

THE FUTURE OF COAST GUARD AVIATION

BY

CAPTAIN WILLIAM J. KOSSLER, USCG

At the outbreak, let me say, that these opinions are my own. They have been formed over a long period of time as a result of close contact with the problems of Coast Guard Aviation. They are in no sense propaganda. It is apparent to me that this is the way the cards are stacked and that those who are wise will be governed accordingly.

Let's face the facts of the past, honestly:

Aviation in the Coast Guard never had but lukewarm support of the higher administrative officers. The reason for that fundamentally can be attributed to the fact that it was not really believed that the work performed justified the expense or effort. Those who entered the aviation did so, if they were worth their salt, because they wanted to fly – period. Shortly, those who were honest with themselves, realized they weren't doing anything important. Others, more capable of deluding themselves, however, fooled no one capable of judgement. The result was that Coast Guard Aviators got the reputation of being strutters who had soft jobs and got pay and a half. The Aviators felt, on the other hand, that they were kicked around and had to get along on a shoestring. Net result was general ill feeling.

The came the war. The Commandant had supported Coast Guard Aviation to a certain extent mostly on the presumption that our aviators would provide valuable trained personnel in case of national emergency. He had been sold that idea. Actually, that was a fiction because our aviators had never been trained for combat duties and didn't fit into the Navy picture. Result, we were practically ignored. The situation was further aggravated by the fact that Naval aviation personnel expanded, and due to our shortsighted policy of attempting to keep up with the Jones', we grabbed far higher rank too – with no place to put them or justify it. We then attempted to justify our rank by playing up our really not very important activities by public ballyhoo – which made the situation worse.

Which brings us to the mess we have on our hands today.

I have been at Headquarters nearly four years and have watched this situation develop. I considered it hopeless except for the rising tide of rotary wing development. The only reason I consented to remain was the faith I had that the rotary wing development would open new fields for the Coast Guard and that it would ultimately provide real jobs and solve, to a great extent, our problems. I reluctantly came to the conclusion that Coast Guard Aviation would play no important role in the war and I fully realized that it

was a very long chance that the helicopter could be developed sufficiently to make any real contribution. However, it was a chance worth taking as we had nothing to lose and I had no doubt whatever of its importance to us after the war. I, therefore, went after it all out and got the Commandant's full backing.

We are now well established. The Navy is really backing us, and I am convinced, are anxious that we make a success of it. We will continue to get this backing so long as we play them on top of the table and do not fall into the error of seeking unjustified publicity on our own for whatever we do.

I do not know in exactly what way or to what extent helicopters will be used in the war. I firmly believe, however, that if the war continues another two years, helicopters will be employed and may make a real contribution. Regardless of that, we are committed, and this is important, we have for the first time the active interest and support of the high administrative officers of the Coast Guard. And remember this, these officers are concerned a great deal with the post war picture and preserving the identity of the Coast Guard.

There may well be room for a considerable number of Lieutenant Commanders in the developing helicopter program, and it should fit in and perhaps be a mainstay of the air sea rescue setup. I am most certainly not opposed to the air sea rescue idea but it should be kept in mind that it is primarily war born and will to a great extent die with the conclusion of the war. On the other hand, there are all sorts of peacetime jobs of the Coast Guard waiting for the development of a serviceable helicopter.

As you know, the Bureau of Aeronautics opposed the helicopter in the beginning. Their attitude has greatly changed. Six months or so ago I proposed a 900H.P. twin rotor machine of 3000 lbs. useful load and 600 mile range. They practically laughed at me. Today, they are about to a contract to a responsible and recognized aeronautical engineering firm for an experimental machine of this exact size.

I now believe that Coast Guard Aviation has a real future. Several years ago, I was almost ready to quit. I do not say there will be no applications for conventional planes, but I do believe conventional planes will be fluff on the pie. The Bureau of Aeronautics has indicated their willingness to give us complete maintenance of helicopters and to even build the necessary additional shops and furnish the equipment at our Air Stations as may be needed. Our present Air Stations will, I believe, all become ultimately main maintenance bases. It is obvious that there will be ample administrative jobs for aviators who at least engineering minded.

Here is one final thought, I believe we should fight to the last ditch the idea that aviators should be well-rounded officers and periodically sent to sea. I think we should stand on the fact that navigation of the air is as much or more a specialty as going to sea that it doesn't make any more sense rounding out an aviator by sending him back

to sea in no aviation connection, than the idea to send seamen into the air to round them out. Furthermore, in the future, young aviators will undoubtedly get to sea, if there is any seagoing in the Coast Guard for every Coast Guard Cutter will carry helicopters. As to the older aviators, what's done is done. Jealousy and prejudice should not govern and will not if we stand up and fight. Finally, I believe, in the future, Coast Guard Aviation will be of such stature, that we should have our own promotion system so we can tailor the stripes to fit the jobs whether that means faster or slower promotion than the seagoing branch. If it happens to be slower, those who don't like it can get out. You can't eat your cake and have it too. And that thought applies very forcibly to the present situation. You can't expect to get out and collect ribbons now and at the same time be assured that a place will be reserved for you at the Coast Guard Aviation table later.

In conclusion I want to touch on some personal angles. I have noted a growing feeling that some senior aviators feel that they are being frozen out of the helicopter program and that it is going to be dominated by Erickson and me. This feeling perhaps has been fostered by slighting remarks made by Erickson regarding the relative importance of fixed and rotary wing in the Coast Guard and the fact that to date not many older aviators have been given training.

There is no such intention. I believe the program will become big enough to provide opportunity for all who are really interested. So far as I am concerned, that is the only criterion. At the present time we are building a training organization. It is not desirable to load that up with excess rank. When it becomes justifiable, older aviators, even senior aviators to Erickson will be desired.

It is only human for Erickson to turn the tables a bit. He was subjected to considerable scathing and sarcastic remarks in the beginning. He is enthusiastic, perhaps overly so – but that is a good fault and is a necessity in a pioneer. If he should become a dog in a manger or go prima donna, which I am certain he will not, he will only harm himself.

I have turned the administration of the whole project into regular channels and I will not interfere so long as it is run on the up and up and is not jeopardized by personal prejudices. Paradoxically, I had a difficult time convincing both the Engineer-in-Chief and the Commandant to do this. If I had any idea of building a personal kingdom, I would have held on to the dictatorial power I had as long as possible. My motives however, were not entirely unselfish. I firmly believe that the future of all of us depends upon our ability to form a sound and strong organization divorced from personal jealousies and cut-throating.

In the past, the Coast Guard Aeronautical organization, in addition to its other troubles, has been plagued with this disease of internal dissension and personal grasping for power and glory. We still have some of it and in the nature of things, it cannot entirely be eliminated. We have got to put our house in order in this regard, and I assure you,

I will do my utmost, so long as I remain active in aviation in whatever capacity, to crack down on anyone who begins to show evidence of delusions of grandeur.

W. J. Kossler

EDITORS COMMENTS:

Captain William J. Kossler was a man of vision and a man of great integrity. He served the cause of the Coast Guard and Coast Guard Aviation by his vision with the development of the helicopter as a major tool of the future in Coast Guard missions. During his tenure, the Helicopter Flight School was brought on line with Captain (then CDR) Frank Erickson leading. The first helo ASW tests were flown from shore and aboard ship in the Atlantic during wartime convoy by CDR (then LT) Stew Graham. His efforts in cooperation with the United States Navy speeded the development of the helicopter both in capability and mission acceptance. I have attached a summary copy of a page from his service record, the awards of the Distinguished Service Medal (Posthumously), the US Navy Commendation Medal (Posthumously) and added photos to follow. He served by his integrity up to the end of his life in March 1945 and the above article by Captain Kossler reflects his beliefs and positions. Captain Kossler was inducted into the Coast Guard Aviation Hall of Fame as one of the first members.

G. E. Brown, Jr., CDR, USCG (Ret)
Web Master USCG Aviation History Web Site
<http://uscgaviationhistory.aoptero.org>



Captain Kossler pictured when
a junior officer



Captain Kossler pictured when
in CG Headquarters



Captain Kossler's son, William, age 9, along with his mother
accept the USN Commendation Ribbon awarded to Captain Kossler
posthumously for his work on helicopter development

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in commending

Captain WILLIAM J. KOSSLER
UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

"For outstanding performance of duty as Chief of the Aeronautical Engineering Division and as Special Representative of the Engineer-in-Chief, United States Coast Guard, in connection with helicopter developments for service use since May 24, 1940. Because of his broad vision and his confidence in the principle of rotary wing aircraft, Captain Kossler recommended its adaptation for military and Coast Guard rescue use and was instrumental in establishing an effective training program in the Coast Guard Air Station in Brooklyn, New York. Subsequently important rescue was performed, proving his theory of the adaptability and ultimate usefulness of the helicopter. By his resourcefulness in connection with this project, Captain Kossler was greatly responsible for the progress accomplished and rendered valuable service in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

A copy of this citation has been made a part of Captain Kossler's official record, and he is authorised hereby to wear the Commendation Ribbon.

**CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF
THE COAST GUARD DISTINGUISHED SERVICE MEDAL**

TO

**Captain WILLIAM J. KOSSLER
UNITED STATES COAST GUARD**

Captain KOSSLER is cited for exceptionally meritorious service to the Government of the United States in a position of great responsibility as the Chief of the Aeronautical Engineering Division and as Special Representative of the Engineer-in-Chief, United States Coast Guard from May, 1940 until March, 1945. Captain KOSSLER demonstrated exceptional vision, extraordinary insight, and inspired leadership in advocating the adoption and development of rotary wing aircraft by the Coast Guard and Navy in both rescue and military roles. Captain KOSSLER actively championed the helicopter, a new and untried invention, as the preeminent search and rescue tool of the Coast Guard successfully. He was also instrumental in establishing an effective helicopter pilot training program at Coast Guard Air Station, Brooklyn, New York, for all of the U.S. and United Kingdom's military services. Captain KOSSLER himself underwent the training program and qualified as Coast Guard Helicopter Pilot number 25. Undoubtedly the shape and character of the Coast Guard's aviation program of today is in no small measure due to the tireless efforts of Captain KOSSLER. Captain KOSSLER's leadership, dedication, and devotion to duty are most heartily commended and are in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Coast Guard.

