

U.S. Coast Guard History Program

The Great Ohio, Mississippi River Valley Flood of 1937



*Coast Guardsman transports radio reporters detailing the flood's devastation.
U.S. Coast Guard photo.*

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A period of heavy rainfall and melting snow this spring saw the Ohio and Mississippi rivers exceed record flood levels. The rivers' waters rose so high that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had to demolish an earthen levee resulting in the controversial sacrifice of Missouri farmland in order to spare the city of Cairo, Ill., located at the confluence of the two great rivers.

The preceding record for flood levels was established during the winter of 1937 and saw the inundation of cities from Cincinnati to New Orleans. Even though corrective steps had been taken following the floods of 1937 to prevent the recurrence of such disasters, the heavy rainfall of January and February resulted in unprecedented crests of the rivers.



*Rescuing civilians in Lawrenceburg, Ohio.
U.S. Coast Guard photo.*

According to the United States Weather Bureau, the rainfall resulted from irregular weather patterns which saw abnormal barometric pressures and the colliding of warm, moist southern tropical air masses with cooler northern polar air masses. The resulting precipitation from the collision of these fronts dropped an estimated 165 billion tons of water in the Ohio and Mississippi River Basin. This was enough to cover over 200,000 square miles of land to a depth of over 11 inches. In only 12 days, January 13 through 14, Louisville, Ky., received 15 inches of rain. Over 19 inches of rain fell over the course of the month of January. As a result, 70 percent of the city was submerged, forcing 175,000 residents to flee. Across the river 90 percent of Jeffersonville, Ind., was flooded. One contemporary source estimated that the flood did \$250 million (1937 dollars) of damage to the area. The extent of the damage throughout the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys caused the American Red Cross to claim that the deluge shattered all previous records for natural disasters in the United States.

At the direction of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, the United States Coast Guard mounted the largest relief expedition in the history of the service. The Coast Guard mustered a relief force of 142 officers and 1,706 enlisted men to assist the Red Cross in responding to these massive surges. Units from the Atlantic and Gulf coasts in addition to stations on the Great Lakes provided men and equipment. Captain (later Rear Admiral) LeRoy Reinburg, Commandant of the Coast Guard Depot at Curtis Bay, Md., was placed in command of the Coast Guard's effort. He initially established his headquarters at Evansville, Ind. Later, he moved his headquarters to Memphis, Tenn., as the crest advanced southward down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico.



Coast Guard picket boats muster beside CGC Yocona on the Mississippi River. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

Rescue operations extended from January 19 through March 11 and involved 351 boats of all types. In addition, 24 cutters, ranging from 75-foot "Six-Bitters" to 165-foot patrol boats, were sent to assist in saving life and property. The Coast Guard chartered special trains in order to facilitate the transportation of many of these craft from their stations to the focal points on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Along with boats and Guard employed to include 12 these were could operate water. These in work and in medicines and The other two and Lockheed large quantities the Eastern affected areas also deployed sets and 12 trucks which radio stations. to the an emergency included 244



cutters, the Coast additional assets aircraft. Ten of amphibians, which on land and the aircraft were used reconnaissance delivering medical workers. aircraft, Northrop transports, flew in of supplies from seaboard into the The Coast Guard 12 portable radio communications served as mobile These contributed establishment of radio network that stations.

Coast Guardsmen pump flood waters to fight fires in downtown Cincinnati. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

In responding to the floods, the Coast Guard faced some very interesting dilemmas. In Cincinnati, for example, the flood waters of the Ohio River caused the spill of thousands of gallons of gasoline from storage tanks. This fuel was ignited and, ironically, produced fires in buildings surrounded by water. In response the Coast Guard boats pumped the flood waters into the already inundated buildings to extinguish the flames and prevent the spread of fire.

The winter temperatures also saw floating ice in the northern-most parts of the rivers. These small icebergs acted as hazards to navigation and sometimes resulted in the capsizing of rescue crafts.

Floating ice acts as a hazard to navigation as motor lifeboats operate on the flooded river. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

Reports of discrimination by local authorities in the rescue of non-whites in distress had reached the headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. This caused the organization's assistant secretary, Roy Wilkins, to make an appeal to the commandant of the Coast Guard, Rear Admiral Russell R. Waesche to ensure that



the Coast Guard ensure that local authorities rendered assistance to all those in need regardless of race. In response Waesche gave his assurances that the Coast Guard was making no discrimination "in rescue and relief operations" and forwarded an instruction to Reinburg that "no discrimination is shown."

The Treasury Department's Annual Report for Fiscal Year 1937 stated, "The relief force, besides rescuing 839 persons from peril, transported 67,613 refugees to safety, afforded transportation to thousands of Red Cross officials and relief workers, saved 1,993 head of livestock, carried mails, towed disabled boats and floating buildings to safety, helped to restore telephone and telegraph service, aided in preventing looting, and otherwise extended all aid within its power to be of assistance."

This 1937 relief operation marked a milestone in the Coast Guard's tradition of response to natural disasters and served as precursor to the service's response on the Gulf coast to Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita in the late summer and fall of 2005.



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