Southwest Pass Lighthouse
One Of Last Landmarks

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Radio signals are replacing lighthouses as guides for sailors on America's coastal waterways, but Coast Guard officials say the lighthouse still has a place as a navigation aid.

Most of the old lighthouses along the Louisiana coast have either been downgraded with smaller lights, taken out of service, or automated, said Coast Guard Lt. j.g. G. P. Shriner.

But the 8th Coast Guard District, based in New Orleans, still has one lighthouse with men on board among their three operating beacons.

"Southwest Pass is a manned light station," said Shriner. "It's pretty solitary — the crew of five splits up into two groups of two weeks. There are usually two people on the station."

Shriner said the lighthouse, which marks an entrance to the Mississippi River of 150 yards in width, is still kept as a beacon to guide ships into and out of the harbor that are up to 24 miles to the Gulf of Mexico.

Duty on the Southwest Pass is uniquely, but there is worse duty in the Coast Guard, Shriner said.

"It's no worse duty than old lighthouses that are away pretty much of the year, at three months a shot," Shriner said.

"It's mostly lonesome from boredom. You can only walk around the lighthouse so many times for two weeks, before you get bored real quick," said Shriner.

"We've got Loran stations, like French Frigate Shoals, where you spend a year there. That's nothing but a 300-foot strip of land, and that by far would be worse."

Loran is a radio locating system that depends on accurate signals from two separate stations to fix a ship's position.

The lighthouse has slightly softer chairs than you'll find in much of the Coast Guard, and amenities like television, radio, and a fishing boat, said Shriner. But crews still sleep on standard-issue thin mattresses, and fill out lots of paperwork.

"They get a couple of little extras there to try and make it a little bearable," said Shriner. "But still, it's not like living in downtown New Orleans. It's comfortable, and that's where we stop."

Food is something that is carefully thought out among the crews, said Shriner. From a food allowance provided by the government for each shift, the men prepare menus and buy what they need before being taken to the lighthouse by helicopter.

The lighthouse is the fifth to mark the entrance of the pass. Previous light stations have either collapsed or tilted in the Mississippi mud. They could not bear the weight of the heavy lens and thousand-watt light bulb, said Shriner.

Southwest Pass Light Station looks more like an oil platform than a traditional lighthouse, sitting on concrete pilings with a heli pad connected by a walkway to the main building.

Shriner said manned lighthouses, like all lighthouses operated by the Guard, are becoming outnumbered and are being replaced by modern navigational aids.

Loran-C radio systems and other position locating systems using satellites provide accurate benchmarks to guide skippers, and good loran equipment can be bought for about two thousand dollars, Shriner said. But there's still a place for the lighthouse.

"The big ships are still using them, but they use them more or less as landmarks than anything else," Shriner said.

"I'd say it's really for the smaller vessel, for the actual light shining them back.