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CAPTAIN ALEXANDER V. FRASER, FIRST COMMANDANT OF THE
UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

The United States Coast Guard's first Commandant, Alexander V. Fraser, was a Scotsman. His family tree dates back to 1066 when a Scot nobleman named Friesel accompanied William the Conqueror from Normandy at the time of the Conquest of England. The Normans influenced the government and achievements of the English nation to a great extent, and records show that the Fraser Clan played a large part in Scottish and English history. Historians particularly mention the Frasers as one of the most conspicuous families in Scotland, south of the Forth, during the Scots-Saxon period, and their castles of Oliver, Fruid, Needpath and Drumelzier attest their ancient greatness. Oddly enough, the shield of the Fraser Coat of Arms bears the words "Je Suit Pret," translated "I am ready".

Alexander Fraser was born in New York, April 20, 1804, and he became ready to be the first Commandant of a service now known by its motto "Semper Paratus--Always Ready" by long service in the East India maritime trade. He came with excellent qualifications as a master mariner when he applied in 1832 for a commission in the Revenue Cutter Service, as the Coast Guard was called at its inception. President Jackson gave him a commission as Second Lieutenant on the cutter ALERT, captained by W. A. Hammond. This vessel was ordered to Charleston and Fraser's duty was boarding the sugar ships from Havana and compelling them to pay duty for importation. In 1836, he received a leave of absence from the service to accept an excellent commercial offer to be in command of the ship HIMMALEH, on a voyage to Japan, China and the Malayan Archipelago.

Upon his arrival in New York after a two-year voyage in the Far East, he requested that he might be appointed First Lieutenant on the ALERT, writing thus: "After a hard and laborious voyage of two years I am ready to obey any order the Department may give me". Secretary Woodbury asked that the case be looked into, and Assistant Secretary McClintock Young found Fraser's records indicated that he was one of the best officers in the service, so he recommended him for the promotion and assignment on the ALERT. This recommendation was marked "Promoted. MVB", meaning that President Van Buren gave his assent, and after six years, Fraser received his first promotion, in 1838.

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On December 22, 1837, Congress passed a law authorizing public vessels to cruise along the coasts in the stormy seasons to render aid to distressed ships. Alexander Fraser had returned to New York before any cutters actually started this new duty, and he applied for it, evidently taking command of the cutter when its captain was too infirm or too sick to go to sea. He spent three years at this thrilling, but arduous work, virtually starting the Service's tradition of aiding vessels in distress. In 1841, he wrote a letter to the New York Board of Underwriters, showing in detail the records and actual tracks of his cruising in search of distressed vessels.

New York needed a new cutter, and the Board of insurance men took the occasion to write Fraser that they hoped that the Government would furnish him with a ship to cruise the coast during the dangerous seasons, writing thus: "for beside the saving of property to the Country and revenue to the Government and relief to suffering seamen they know not a school better calculated to make bold and hardy seamen a class admitted to be useful and necessary in peace and in War." Such was a declaration made in favor of the Coast Guard in 1841. Fraser obtained fourteen more favorable letters, including one from Edward Curtis, Collector of the Port of New York, directed to Walter Forward, then the Secretary of the Treasury saying that he regarded Fraser as the best officer within his acquaintance in Revenue Cutter Service, "a good seaman, a faithful, energetic and very discreet man, fit to be entrusted with any duty". With all this evidence, Fraser was made a captain in 1842, in command of the cutter EWING.

About this time, criticism from Congress over the expense of maintaining the service revealed the necessity of having an experienced man in charge. Fraser seemed to be the logical man, and in 1843, Secretary of the Treasury J. C. Spencer wrote to him, outlining the nature of his duties. They are briefly as follows:

1. The charge and investigation of all estimates for the Revenue Service and the examination of all accounts for disbursements made by Collectors for the Revenue Vessels.
2. The construction and equipment of new vessels and the repair or other disposition of the old ones.
3. The charge of all applications for appointment in the Service, the transmission of commissions, the assignment of officers to their stations, cruising of the vessels.
4. Care of all public property on board cutters and on shore.
5. Investigation of all charges for neglect of duty or other misconduct.

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Fraser was provided with an assistant and accommodations in the Department. His first change was a system of promotion based on examination by a board of officers. He spent most of his first year at the office stock-taking and assembling material for his first report on the service as a whole, submitted January 9, 1844. In this report, he outlined his policy of building iron steamers for the service instead of the old wooden ones that required constant repair. In addition to new equipment, Fraser advocated the raising of the pay of petty officers to thirty dollars a month instead of twenty. He advised the appointment of a chief engineer for each steamer and an assistant. Under no circumstances would he allow liquor on board the cutters for officers or for men.

His severity on all matters is expressed by a memorandum he directed to be sent to a Captain who had complained that he had too few seamen to man the ship. He wrote: "While the number may not be sufficient to man her and maintain the form and paraphernalia of a man of war, which is not desired, it is all sufficient to ensure the safety of a vessel of 365 tons if the officers and men understand their duty and perform it cheerfully. Tell him it is desirable in the future to support as few idlers as possible on board Government vessels. Last--give it to him in plain terms."

After introducing the use of steam vessels in the Service, Fraser continued to manage the affairs of the Revenue Cutter Service until November 15, 1848, when the command was turned over to Richard Evans. After his dismissal from the Bureau in Washington, Fraser asked for the command of the brig LAWRENCE, on her trip around the Horn to the West Coast. This would put him on the coast of California when the revenue laws were extended there--an exciting but difficult job. Fraser had made twenty-six trips across the equator whereas his officers had little experience--so little that Fraser could not trust them in charge of the deck and was compelled to keep their watches himself.

Here, Fraser's keen appreciation of the needs of the service and his sincere desire not only to secure the revenue, but also to establish a military service in a democratic country led him to make a school of seamanship of the LAWRENCE. From his letters, it can be seen that he demanded a certain amount of study by his officers in the fair-sized library on the ship and that he made reports to Washington on their progress. He placed a Digest of Revenue Laws in the Ward Room, and composed an order in mid-Pacific that is a clear-cut guide to action for future Coast Guard officers and foreshadows the mission of the present Academy. In it, he explained that the Revenue Cutter Service was established "not for the creation of additional officers, or for the purpose of augmenting the expenditures of the government, but to provide an additional guard against infringement of the Revenue Laws, which could not be afforded by officers of the Customs on shore," and that "Efficiency in the officers demand three requisites: a knowledge of navigation and seamanship as well as an intimate acquaintance with those laws the observance of which he is bound by his oath of office as well as in consideration of the compensation he receives to enforce."

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Fraser's LAWRENCE arrived at San Francisco almost a year after it had left New York, due to unfortunate delays in repairing wrecked or missing parts along the way. Upon arrival, many of the crew deserted to take shore jobs at which they could get much more money because of the California gold rush then in full swing. In addition to his duties of securing the revenue, Fraser was ordered to relieve distressed merchant vessels and to make scientific examinations of harbors he visited, still the three basic functions of a peace time Coast Guard.

Until he return to New York in 1852, Fraser had a busy time. There were often five or six hundred vessels at anchor in San Francisco harbor, many with insubordinate and lawless crews. There were no civil tribunals to help in law enforcement, and Fraser, without very much legal authority himself and with only one officer and one or two third lieutenants, had to enforce the Revenue laws and also aid shipmasters in suppressing mutiny and violence.

Back in New York, his service was suspended during an investigation on the charge of having administered corporal punishment while at California. Nothing could be proved against him so he retained his captaincy, serving in and around New York Harbor. In 1856, it was decided that New York needed a new cutter since it had become such an important commercial port, so as captain in charge, Fraser was chosen by the shipping men to go to Washington and lobby for the new cutter. He advocated the building of a steam cutter, and finally Congress, having taken the cutter-building authority from the Secretary of the Treasury, appropriated the money to build the steamer that was eventually named the HARRIET LANE. However, because Fraser had opposed an Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, who saw no need for a new ship in New York, he was removed from the service and went into private business as a marine insurance man at New York.

A series of letters written by many influential people in 1861 shows that Fraser tried to be reinstated in order to help the government in the war between the states, but he was unsuccessful. However, the HARRIET LANE, which was constructed through his efforts, performed many heroic deeds and became famous as a battleship under the Navy. Though the first Commandant of the Coast Guard ended his career as a businessman, he showed a sincere interest in military service until his death in Brooklyn in 1868, and established many of the basic fundamentals of the present Coast Guard. With the valor of true seamanship and the strength to carry out his convictions, Fraser seems to have been the logical man to establish the basis on a service whose seagoing motto is "You have to go out, but you don't have to come back".

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