

The legacy lives on . . .



(April 24, 1923 - December 14, 1989)

RADM "Mike" Benkert was larger than life

By LTJG Pamela Zearfoss

When Admiral J. William Kime became commandant of the Coast Guard on May 30, 1990, he began his acceptance speech by recognizing the honored guests. The first was RADM William "Mike" Benkert, who was truly there in spirit.

Larger than life

When people recall Mike Benkert, they do so with a smile. He was larger than life...respected and admired by all who worked with him. Indeed, his enthusiasm, stamina and love of life was contagious.

He led the Coast Guard to heights they never could have reached without him. In fact, Mike Benkert is considered by many to be the father of the Coast Guard's marine safety and environmental protection mission.

RADM A. E. "Gene" Henn, today's chief of the Office of Marine Safety, Security and Environmental Protection and tomorrow's vice commandant, calls Mike Benkert "the yardstick by which we all try to measure ourselves, recognizing that we'll never reach his stature."

Public servant

Mike Benkert always maintained an excellent working relationship with industry. For example, when he was commanding officer of the marine inspection office at San Diego (1959-1962), he began to implement the small passenger vessel (subchapter T) regulations, which cover a wide variety of vessels from inland and ocean charter boats to large excursion vessels and ferries. Many complicated issues were involved, including the enforcement of stricter licensing and vessel inspection standards.

Mike Benkert committed himself and his crew to many nights of hard work to arrive at policies that were both fair to industry and uncompromising on safety. Small passenger vessel inspections were conducted at night so as not to interfere with normal daytime business hours.

His high regard for and partnership with industry foreshadowed the Coast Guard's total quality management (TQM) practices. As the first major overhaul of small passenger vessel regulations begins and new legislation requiring the inspection of a large number of previously uninspected charter boats is carried out, the Coast Guard will strive to follow Mike Benkert's lead.

Taskmaster

In the late 1960s, when he was the officer in charge of marine inspection in New York, new legislation on fire safety standards came into effect, forcing a number of famous passenger ships, including the *Queen Mary*, out of service due to the fact that for the first time, tough new fire safety requirements applied to existing passenger vessels. Mike Benkert held many meetings with representatives of industry to resolve sensitive issues while implementing the legislation in the United States.

He carried out the new fire safety standards rapidly by forming inspection teams and giving vessel owners ample time to make changes dictated by the standards. When owners would not comply in a timely manner, Mike Benkert was heard to say, "You've been goofing off long enough and, by God, you are going to do it." He was willing to help those who made an effort, but could be hard nosed when he felt there was foot dragging.



The international passenger vessel industry is again going through major changes following through on the 1992 fire safety amendments to the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) convention. And again, the Coast Guard continues to follow Mike Benkert's lead both when it is time to be tough and when it is appropriate to compromise.

While overseeing marine inspection in New York, Mike Benkert conducted a special industry day on Governors Island, during which he fielded many complaints about Coast Guard inspectors and their competency. He responded with flair and without apology. He even got one critic to admit that he knew Mike Benkert's personal phone number by heart, adroitly diffusing the situation with laughter.

Mount Benkert

The admiral particularly relished the sea duty he served early in his career. He enjoyed having a concrete mission to perform, knowing he could get it done with a loyal crew behind him.

His last vessel command was on the *Eastwind* in the middle 1960s. The first charting of the Antarctic was begun during his command of the polar icebreaker. He became so familiar with the contours of the region that, years later, when questioned about a recent ship grounding there, he drew a "chart" of the area from memory on the back of a McDonald's napkin.

A mountain in Antarctica was named in his honor, "Mount Benkert," because of his work in the area. The marine safety office in Boston, where the *Eastwind* was homeported, is also dedicated to him.

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Big brother

Because of his wisdom, patience and thoughtfulness, Mike Benkert was often rec-

ognized as a big brother or a favorite uncle. He once described his personality as "volatile," yet he always directed his energy and criticism towards work not individuals. He once grabbed a file of papers requiring his signature out of the arms of an officer and threw it against a bulkhead. Two hours later, he had signed it all, called the officer back and acted very graciously.

It was widely known that his interest in his peers and subordinates was personal as well as professional, and he formed friendships that outlasted business relationships.

He liked to get right at the heart of a problem by contacting the people involved. He was extremely meticulous about his work and that of others. It was universally agreed that he could spot a typo at 50 feet.

Mike Benkert absorbed concepts and details of complicated subjects, recalling the essentials long after other people had forgotten the topics. Once en route to London, he was given a draft of a comprehensive environmental impact statement to review on the plane. As soon as he arrived, he express mailed it back to Washington "with the blood of red ink all over it." He was a voracious reader.

Rear admiral

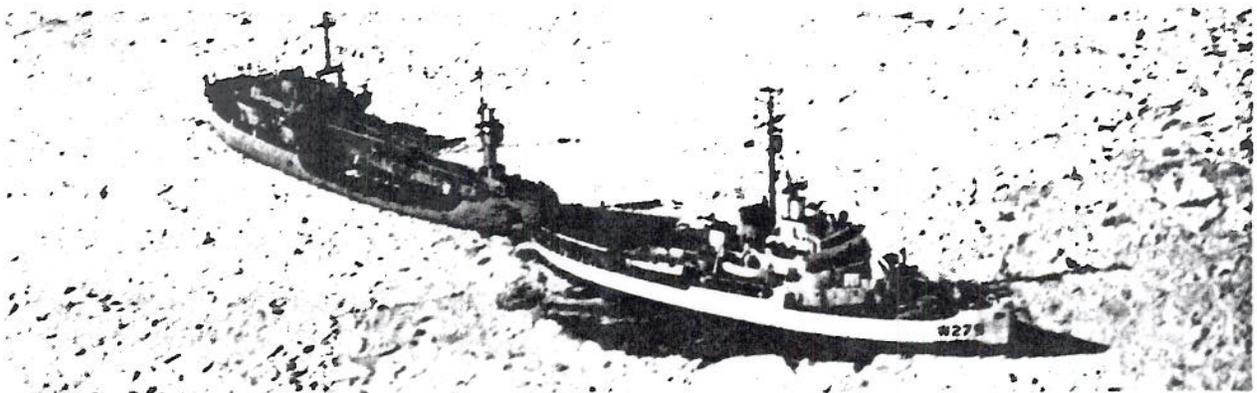
When he was appointed rear admiral in 1971, Mike Benkert was designated chief of the newly created Office of Marine Environment and Systems. This office was formed by then commandant, Admiral Chester R. Bender, to carry out the mandate of the Council on Environmental Quality for the Coast Guard to be the principal agency responsible for coping with oil pollution. In this capacity, Benkert oversaw maritime law enforcement, port safety, maritime pollution control and aids to navigation. The establishment of this office began a new era of protecting the environment from people, instead of safeguarding people from the environment. His ideals foreshadowed the environmental protection philosophy embodied by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA 90).

Achievements

RADM Benkert was awarded the Legion of Merit in 1973 for the contributions he made as chief of the Office of Marine Environment and Systems. Under his guidance, the Coast Guard assumed responsibility for programs under the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, and the Ports and Waterways Safety Act which led to the installation of vessel traffic systems in major United States ports.

He also led a national task force in developing a policy for consideration at an International Maritime Organization (IMO) Conference on Pollution of the Sea by Ships. This policy was carried over in the 1973 International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL). This policy serves as the basis for Coast Guard enforcement and control of pollution from all vessels entering United States ports.

Mike Benkert's last vessel command was on the Eastwind, shown breaking the ice in the Antarctic.



IMO delegate

Appointed chief of the Office of Merchant Marine Safety in 1974, Mike Benkert represented the United States as a delegate to the IMO, and helped develop the 1974 SOLAS Convention, the 1977 International Convention for the Safety of Fishing Vessels, and the 1978 Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers.

As alternate head of the delegation to the Tanker Safety Pollution Prevention Conference in London, he directed all technical negotiations and paved the way for congressional passage of the Port and Tanker Safety Act of 1978. Mike Benkert continued to advocate the safety standards set forth in this act, ensuring that they were implemented worldwide through the IMO. The Coast Guard continues this advocacy, seeking international acceptance and solutions to the congressional mandates of OPA 90.

Stamina!

Mike Benkert met international and domestic challenges, and successfully raised international safety standards due to stamina! He was convinced that stamina (always with an exclamation point!) was the secret of his success. This stamina(!) was demonstrated by his 44 visits to Capital Hill during a two-year period, long days of negotiating terms of complex treaties at IMO in London, and tackling diplomatic conferences four months apart while still completing work at home.

In 1978, Mike Benkert was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for his work on IMO committees and his success in meeting maritime pollution prevention objectives.

Grass roots interest

Notwithstanding his imposing presence on the international scene, Mike Benkert still retained his appreciation for grass roots problems. While chief of the merchant marine safety office, he agreed to see an unlicensed merchant seaman who wished to discuss the suspension of his document with someone in authority. Following the meeting, the seaman told an officer in the elevator that he really felt good about the meeting and that someone (an admiral no less) had really listened to his problem.

Mike Benkert could communicate eloquently with audiences and individuals. He had an amazing warm way with people and really cared.

"He had an amazing warm way with people and really cared."



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Safety after retirement

Mike Benkert retired from the Coast Guard in 1978, and went on to serve as president of the American Institute of Merchant Shipping. He continued focusing on marine safety and pollution prevention as the key spokesman for the organization, which represented 30 companies that owned and operated more than 200 United States-flag tank, bulk, chemical and liquefied gas carriers.

He also served as the United States flag industry representative on the executive committee of the International Chamber of Shipping and was elected vice chairman in 1982.

He continued promoting safety and a clean environment, serving as chairman of several committees of the Marine Board of the National Academy of Sciences. Devoting long hours and incredible energy gratis, Mike Benkert never lost his touch uniting labor and management in a productive, positive manner.

The Swiss philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau

wrote, "To live is not merely to breathe, it is to act; it is to make use of our organs, senses, facilities, of all those parts of ourselves which give us the feeling of existence. The man who has lived longest is not the man who has counted the most years, but he who has enjoyed life most."

RADM William "Mike" Benkert (April 24, 1923 - December 14, 1989) certainly enjoyed life, and touched and inspired many other lives in the process. He lived by principles of lasting value and imparted those values to others. He inspired loyalty and love. He is remembered with fondness.

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