

CORPUS CHRISTI SAILORS GAIN FAME ON A POSTAGE STAMP

By Norman Delaney, Ph. D.

Friday, October 9, 1942, was another day of bustling activity at the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. Just two years earlier, this secluded coastal area in South Texas, with its sand dunes, scrub brush, trailers, and fishing shacks, was transformed into the largest center for aviator training in the world—the “University of the Air.” Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, which signaled the entry of the United States into World War II, an increasing number of sailors and cadets in flight training were required to assist with operations, and a boot camp was established in Corpus Christi on December 21 of that year.

Note: The Corpus Christi military base is referred to as the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station, the Corpus Christi Naval Air Training Center, and the Naval Air Station Corpus Christi in this article.

Opposite page: The engraving on this 3-cent postage stamp featured a portion of a photograph of sailors training at the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. The stamp, based on a photograph by Robert Towers, was released on October 27, 1945. Permission to reprint courtesy of the Smithsonian National Postage Museum.

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Nine months later, on October 9, 1942, after having completed their training, a contingent of these “booties” began arriving at the station’s photo shack to have their pictures taken for identification documents. Waiting for them was 33-year-old Robert “Bob” Towers, a photographer first-class (P1c-V6) petty officer, who in civilian life was a photographer for the *Detroit Free Press*. A naval reservist since June 1940, Towers had been called to active duty in April 1941 and assigned to Corpus Christi. With an eye for a good shot, he climbed to the roof of the photo shack and snapped a picture of the men grouped below him. It was a good one: an image of 46 bright-eyed young booties in their summer whites radiating high hopes during a time of national crisis. None of the faces were Black or Brown, indicating the racial divide that existed in the military during World War II. Those minority sailors at the station were relegated to *mess* (kitchen) and yard-craft duties, with a smaller number assigned to a gunnery division. There was no separate boot training unit for those men. Towers’ photo was titled “Recently inducted recruits at NAS representing all states of the Union” and filed with other snapshots taken at the station. A copy eventually arrived at naval headquarters in the nation’s capital.

When Towers took his photograph, little did he or anyone else suspect that 11 of the men in the photo would one day appear on a postage stamp, an

honor customarily reserved for notable American men and women and historical events. That this could happen at all would seem unlikely since an 1866 federal statute stated that no living person or persons could be shown on a postage stamp at the time of issue. Towers’ photograph, along with others taken at the station, was published in the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* on October 25, 1942, commemorating Navy Day. Four months later, the image of the sailors had still wider circulation when it appeared on the cover of the February 1943 issue of the *Bureau of Naval Personnel Information Bulletin*.

The photographer, Robert Eino Towers, was born in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, on June 2, 1909, the son of Harold Towers, a steel worker who had immigrated to the United States from Canada, and Aini Wirtanen Towers from Finland. It was his mother who had given her son his Finnish middle name. By 1930, Harold and Aini, along with their second child, seven-year-old Douglas, were living in Cleveland, Ohio, where Harold worked as a machinist for a company manufacturing optical instruments. Their older son Robert, however, was beyond the reach of any census taker. After completing two years of college, he spent a year as a deckhand on American Export Line vessels sailing to Mediterranean and West African ports. Upon returning to the United States, he worked for the *Springfield Union* (Massachusetts), and in 1937, was hired as a photogra-

pher for the *Detroit Free Press*. While attached to the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station, Towers, who had much to learn about the latest methods of high-altitude aerial photography, continued to contribute pictures and photo-stories to the Michigan newspaper.

The public first became aware of the significance of what was happening in Corpus Christi from an article by Frank Morris that appeared in *Collier’s* magazine on June 7, 1941, titled “Zoom Town.” Along with four black-and-white photographs of cadets in training, it included a color picture of an N3N (“yellow peril”) training aircraft. Not wanting to be outdone by *Collier’s*, Towers produced his own photo-story for the *Free Press* with 22 photographs. The newspaper’s Sunday

Opposite page: The February 1943 issue of the *Bureau of Naval Personnel Information Bulletin* featured the Robert Towers photograph of Corpus Christi sailors, shown here in its entirety. Original in color. Photograph courtesy of United States Navy. **Above, left:** Navy sailors at the Corpus Christi Naval Air Training Center (CCNATC) check out a training plane. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. **Right:** U. S. Navy Pilot George Herbert Walker Bush, who later became the nation’s 41st president, trained at CCNATC. When his military service was complete, he had flown 58 missions and recorded more than 1,200 hours of flight time. Photograph courtesy of the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum.



TRAINING THE NATION'S FLIERS

Construction of the Corpus Christi Naval Air Training Center (CCNATC) began in June 1940 with Brown & Root as contractor and W. J. Bellows and Columbia Construction as subcontractors. When the site's dedication took place less than a year later on March 12, 1941, Main Station was already 70 percent completed. The first class of cadets received their wings and commissions only weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. With the ever-increasing numbers of trainees arriving, six auxiliary bases were added for specialized instruction: Rodd, Cabanas, Cuddihy, Kingsville, Waldron, and Chase Field in Beeville. A radar training station was established on Ward Island, located at the confluence of the Corpus Christi Bay and Oso Bay, under strict security measures. The "University of the Air" became the largest air training center in the world with trainees also coming from nations friendly to the United States.

Among the 35,000 men who received flight training at CCNATC during the war were George Herbert Walker Bush (at age 18), who would be elected the country's 41st president; John Glenn, later to become an astronaut; and a future radio and television game-show host, Bob Barker. Actors Tyrone Power and Charles "Buddy" Rogers also received flight training at the station. On April 21, 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt and Mexican President Manuel Avila Camacho met at CCNATC to discuss cooperation between the two countries. In 1945, a German prisoner-of-war compound was built, its 300 inmates used mainly for outdoor maintenance.

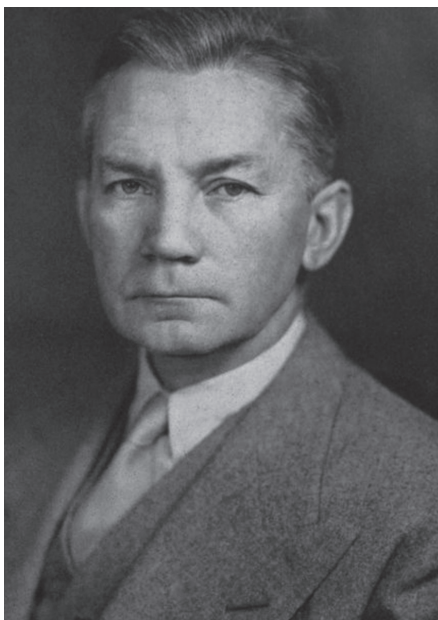
Now called Naval Air Station Corpus Christi (NAS-CC), the facility affected the local community from the beginning. As the population skyrocketed, four housing units were built for both naval and civilian personnel and their families, all still in use today. Many of those who arrived before and during the war remained in the Gulf Coast city, or returned, and contributed their talents to the community.

Above: A U. S. Navy pilot signs off before departure. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



graphic section of October 4, 1941, headlined "Michigan Men in the Navy," boasted that Photographer First Class Towers had produced "the first picture story of the world's largest naval air training station." *LIFE* magazine also highlighted the base in its April 19, 1943, issue with nine photographs, including three that were in color.

In spring 1945, the Post Office Department decided to issue stamps honoring each individual branch of military service. President Roosevelt had a personal interest in the project, and in particular, any stamp that would represent the U. S. Navy. Not only was Roosevelt a navy man—he had served as the branch's assistant secretary during World War I—but he was an avid *philatelist* (stamp collector) as well. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal noted in a letter to Postmaster Frank Walker that unlike the other branches of military service, no single group—"gunners, navigators, signalmen, aviators, submariners—typify the whole navy the way infantrymen typify the marines." When pictorial choices were brought to his attention, Forrestal was not completely satisfied until he found a photograph that he deemed appropriate—the one of the Corpus Christi sailors. Because of the size of the image, only a portion of the photograph could be used. Captain Edward Steichen of the Naval Aviation Photographic Unit approved the selection, which was then sent to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Because of the prohibition against living individuals appearing on a postage stamp, designer Victor McCloskey, Jr., was directed to alter the sailors' features in the master die so they would be unrecognizable, a procedure likely to damage the integrity of the photograph. Having this in mind, McCloskey kept his changes to a minimum.



On Navy Day, October 27, 1945, the blue 3-cent stamp was released at post offices throughout the United States with its first-day cover at Annapolis, Maryland, the site of the Naval Academy. No one was more surprised at seeing the stamp than the photographer himself. Towers had not been apprised of its selection, which—despite the alterations—he recognized immediately. On October 9, 1945, the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* published its file copy of the image alongside one of the stamps.

From the very beginning, hundreds of current and former sailors who had gone through boot camp claimed to be on the stamp, including many who had trained at places other than Corpus Christi. A sailor from Central Lake, Michigan, was credited in his local newspaper, even though he had enlisted in 1933—nine years before the actual photograph was taken. Not all claimants were bogus, though. Before the stamp's official release, the October 11 issue of the *Indianapolis Star* identified two of the sailors as Hoosiers Harry B. Perkins of Indianapolis and John C. Lemm of Lawrenceburg. By then, Perkins was on the West Coast as an aviation machinist mate second class. In a 1991 interview, he recalled his boot-camp training at Corpus Christi. Because of his Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) instruction at Arsenal Technical High School in Indianapolis, followed by two more years of ROTC at Purdue University, he had been selected as a leader. "I had to nurse-maid about 150 men and was

their Drill instructor. We had a fast and rather informal boot camp. The war was on, and the Navy needed men fast." On the stamp, Perkins is the first of the three sailors in the front, at left. He could identify eight other sailors, mostly by their last names only—Littere, Pate, Christian, Shepardson, Fiscus, Brenneman, Knipple, and Corbin (Joseph)—but had no recollection of fellow Hoosier Lemm.

As for the man responsible for the photo, by 1943 Bob Towers was no longer a photographer first-class petty officer. Determined to see action before the war ended, he applied for and received a commission as a naval ensign, and as a lieutenant junior grade (jg), he served on the escort aircraft carrier USS *Altamaha* (CVE-18)* beginning in June 1944. That December, the vessel was struck by a typhoon in the Philippine Sea, during which almost half of the planes on board were lost.

After Towers' discharge, he returned to Detroit, but found still further adventures outside the United States. His photographs of an avalanche rescue in the Swiss Alps appeared in the "This Week Magazine" section of the *Spokesman Review* on April 19, 1948.

Weary of Michigan's harsh winters, Towers and his wife Jeannette relocated to Sierra Vista, Arizona, where throughout the 1950s, he made a living as a freelance photographer, his works appearing in the *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix), *Collier's*, *Business Week*, *Arizona Highways*, and the *New York Times*.

What did Towers think of the postage stamp based on his 1942 photograph? Fifty years later, when a letter from an irate navy veteran appeared in the *Arizona Republic* complaining there was no postage stamp honoring sailors, Towers was quick to respond. "The U. S. Postal Service did indeed issue a stamp honoring U. S. sailors during World War II. Not only 'tin-can' (destroyers, escorts, etc.) sailors, but airmen, submariners, Seabees and UDTs [underwater demolition team]—all sailors who served a common cause." He did not mention that he had taken the photo used on the stamp. Bob Towers died at age 93 in Phoenix on June 11, 2002, and was buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of America in that city.

The 1945 sailors' stamp was not the first incident that stretched the 1866

Opposite page, right: Ensign Bob Towers, USN, was called to duty in 1941 and served in the U. S. Navy in Corpus Christi, but his photography career took him across the country. Towers did not know the picture he took in 1942 as a navy photographer was being used on a stamp until its release by the post office three years later. Photograph from the *Detroit Free Press*. **This page, left:** Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal served the country during World War II. The USS *Forrestal* was named in his honor in 1954. Photograph in the public domain.

rule. There were at least five others, one as early as 1898. In 1945, a stamp honoring the United States Marines pictured the second flag raising at Iwo Jima base when three of the six men were still living. But the rule essentially ended in 1952 when four women from four different armed services appeared on a stamp honoring the contribution of females during World War II (their faces had not been altered). When interviewed in 1968, one of the women, Elizabeth Bradford Berry, who had been in the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), remarked: "There's no law prohibiting or even limiting use of living persons as subjects for postage stamps, but custom has dictated against it." Of course, this statement was not accurate, but the 1866 rule had, in effect, become a dead issue. ★

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* During World War II, every ship had a hull designation with a number. CVE stood for "escort aircraft carrier." The USS *Altamaha* was given the number 18. This type of vessel also was referred to as "jeep carrier" and "baby flattop."

Editor's Note: Corpus Christi has been designated by the Department of the Interior as an American World War II Heritage City. Each state was allowed one selection, and Corpus Christi received that honor in the Lone Star State, in part because of the number of aviators and crew members who trained at the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station and served in the conflict.