

Floyd, Joe: The Lightship Relief ^[1]

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Joe Floyd: The Lightship Relief

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 1/11/2004. Copyrighted.
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Joe Floyd served aboard the U.S. Coast Guard lightship Relief in the 1950s. Anchored far offshore, the Relief carried a bright beacon that warned sailors away from "the Graveyard of the Atlantic," the great shoals that have wrecked so many ships off the North Carolina coast. Lightships like the Relief protected coastal shipping here from the 1820s to the 1960s.

Now living in Wilmington, Floyd recently accompanied a boatload of schoolchildren to one of the Relief's old anchorages, Frying Pan Shoals, 28 miles out in the Atlantic off Cape Fear. A manned light tower built on tall pilings replaced the lightship there in 1965, but the Coast Guard plans to dismantle the tower this spring. Now that ships rely on satellite navigational systems, the age of lightships and light towers on our coast is ending.

In the shadow of the light tower, Floyd told the children about surviving the century's worst hurricanes, the isolation of lightship duty and the wonders of life on the edge of the Gulf Stream.



Joe Floyd. Photo by Chris Seward, 2004. To request permission for further use, please contact the News & Observer.

I was born on Holden Beach and my dad was a waterman. He was in the old lifesaving service and on a shrimp boat or a dredge boat up until 1948, when everybody in Brunswick County was starving to death. They moved to High Point and I joined the Coast Guard right out of high school. All my life I had wanted to go into it. I was on the Relief lightship July of '54 until late in 1956. We relieved other lightships -- the Winter Quarter, that guarded the shoals off of Maryland; the Chesapeake Lightship, that guarded the Chesapeake Bay. There was a lot of talk on the lightship about its history. They talked a lot about the time during the war when it was armed. When the war broke out and the Germans started coming off the coast, they eventually pulled the Relief, like they did to get a picture of a lightship in your mind, take a watermelon and shave the top flat. That's what a lightship looks like out of the water. It had two masts and the light was on the foremast. The ship was made for sitting at sea. It was not made for fighting. We were usually 25, 28 miles out to sea and in about 50 feet of water. We couldn't see land on any station, but on Diamond Shoals, on a real clear, crisp day, we could climb up the foremast and see the Hatteras Lighthouse. We were on Diamond Shoals when Hurricane Hazel hit in '54. They brought us all the fuel and all the water we could fit in our tanks to try to make us lay low in the water, then they just left us to it. The big Navy vessels were out there riding out the storm. Everybody was sick except two of us. There was an engineer from Morehead City named Earl Styron and myself. Earl kept the main engine running. If something happened, we would try to keep it into the sea. As far as the deck was concerned, the chief engineer on the lightship was a guy named Andrew Holeman. We lost Andrew. We didn't know where he was. Earl and myself started looking, and when we went down into the very bottom of the engine room, we could see the bottom. I spent most of my time on a tall stool between the wheel and the forward portholes. I would wrap my legs around the stool and put my arms in the dogs of the portholes and just try to ride it out. You could look out the portholes and all you could see was the sea. When the ship is riding on the anchor, it noses down into the sea, then it will come back up and go back down again. But during Hazel it would go down into a sea and try to come back up, and another big sea would hit it. It just kind of stayed there. There have been lightships sunk during storms and lost, and there's been quite a few of them rammed. The Olympic, the Titanic's sister ship, cut the Nantucket in two. That was in '33, I believe it was. There were 11 people on there and seven of them died. When Diane came in at Wilmington in '55, we were on the Frying Pan station. We lost our main anchor, then we put our spare down and the chain on that parted. We ended up 130 miles away. Now that's not any fun. The seas were tremendous. If it wasn't a storm or a heavy fog, a lightship could get tremendously boring. We'd scrape and chip and paint from the bow to the stern, and as soon as we got through, we would start right over. We did a lot of reading. In the summer we'd rig up a radio. The lightship crews were special people. A lot of people can't take that isolated duty. You're just too confined and too alone. We all got along good together and worked together. You became more like a family on a lightship. You know, I think about the Relief all the time. I think about morning out there a lot. There's nothing greater than the sun coming up over the ocean and the sounds and smells early in the morning. When I think about the lightship, that's usually the best time. Night could get sort of lonely if you had the midwatch, but it's not like you're sitting out there and nothing's going on. You could hear sea life coming up for air and flipping and making all kinds of noises in the dark. You couldn't see any of it, but

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11 January 2004 | Cecelski, David S.

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