David Marin, Friday, October 9, 2015

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Chesapeake Bay, Md. (Nov. 11) — A sailboat cruises by Thomas Point Light in the Chesapeake Bay. USCG photo by PA1 Pete Milnes

By Petty Officer 2nd Class David R. Marin –

As a young boy, John White recalled seeing signs above water fountains in Charlotte, North Carolina, separating their usage by ‘whites’ and ‘colored’. He doesn’t remember any Caucasian children as classmates. For a child growing up in the final years of segregation in the South, he was unsure where his life would lead him. He certainly never imagined he would be the first black man in command of a Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse while ushering it into its 100th year of service.

Before he graduated high school, he had a glimpse into his future when he witnessed his two older brothers get drafted into the Army for the Vietnam War.

“I was drafted into the Army in 1969 a year after I had graduated high school,” said White.

After learning of his draft status, White took it upon himself to do some research into the armed services.

When he learned about the Coast Guard, White felt a certain connection.

“I heard about ice breaking, pollution response and the search and rescue cases,” said White. “I said, ‘man, I think I would like that.’”

Deciding to enlist in the Coast Guard, White took the Armed Forces Entry Examination, but failed the first time around.

“I just felt [the Coast Guard] was the branch God wanted me to be in,” added White. “So I studied the booklet that I checked out from the library for 30 days and had the recruiter come approximately 100 miles from Greensboro, North Carolina, to Charlotte to pick me up a second time to re-take the test.”

This time, he passed. White headed off to basic training in Cape May, New Jersey, where he had his first lesson on doing what he was told, when he was told and how he was told.



John W. White, early in his Coast Guard career. U.S. Coast Guard photo

“When I was in boot camp, I did mess up,” said White. “When you first arrive, you are given a ditty bag with all your issued belongings. We were given four towels and told to stencil one towel with our name on the upper right hand corner and turn it over to do the second side.

“Being young and smart, I thought that was taking the long way around, so I had decided to do all four at the same time. I was turning all four over when the company commander saw what I was doing. Man, I tell you, he came up to me and yelled, ‘What are you doing?’ To which I said, ‘nothing sir.’ He then said, ‘I’m going to make an example out of you.’

“He picked up all four towels, as if he were pulling them from the dryer, and threw them into my face. It didn’t hurt me, but it did humiliate me in front of all of these guys from around the United States. The anger came and tears started to swell up in my eyes, but I didn’t let one tear drop. He then got close to my face and yelled, ‘you see that glass door over there? Go over and put your nose to that glass door.’

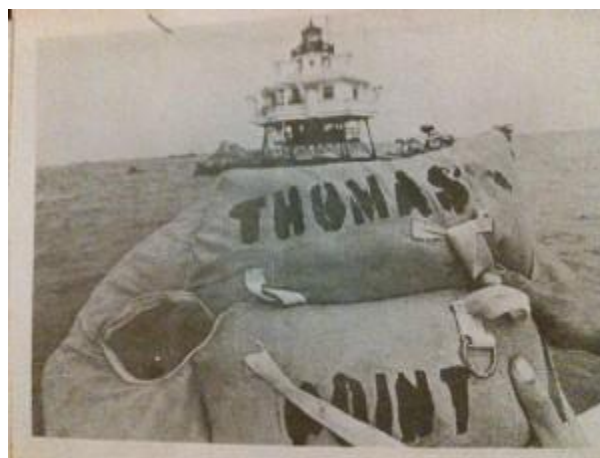
“My first thought was, ‘this guy’s prejudiced.’ The only thing that made me feel good and made me say that I will never disobey again was that, within 15 seconds, a white guy came up on the opposite side of the glass door and put his nose right up against mine,” White said.

After he graduated from boot camp, White was transferred to the Coast Guard Cutter Chincoteague, where he quickly moved up from seaman apprentice to boatswain’s mate 3rd class.

“I remember when I was on the ship, there were guys that were there before I came aboard as a [seaman apprentice],” said White. “When I moved up in rank above them, some of them got mad at me. They’d say, ‘man you just got here, and I’ve been here three years, and you’re gonna tell me what to do?’ But I had them look beyond all that and said ‘man, I earned this.’”

After his tour aboard the Chincoteague, White was transferred to Annapolis, where, after a year, he moved up to petty officer 2nd class and was provided with a rare opportunity.

“I had a commanding officer back in the 70’s ask me if I would like to be in charge of Thomas Point Lighthouse,” said White. “I figured it was a challenge for me to take on this task, and having one or two other people under me was a responsibility that I felt I could take on.”



A life jacket stenciled with Thomas Point is held up in front of the Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse. U.S. Coast Guard photo

White was assigned as the officer-in-charge of the lighthouse and had a non-rate and a petty officer 3rd class assigned under his command.

The unit was unique. To begin with, it was a lighthouse out in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay.

Secondly, the three Coast Guardsmen rotated the duty, each standing a two-week duty while one member took one week off. With only two members at the lighthouse at a time, the duty was further split to have one man awake at all times. That meant, on average, the duty watchstander would have eight hours of solitude every day.

White recalls having approximately six Coast Guardsmen under his command throughout the three years he was stationed at Thomas Point.

“None of the guys under my command stayed much longer than a year,” said White. “I think it could have been boredom, the difficulty in being away from home three weeks of the month, or that they wanted to try something else.

“The biggest challenge was making sure the men in my charge were doing their assigned duty and responsibilities during the week I was off. I needed to impress upon them how important it was to be lighthouse keepers and ensure the foghorn was operative, the beacon was working and that the light was on every night when it was supposed to be,” said White.

Keeping his experience from boot camp in mind, White used that as a model to conduct his actions and hold others accountable for theirs.

“You give me a job, teach me what to do, and I’ll try to perfect that job,” said White. “That coupled with a desire to succeed formed a mindset of being able to do anything I want to do, if I did what I was told, when I was told and how I was told.”

Through his hard work, White found himself in quite a unique position, one that he loved and remembers fondly.

“I loved seeing and meeting all the mariners that passed by the lighthouse,” said White. “Some of the boaters would come out here every week. I knew some of them personally, visited some of their homes, they cooked meals for me, and wrote me letters.”

White collected several news articles about the lighthouse and his time there. Friends who were locals to Thomas Point sent some of the articles to him.

“They would say, ‘John, here’s an article written about the lighthouse, and I thought you might like it,’” added White. “That really made me feel like I was doing something of importance. Not only as officer-in-charge, but also as a friend of the people in the bay itself. They would come just to visit the lighthouse. I was always open to giving them a tour. It was like showing off my home away from home.”

Nearing the end of his tour, White asked for an extension to be there for the centennial celebration of the lighthouse.

“You can’t imagine how it made me feel to be officer-in-charge of the lighthouse as it turned 100 years old and how proud I was to have that position as an Afro-American,” added White.

Thirty-nine years later, while celebrating his 26th wedding anniversary, White returned to visit Coast Guard Station Annapolis and was offered a trip to the lighthouse to show his wife where he had been stationed. He didn’t know it at the time, but crewmembers from Station Annapolis worked to gain access to the lighthouse during the visit.

“Finding out about [White] wanting to visit and his history was very exciting,” said Senior Chief Petty Officer William Krukowski, officer-in-charge of Coast Guard Station Annapolis. “We decided to take him to the lighthouse so we contacted the U.S. Lighthouse Society.



(Left to right) Petty Officer 1st Class James Ables, public affairs officer at station Annapolis, Senior Chief Petty Officer William Krukowski, officer-in-charge of Coast Guard Station Annapolis, and John White pose for a photo while on the Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse Sept. 9, 2015. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class David Marin

At the lighthouse, White walked around, pointing out all the things that changed since his time there. He reminisced about the feeling of the wind and sun against his face as he used to fish there. He thought back on all the filleting and cooking he did, the way his room looked with the pictures he hung on the walls, and bringing curtains to the lighthouse for it to feel more like home. Most off all, he recalled just how grateful he was then and is now for the historic position he held.

“As a religious man, White gathered us all together and said, ‘before we leave, I just want to sing you all a song,’ said Krukowski.

White sang, “Lord I just want to thank you... I want to thank you for being so good to me.”



John White, his wife and those who visited the Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse Sept. 9, 2015. White and his wife were visiting Md., for their 26th wedding anniversary and planned the visit with Station Annapolis. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class David Marin