



***THE FINEST HOURS* – Michael J. Tougias & Casey Sherman**
Discussion Guide

1. Authors Tougias & Sherman begin *The Finest Hours* with a quote from *A Trip Around Cape Cod* (1898) by the author, a self-titled “Cape Cod Boy”, Ezra G. Perry: “The sea is master here – a tyrant, even – and no people better than ours, who have gone down to the sea in ships so often in so many generations, understand the subtle saying...’*We conquer nature only as we obey her.*”

The ending quote is a slight mis-quote on Perry’s part. The original quote is from Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626), and reads: “Nature cannot be conquered but by obeying her.”

Can nature be conquered by those that obey her? Did Bernie Webber and crew conquer nature the night of February 18, 1952 in their 36-foot motor lifeboat, the 36500 when they succeeded in their rescue mission?

2. The *Instructions for United States Coast Guard Stations* (1934), repeated, verbatim, the 1899 U.S. Lifesaving Service orders which instructed the USLSS Keeper (later the USCG station commander) “not [to] desist from his [rescue] efforts until by actual trial the impossibility of effecting a rescue is demonstrated. The statement of the keeper that he did not try to use the boat because the sea or surf was too heavy will not be accepted unless attempts to launch it were actually made and failed...” This directive evolved into the commonly quoted directive of the USCG today: “You have to go out, but you don’t have to come back.”

What do you think would motivate a man to join the U.S. Lifesaving Service, later the U.S. Coast Guard Service, when this directive, and the regulation that fostered it, are the underpinnings of one of the most dangerous “first responder” services?

As depicted by the authors Tougias & Sherman, did you come to know and understand Bernie Webber’s motives for joining the USCG?

3. “The Cape” has held a fascination for Europeans since 1602, when English mariner Bartholomew Gosnold named the 65-mile long peninsula “Cape Cod”, in recognition of the abundance of the fisheries. Countless books have been written, from Henry David Thoreau’s 1865 book *Cape Cod*, which begins with a shipwreck on Boston’s South Shore, as Thoreau is heading to the Cape, to Henry Beston’s *The Outermost House* (1928)– chronicling the year Beston lived on the Cape’s dunes, to Eleanor Early’s *And This is Cape Cod!* (1936), an amusing travel writer’s view of the “quaint” Cape Cod towns, to the sweeping, historical novel *Cape Cod* by William Martin (1991).

How does the story told in *The Finest Hours* fit into this centuries-old, on-going narrative of Cape Cod and its inhabitants?

4. “The Graveyard of the Atlantic” is the nickname commonly assigned to two areas of the U.S. East Coast – Cape Hatteras, NC and the region from Sable Island, Nova Scotia to Cape Cod, MA. The first European wreck off Cape Cod was the *Sparrowhawk* in 1626. Thousands of vessels have wrecked in the intervening 400 years and the National Park Service states that between Truro and Wellfleet alone, over 1,000 wrecks are known.

Despite the USCG directive (quoted above), does the order of Chatham Station commander Warrant Boatswain Daniel Cluff to send out the 36-foot motor lifeboats seem reasonable, given the weather conditions on the night of February 18, 1952?

5. If you had been a member of the USCG Chatham Station that night, would you have gone if ordered?

If you had not been a member of the USCG Chatham Station, but were on the scene, would you have volunteered to be in Bernie Webber’s boat, as Ervin Maska did on Feb. 18th?

6. “...the real heroes were the guys who didn’t come back.” (Tougias & Sherman)
Were you surprised to read of the adulation that Bernie Webber and his crew received?

What did you think of the U.S. Coast Guard “public relations machine”, using Webber and the others as described in *The Finest Hours*? Do you think this promotion by the USCG was important, necessary, and/or served an honorable purpose at the time? Recall that the United States was in the middle of the Korean War and efforts to conclude the conflict were still unsuccessful. Was a remarkable, stunning at-sea rescue the “feel-good” story that America needed at that time?

Do you agree with Bernie Webber who thought that the USCG crew that rescued the *SS Mercer* crew should have also shared the PR limelight?

Can you think of similar “heroes” promoted through “public relations machines” today?

7. If you also watched the Disney Studios movie, “The Finest Hours”, in addition to reading the book, did the cinematic version enhance your understanding of the shipwreck and the rescue of the crew of the *SS Pendleton*?
8. The sub-title to Tougias’ & Sherman’s book is: “The True Story of the U.S. Coast Guard’s Most Daring Sea Rescue.”

Theresa Mitchell Barbo, John Galluzzo and Capt. W. Russell Webster, USCG (Ret.) authored *The Pendleton Disaster Off Cape Cod* (2007). The sub-title to the Barbo book is: “The Greatest Small Boat Rescue in Coast Guard History.”

Which sub-title is more accurate to the narrative of the rescue? Why?