

The Gulfstream Pirate

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MIAMI - In the heyday of bootlegging, a colorful character known as the Gulfstream Pirate, met his untimely end at the hands of the federal government, the only man hanged at a U.S. Coast Guard hangar.



MIAMI - Horace Alderman, otherwise known as "The Gulfstream Pirate", was the only man hanged by the Coast Guard during Prohibition. Image courtesy of USCG Historian's office.

Horace Alderman made his living as a fishing guide, amassing a rap sheet for petty larceny and migrant smuggling, before turning to illegal rum running in the feisty days of Prohibition.

With its heady tropical allure, Florida depended upon alcohol to fuel the dreams of those touring the Sunshine State. Tales were circulated of smugglers speeding to the Bahamas in fast boats powered by converted W. W. I. aircraft engines. According to news reports, liquor was in high demand, despite restrictive laws. In 1922, a reported 10 million quarts of alcohol were sold out of Nassau, in the Bahamas. Newspaper clippings from the era read like a vintage thriller, with tales of high profile smuggling cases stretching into the most senior ranks of law enforcement, South Florida politics and even the Judiciary system.

Illicit activity could be traced to the 1920 passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment banning, "the manufacture, sale and transport of alcoholic beverages". As America grew increasingly violent, so too did its thirst for contraband liquor. During this era, the Coast Guard fell

under the Department of the Treasury with anti-smuggling operations as one of its missions. Congress had also changed the territorial limit to 12 miles, making the Bahamas and Cuba ideal locations for Florida bootleggers. Only 50 miles from Miami, the northeastern tip of the Bahamas offered smugglers an easy port in which, to fill their boats with contraband. Most trips went without incident and to family; Alderman remained a "nice guy".

But on Aug. 7, 1927, he and crewman Robert Weech were intercepted by Coast Guard Patrol Boat 249, on special duty while transporting Secret Service agent Robert K. Webster to Bimini, for a counterfeiting investigation associated with smuggling. After a lengthy altercation, Alderman, himself bleeding and semiconscious, had killed three of the five crewmembers, injuring others onboard. Convicted in January, 1928 for the brutal murders of Boatswain Sidney C. Sanderlin, Machinist's Mate 1st class, Victor A. Lamby, and Agent Webster, Alderman was sentenced to death. In the only hanging ever carried out by the Coast Guard, a hangar at Base Six in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., was the unlikely site of Alderman's Aug. 17, 1929 dawn demise. Descriptions of his ruthlessness near the

Ft. Lauderdale seabuoy filled the papers, dubbing Alderman the “Gulfstream Pirate” and likening him to bloodthirsty swashbucklers of bygone times. Yet the hanging occurred as public support for Prohibition had reached an all-time low, and even as South Florida county law enforcement officials were carted off and incarcerated for their own roles in smuggling operations. Alderman’s may have been the only legal execution in Broward County, and was designed to stem the tide of smuggling. In court, he testified the Coast Guard crew was dressed in dungarees and did not immediately identify themselves as government agents. Saying he mistook them for rival smugglers, he claimed he planned to turn the suspected rival smugglers over to the authorities, as he recounted a ruthless tale of murder at sea, with one crewmember wounded by a bullet in his eye; another in his spine:

"Lamby made a grab for one of the guns and when he did, I grabbed at the same time. I got a gun and shot him in the breast. When I shot him, I jumped back. That put me just outside the door of the pilothouse. Sanderlin whirled to grab a gun and I shot him in the back. I whirled right around outside the door and put the gun on the rest of the Coast Guard -- the rest of the boys that were on the deck of the Coast Guard boat. If I had not shot Lamby when I did, he would have shot me. I was going to bring them to Miami, turn them over to the authorities -- the sheriff or the city police department. I was going to throw the liquor overboard before I got in. I was going to give myself up."

Despite his claims, the Supreme Court declined to hear the case, Pres. Coolidge declined to commute the death sentence or stay the execution and on Aug. 15, 1929, Alderman's death warrant was signed. Judge Ritter moved the execution to the closest federal facility, which was Coast Guard Base Six. Following his hanging, Base Six received more personnel, ships and seaplanes to help prosecute the war on smuggling, and Alderman was placed in what allegedly remains an unmarked grave.

A Fading Memory

Yet rumors of Alderman’s heists still circulate. Ola Dragon was barely five-years-old when “Uncle Horace” was hanged. He lived with his wife Pearl – the sister of her father’s first wife, and their three daughters; Bessie, Ruby and Wilma, in what his niece recalls as a, “nice, large home”. While documents from the National Archives in Washington, D.C., describe Alderman's life as a rum runner and petty thief, Ola Dragon, 83, recalls very little talk of the case, though she said “rum running may have been discussed”. While details have been lost in the fog of time, the memory of that August dawn has stayed with her, as her family visited their Miami cousins on that fateful day.

“Ruby, one of his daughters, had a head of really beautiful, red hair.” she said. “I remember she walked out the front door at dawn, with a Bible in her hand, and looked up at the sky,” said Ola Dragon, who also recalls bits and pieces of the funeral which, according to news reports at the time, lasted four hours. She proffered a historical perspective on alcohol.

“I grew up on Marco Island,’ she said, “and lots of people had stills ...you could see them sticking out of the swamp - that’s just what folks did,” said Ola Dragon, whose family has been in Florida since the 1700s.

For years, the memory of her uncle, Horace Alderman, lay dormant, tucked in the back of her mind. In 1974, her son Barry joined the Coast Guard and was serving as an E-6, special agent prosecuting the illegal smuggling of marijuana in Fla. when he first heard the tale.

“It was kind of ironic and amusing at the same time,” said Barry Dragon, a retired Coast Guard Commander, who served 25 years.

As his career progressed, he worked in Operations and Law Enforcement in the Seventh Coast Guard District. In a strange twist of fate, the wife of his commanding officer turned out to be the daughter of the man who had hanged his uncle. While being related to a rumrunner is mildly amusing for a man who dedicated his career to law enforcement, he also helped ensure the sacrifice made by Sanderlin and Lamby were recognized. In 1994, as the Officer-in-Charge of the Seventh District TACLET, with the help of documents received from the National Archives and a crew that diligently recorded the facts, he drafted a request to have their names engraved on the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial, in Washington, D.C.

“This is a serious story, but I still like to tease my mother about her relatives,” he said.

In a story laced with unusual turns, other papers from the Archives describe involvement of Coast Guard personnel in smuggled liquor, illustrating the spectacular failure of Prohibition. In telegram 9916-1320 to the Commandant, R.L. Jack, Commanding Officer of Coast Guard Base Six, details the smuggling. Dated Jan. 17, 1929, it says, “...liquor was found concealed in every compartment on (the ship), chains had been routed out, cases stored under them ...the radio cabinet was stocked full, there was liquor in the lazarette, in the cabin, in the galley, and in the engine rooms, the floor boards in the crew’s compartment had been lifted and the liquor was stored in the turn of the bilges.

“It’s an unusual story,” said. Dragon, civilian Chief of the Seventh Coast Guard District’s Bridge Branch. "But in the end, justice was served”.

That makes it a cautionary tale for smugglers.

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