

Drug War Veteran Arndt Finds A Home On Oak Island

BY ERIC CARLSON

When J.D. Arndt was growing up in landlocked Allentown, Pa., his idea of going out on the water meant rowing a little boat across a little pond. Then one summer, on a family trip to Atlantic City, he got a look at "the big pond."

That's all it took. One year out of high school, he abandoned plans to be an electrician, enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard and soon found himself on a 180-foot buoy tender on the storm-tossed Pacific off Alaska.

Now, 15 years into a career that has put him aboard dozens of boats on three seas, Arndt has found a home in Brunswick County as the first chief of the newest Coast Guard station in the United States. Arndt calls his Oak Island facility "the best-built station this century" and says he wouldn't exchange jobs with anybody.

"I'm having a great time," he said. "I get up every morning and I can't wait to get to work. And they pay me to do it!"

An eager, wiry man of 34 years with piercing eyes and a wide grin, Arndt sits relaxed and alert behind a desk overlooking an expanse of marsh flanked by the Cape Fear River and the Intracoastal Waterway.

A two-foot-tall brass cannon shell stands in the office corner. It is trimmed with white cord worked into two "turk's head" seaman's knots. From its mouth, a three-inch diameter projectile was once fired off the deck of America's top ship in the war on drugs. Now Arndt uses it to hold his putter.

Though he enjoyed the splendor of Alaska's uninhabited offshore islands, where "eagles were as plentiful as sparrows," Arndt said he was happy to accept a transfer to his second ship in Miami Beach. Aboard the 175-foot *Hollyhock*, his mission was to help tend the large navigational buoys that guide small boats and huge ships through the maze of shoals and reefs around Florida, the Bahamas and south to Puerto Rico.

Then Arndt spent two years at a boat station on

Islamorada in the Florida Keys. It was the late 1970s, when the Coast Guard's escalating effort to control smuggling came to be called the "War On Drugs." As a boatswain's mate on a patrol boat, Arndt and his crew found more and more of the vessels running aground on area reefs were loaded down with bales of marijuana.

Many of their catches were the high-speed racing "cigarette" boats and smaller fishing vessels that smugglers used to transport drugs from offshore "mother ships" to remote landing areas on shore.

"Late one night we were alerted by someone who got suspicious when they heard boat engines running back and forth close to shore," Arndt remembered. "We investigated and found a fishing boat docked and off-loading bales onto a tractor trailer."

"They heard us coming and pulled out, but they were heavy laden," he said. "So they started throwing bales overboard. We followed the bales and arrested them. Then we went back to recover the bales. There were hundreds of them floating in the water."

"I guess other people on shore heard the activity on the radio, 'cause before long everybody in their bathtub was out there picking up bales."

In his next assignment, Arndt was sent to the drug war's front lines as a deck officer and gun captain aboard the 210-foot cutter *Dauntless*, the first vessel to seize more than one million pounds of marijuana.

The ship was featured in national news magazines with photos showing its rows of painted-on pot leaves, each marking a successful bust. With the most seizures of any vessel in the drug war, the *Dauntless* became known as "the scourge of the

Caribbean."

Her targets were the big mother ships hauling tons of marijuana from South America. Most were large fishing vessels and island freighters with their holds and decks loaded with bales, Arndt remembered. Cruising throughout the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, the *Dauntless*



STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON
BMCS J.D. ARNDT is chief of the U.S. Coast Guard's newest station on Oak Island.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

LOWERING AWAY from the cutter *Dauntless*, Arndt (upper right) and his crew prepare for another boarding in the "war on drugs." The first vessel to seize a million pounds of marijuana, the *Dauntless* was known as the "scourge of the Caribbean."

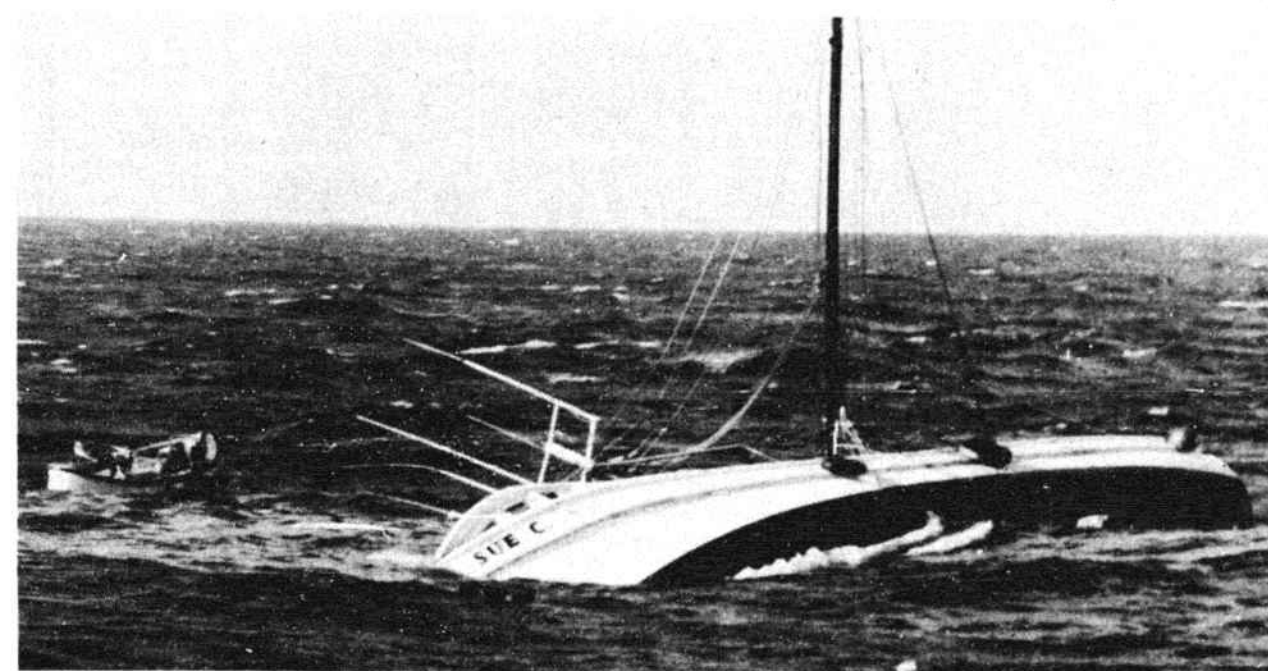


PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

SCUTTLED to avoid capture, the fishing boat "Sue C" rolls on her side as a boat from the Coast Guard Cutter *Dauntless*, piloted by J.D. Arndt, attempts to retrieve her crew of drug smugglers.

averaged two or three major busts on every patrol.

"One time we pulled along alongside an unflagged fishing vessel, about 50 feet long, and radioed her to stop. But she kept on going," Arndt said. "We tried everything to stop it. We radioed in three languages. We shot water down her stack. We threw stuff in front of the bow to foul the propeller."

"Finally, we fired a shot across her bow. But it still wouldn't stop," Arndt said. "So we began firing the .50-caliber (machine gun) at her waterline. We started at the stern and worked our way to mid-ships and eventually caught the gas tanks on fire. But the crew came out and put the fire out."

"They kept going and we kept firing, he said. Eventually we hit the engine and stopped it. She was loaded with 15 tons of marijuana."

Arndt's next assignment was as officer in charge of a small boat station in Coos Bay, Oregon, tending five lighthouses and scores of navigational aids in the rivers and inlets and along the rugged coastline south to California. It wasn't quite as glamorous as catching drug smugglers, but "the salmon fishing was great," he said.

From there Arndt was transferred to New Orleans. There he served as executive officer on the 160-foot cutter *Pamlico*, a construction tender used to install aids to navigation in the bayous and rivers of Louisiana and in the Gulf of Mexico to Texas.

"I loved it," he said. "Especially the food—lots of

jambalaya, gumbo, crawfish etouffe. I went to Mardi Gras three years in a row."

In 1988, Arndt moved to the place he now calls home as officer in charge of the *Blackberry*, a 65-foot inland buoy tender stationed at Oak Island. Two years later he became the last chief of the 1932 station and the first to take command of the new facility, which was completed in 1990.

Arndt loves the area and hopes to retire here. That is, if the Coast Guard will cooperate by granting his request to take command of the 82-foot cutter *Point Ward* in Wrightsville Beach when his next required reassignment comes around.

"I like the small-town atmosphere here," Arndt said. "It's a good place to raise kids. Not as much crime and drugs as you find in larger cities."

He and his wife Mary, a Florida native he married while serving on the *Dauntless*, live off base in Long Beach. Their son, Ryan, who is almost three years old, has already been immersed—literally—in seafaring tradition.

Like the sons of sea captains throughout the centuries, Ryan was christened in the upturned brass bell of his father's ship, the *Blackberry*. To mark the event, his name was engraved inside. According to maritime custom, when the classic old 1946 ship is decommissioned, the bell will be presented to Ryan Arndt.

Shallotte Middle Team Places 7th In Scientific Olympiad

A 10-member team from Shallotte Middle School finished seventh overall Saturday in the Scientific Olympiad, a knowledge and problem solving competition among more than 25 teams from across the state held at James Sprunt High School in Kenansville.

This was the first year a team from the school has entered, said Darrell Cheers. He and fellow science teacher Harvey Rash coached the group of seventh and eighth graders. Their entry was sponsored by the Southeastern Regional Partnership of the N.C. Science and Math Alliance.

The Shallotte team picked up firsts in two events, "Picture This," in which teammates Chrissy Hewett, Carrie Beth Wemyss and Brooke Odom created pictorial representations for scientific terms against the clock; and "Name That Organism," which required Neil Ansley and Stacy Jankowski identifying pictures or examples of organisms by phylum, class and order.

Wemyss and Brooke Odom placed third in astronomy, identifying constellations and stars on an unlabeled star chart, and Caroline Sheffield and Jamie Atwell successfully identified rocks, minerals and fossils for third place in that category.

"They didn't know they could take notes and they did that well without notes," said Cheers.

Ansley and Jankowski finished third in A is for Anatomy, which required identifying parts of the body.



PHOTO BY DARRELL CHEERS

SHALLOTTE MIDDLE SCHOOL'S team placed seventh overall in a scientific competition with 24 other schools from across the state. On the front (from left) are Chrissy Hewett, Carrie Beth Wemyss, Jamie Atwell, Brooke Odom and Tonia Jackson; and on the back, David Odom, Marcus Gause, Caroline Sheffield, Stacy Jankowski and Neil Ansley.

Team members also placed in these events: Write It/Do It, Tonia Jackson and Atwell, fourth; Metric Mastery, Ansley and Sheffield, fourth; Road Rally (use

of road and topographical maps), Marcus Gause and David Odom, sixth; Weather or Not (knowledge of terms and use of equipment), Ansley and Gause, sixth;

Get Your Bearing (compass use), David Odom, eighth; Egg Drop, Hewett and Jackson, eighth; Simple Machines, Sheffield and David Odom, eighth; and Aerodynamics, David Odom, eighth.

The five top teams overall advanced to state competition.

Shallotte's team, for its first time out, entered only 14 of 21 events, not enough to accumulate the points to advance even though it placed eighth or better in 13 of the 14 events, said Cheers.

Shallotte Middle was the only Brunswick County team to compete in the Scientific Olympiad.

However, teams from three other county schools placed in at least one event each at a similar competition held March 5 and 6 at Washington High School in Washington, N.C.

The Student Challenge '93 featured 26 events, many of them identical to in the Olympiad. While Challenge events required knowledge in the sciences and math, the focus was on application of science process skills and practical problem solving.

Leland Middle tied for first place with two other schools in the middle school pre-algebra competition. The other teams were Bath Elementary and Snowden Elementary. South Brunswick Middle's team placed third in Write It/Do It and North Brunswick High's team place second in the high school algebra I event.