

Capt. John Shepherd marked St. Patrick's Day, 1998 with a bottle of red wine instead of green beer. That's because the retired Navy aviator and BOAT/U.S. member had a serious celebration in mind. He wanted to mark the happy end of a three-year campaign to replace a day beacon with a lighted marker.

The conversion of Red No. 4 on the lower Patuxent River to "Cuckold Creek Light 4" took the U.S. Coast Guard all of 54 minutes to accomplish with its construction tender, *Sledge*. But convincing the Coast Guard to change No. 4 to a lighted aid in the first place took Shepherd nearly three years, including 27 letters and 103 phone calls as well as uncounted face-to-face meetings with local boaters. As a result, the approach to what Chesapeake cruising guides call "one of the prettiest anchorages on the Bay" is a lot safer.

"This is a popular area with local boaters and cruisers alike," said Capt. John Bailey of TowBOAT/U.S. Solomons. "You can see boats at anchor there most summer weekends with hailing ports from up and down the East Coast."

Bailey, whose towing operation in nearby Solomons Island covers the Patuxent River and mid-Chesapeake Bay, says the main channel into Cuckold Creek can be deceptive.

"The entrance has 15 or 16 feet of water but shoals extend quite far out off Half Pone Point which is the landfall for the creek," Bailey reports.

A red day beacon has marked the entrance for decades, but boating has increased dramatically in the area, and in December 1995 Shepherd asked the Coast Guard to leave a light on for nighttime boaters.

But the Coast Guard disagreed. After reviewing the situation in the spring of 1996, the District Five Waterways Management Section said it could not justify upgrading Red 4 to a lighted aid.

According to John Walters, who heads the section, it wasn't just a matter of hanging a blinking light on Red 4. It meant sending a construction crew to pull the old piling, drive a new, larger one and equip it with the appropriate sized light, lens, batteries and solar panel. That's tough to justify in the face of Coast Guard

TURNING THE LIGHT ON AT RED 4



The crew of the Coast Guard construction tender *Sledge* stand by as Capt. Shepherd christens the new light at Cuckold Creek.

budget cuts, he says.

But Shepherd maintains that this was clearly a safety issue. Inside the point, he notes, there are three major creeks with waterfront homes, two marinas, two public launching ramps and a yacht club, creating a real navigation challenge at night.

"With no light on Red 4, the boater had absolutely no usable aid to navigation to rely on at night coming into the creek or heading out to the river," Shepherd says.

Four miles down river, a lighted day beacon has marked the approach to Town Creek for years. But that creek has far less recreational and commercial traffic. Shepherd pointed that out to the Coast Guard when he appealed the decision last September.

"If you can justify the Town Creek beacon, you have a ten-fold justification for lighting Red 4," Shepherd wrote in his formal, three-page appeal letter.

But beyond presenting a carefully documented case — he is an admiralty

attorney, too — Shepherd also enlisted neighbors, fellow boaters and commercial watermen.

"I was overwhelmed by the enthusiastic response from everyone I talked to, except one gentleman," Shepherd reports. "He was an experienced boater who didn't think we needed it and that's the trouble with an issue like this.

"We shouldn't be judging the situation through the eyes of the old timers who are very familiar with the area," Shepherd says. "We should be looking at it from the viewpoint of newcomers, whether they are transient boaters new to the area or people who are just new to boating."

His campaign brought in about 30 letters that led the Coast Guard to reconsider its decision.

"The additional information from boaters helped us to substantiate the need," reports Walters. "We have to consider the amount of traffic as well as the type of use in a waterway and we weigh that against the cost of the project."

Walters says political pressure did not figure in the decision. But it certainly couldn't have hurt. Shepherd got the local county board of commissioners to weigh in on the matter, not just with supporting rhetoric, but with facts. In a letter to the Coast Guard, the commissioners documented a 35% population increase since 1980 and a 53% jump in boat registrations in the county between 1992 and 1996.

Shepherd also brought the situation to the attention of Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD) who represents southern Maryland. Hoyer joined the chorus calling for the change and it was finally approved last December.

"This wasn't just a matter of us changing our minds or Capt. Shepherd's tenacity," Walters told *BOAT/U.S. Magazine*. "Shepherd was able to bring us new information that helped to substantiate the need for a light on Red 4. That's what made the difference." ■

—By Ryck Lydecker



Capt. John Shepherd (right) celebrates the conversion of "Red 4" to a lighted aid with Capt. John Bailey of TowBOAT/U.S. Solomons.