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For Immediate Release:

Flying Santa Visits Prudence Island Lighthouse

(Prudence Island, December 5, 2004) On a bright, and crisp Sunday morning, a New England tradition begun in 1929 again took place at the lighthouse on Prudence Island. Flying Santa arrived by helicopter bearing gifts for the Island children and a traditional care package for the lighthouse keeper.

Helicopters, lighthouses and a Santa Claus delivering toys along with coffee, tea, potato chips and shaving products. Seems like a strange mix for a 73-year tradition to be based on. This annual New England occurrence, though always appreciated by its recipients, has not always been completely understood.

It all began back in 1929 with a Maine floatplane pilot by the name of William Wincapaw. A native of Friendship, Capt. Wincapaw, had been a pioneer in the early days of aviation. He was well known around the Penobscot Bay area as a skilled and adventurous pilot. He flew a variety of aircraft but was most at home in amphibious airplanes. Because the landscape of Penobscot Bay was made up of numerous islands, floatplanes had become a most practical means of transport. At the time, Capt. Wincapaw was overseeing operations of the Curtis Flying Service at the Rockland airfield as well as the nearby seaplane base. On many occasions he took to the air in less than ideal conditions to provide transport for sick or injured islanders. His actions saved many lives.

Often on these flights, his only means of navigation were the lighthouse beacons along the coast. Each time he found himself making a flight in the worst of weather, his appreciation grew for the lighthouse keepers and their dedication to keeping these lights well lit and their surrounding waters safe. When he was out and about, the keepers would keep a watchful eye out for his plane. They made it a habit to relay word back to the airfield whenever he had safely passed their position.

On calmer days, Capt. Wincapaw would often land at a local light, tie up his aircraft and spend some time chatting with the keepers. He had a great deal of admiration for these men and their families and felt that something special should be done to show them how much their efforts were appreciated.



So it began on December 25, 1929, he loaded his plane with a dozen packages containing newspapers, magazines, coffee, candy and other items. They were small luxuries and common staples that could make living on an isolated island a little more bearable. Some of these same items continue to be a part of the tradition today.

He flew to lights around the Rockland area and dropped these modest gifts to the lighthouse families. Without knowing how much his gesture of Christmas goodwill would be appreciated, he flew home to spend the rest of the day with his family. Word came back to him in the days that followed that his gifts of Christmas cheer were extremely well received. The keepers and their families were touched to be remembered on this special holiday. The simple gesture of thanks had made the day so much more special for the residents of these isolated outposts.



Wincapaw quickly realized that this Yuletide flight deserved to be repeated and expanded to include more of the lighthouse families and Coast Guard stations along the coast. The flights continued and were expanded into Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut. His son Bill, Jr., an aspiring pilot, eventually joined Wincapaw on the lighthouse trips. The Wincapaws did not originally consider themselves Santas. The recipients of their goodwill fondly bestowed the title upon them. Eventually Capt. Wincapaw began to dress for the role, whiskers and all. By 1933, Christmas flights took gift packages to as many as 91 lighthouses and Coast Guard stations.

Prudence Island Lighthouse was originally built on Newport's Goat Island in 1823. After just 15 years of service at that location, a newer lighthouse was built and the old light was put out of service until 1851. At that time, the lighthouse was disassembled and moved to Prudence Island where it has provided uninterrupted service for the past 150 years. During the hurricane of '38, the lighthouse keeper's house was destroyed and the keeper's family and two visitors were all swept out into the bay. A young Islander, George "Brother" Taber, age 16 at the time, was able to rescue the lighthouse keeper, but the others perished in the storm. In the aftermath, the lighthouse was converted to electric power, eventually automated and has since been converted to solar power. The Coast Guard continues to keep the light operational as an aid to navigation and services the actual light as needed, but since 2001, Prudence Conservancy has been responsible for upkeep and preservation of the structure and grounds.

The traditional annual visits to New England lighthouses are now undertaken by a non profit organization, Friends of Flying Santa. In 2002 they made arrangements with Prudence Conservancy to add the Prudence Island Lighthouse to the list and have quickly become an Island tradition.

Further information on the Flying Santa may be found at <http://www.flyingsanta.org>.