



## Region – Great Lakes

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### **“Get the 36 Boat Going, NOW!”**

By Fred Stonehouse (Wreck & Rescue - Volume 2, Number 4)

Sometimes simple things turn terribly tragic. A perfect plan just crumbles and the result is disastrous. An example happened at Oswego, Lake Ontario, New York on December 4, 1942.

Oswego old-timers remember it as the worst gale in thirty years. Not since the infamous 1913 freshwater hurricane tore through Lake Ontario was Oswego pummeled by a storm of such intense ferocity. Powerful winds of 65 mph blew steady, tearing out trees and snapping down electric power and telephone lines. Huge waves marched into the harbor, pushing rocks weighing several tons around like a child's wooden blocks. One five-ton boulder was rolled over the breakwater! Snow drifted heavily across the landscape further adding to the feeling of desolation.

Far out in the Oswego West Pierhead Light the lighthouse keeper, Boatswain's Mate First Class Karl A. Jackson, waited with increasing impatience. The frenzy of the storm had marooned him in the isolated tower for the last three days and he was ready to leave his lonely prison. Five times he blew signals with the foghorn asking for relief. "Where were they?" Rations were getting short and he was just plain hungry!

The breakwater lighthouse, built in 1930, sits on top of a square concrete foundation. It is about 10 feet from the water to the top of the landing deck. A steel ladder set in the concrete provided access from the water. The structure perches at the west end of the west breakwater, about a half-mile offshore.

Just past 10:00 a.m., the 38-foot wooden picket boat left the Oswego Coast Guard Lifeboat Station at east Cove and headed for the light. The small boat drove on through the cresting gray waves, shouldering them aside as it continued to work its way slowly to the light. Aboard were two relief keepers, Bert E. Egelston and Carl Sprague and eight other Coast Guardsmen. The six extra men were needed to help fend off the boat when it lay alongside the concrete foundation of the light to transfer the keepers. Although the boat would be under the lee of the breakwater and sheltered from the worst of the storm, additional help was needed. Lt. (j.g.) Alston J. Wilson, 54, the commanding officer of the station, captain of the port and a 35-year Coast Guard veteran, was in command of the boat.

By the time the boat left the station the storm had moderated, with the wind down to 30 mph and the waves somewhat diminished, but it was still very rough. Although the conditions were bad, Wilson believed the transfer could be safely made.

He was right. The transfer was made successfully. Wilson carefully brought the picket boat up to the ladder, the extra men fended it off, and both men scampered up the steel rungs to safety. Timing his move gingerly, Jackson dropped down the ladder and jumped into the tossing boat without injury. To this point it was a job well done.

The boat backed away from the concrete foundation of the light easily, but when the gasoline engine was shifted into forward, it inexplicably quit. The boat immediately started drifting fast, west to east, right across the harbor mouth and the boat began a violent motion, caused by the enormous waves and powerful current from the Oswego River. Twice, the engineer, Machinist's Mate First Class Fred Ruff was able to start the stalled engine in the small engine room. Each time the balky engine quickly coughed to a stop.

Lt. Wilson then ordered the 125-pound anchor dropped to check the boat's drift. Second Class Seaman Irving Ginsburg and Second Class Bos'n's Mate Eugene C. Sisson crawled out on the iced-up and violently pitching bow and released it.

The anchor immediately dug deep into the soft bottom of the harbor. The bow of the picket boat swung into the wind and the progress toward disaster was checked. Now there was time to either get the engine going or for a rescue boat to come out from the station and tow them back to the dock. Then the inch and a half manila anchor line snapped. In the powerful wind and waves it had held for a bare ninety seconds.

At the outer end of the east breakwater was a small beacon known as east light. It was protected by a rock barrier. Now began a fight between wind and current. If the wind won, the boat would hit the east breakwater at a point where there was some protection afforded by the west breakwater since it was partially under its lee. Although the boat would be lost, the men would likely be safe. If the current had proven the stronger, the boat would probably have ended up in calmer water, allowing time for either repair or rescue. The combination of the tow forces, however, kept the boat trapped in a deadly course for the sharp edged rocks surrounding east light.

The testimony of Chief Bos'n's Mate John Mixon, the second in command of the station and Machinist's Mate First Class Fred L. Ruff, the only survivors, can recreate the last moments of the boat.

Lt. Wilson was in the small pilothouse with Ginsburg, Sisson and Mixon. The first two men soon went on deck, apparently uncomfortable in the small, closed-in cabin. Before Wilson followed them on deck, he turned the wheel over to Mixon. Adrift, or not, the wheel must be manned. Jackson, First Class Seaman Leslie J. Holdsworth, and Second Class Machinist's Mate Ralph J. Sprau were on deck in the aft cockpit. Ruff was in the engine room still desperately trying to get the engine working. Mixon remembered Wilson as utterly calm, giving orders as if he were back in the office. Disaster may be imminent, but he kept his wits clear!

The boat was being driven rapidly eastward, parallel to the breakwater. The bow was pointing toward the shore. They would be all right, if they only would clear the end of the rocks.

A large wave surged under the boat and sped it towards the murderous rocks. Realizing what was happening, Wilson yelled, "Look out, she's hitting!"

The boat crashed on the port side with tremendous force, the impact shattering her planking and rolling her over, dumping the men on deck into the frigid water. The backwash swung it out to seam with the bow out into the lake. As the boat righted itself, another wave again smashed it into the rocks, tearing a hole ten-foot long and three-foot wide into the starboard side. The overturned boat then drifted off into the lake.

Mixon was trapped inside the pilothouse and only escaped by smashing out a window and diving through it into the water. When he finally surfaced, he was being carried along

by the current but was able to grasp a jagged rock at the end of the breakwater. With a strength born only of desperation, he somehow was able to climb the slippery rocks of the ten-foot high breakwater to safety. How he did it, he did not remember.

Ruff remembered that when the boat first rolled, the engine room flooded with three feet of water le in through a ventilator hatch. After it righted and hit again, he scrambled out through the hatch to the deck. Finding himself ten feet from the end of the light, he quickly considered the situation then jumped for it. After a short swim he also reached safety at the breakwater.

From his rocky perch on the ice covered breakwater, Mixon looked for his shipmates. Other than Ruff, he saw five or six men left struggling in the rough water. Sisson was about 60 feet away, desperately trying to swim to the breakwater. Both were caught in the current and being rapidly carried out into the lake.

Wilson and Ginsburg were swimming in the lee of the east breakwater. Ginsburg was with him. All the men were struggling to reach the rocks. Jackson was holding onto the broken anchor line that was still fast to the picket boat. The boat itself was barely awash and drifting 300-400 feet to the east.

Wilson's oilskins had trapped an air pocket, which was helping the officer to stay afloat. When a big wave pushed him closer to the breakwater, Mixon, although exhausted and shaking uncontrollably from the cold, scrambled down the rocks with the intention of diving in to help him. When Wilson saw Mixon's intent, he calmly told him, "Don't try it. Save your own life, John." Wilson then stopped struggling. He had issued his last command.

Ginsburg continued to fight to reach the rocks. For a while he swam overhand. Then he tried sidestroke and later backstroke. Unable to beat the powerful current, he finally just sank forever beneath the cold waves.

Jackson soon loosened his death grip on the anchor line, dropped off and sank, too. Some observers on shore thought he might have managed to climb on the bow, only later to slip off into the lake. In the blowing scud and snow they could not be certain just what they saw.

Mixon and Ruff slowly began to work they way from the outer end of the 2,100-foot breakwater toward shore. The breakwater did not extend all the way to the beach. There was a gap of 250 feet between it and land. For a while they crawled painfully on hands and knees to keep from being swept into the lake. Countless times they slipped on the icy rocks and fell. Each time they got back up and fought onward toward the shore.

When they saw the picket boat was in trouble, the men at the station sounded the alarm and desperately worked to get a rescue boat underway. Second Class Bos'n's Mate Robert Burnet, left in charge of the station, bellowed, "Get the 36 boat going, now!" The big 36-foot motor lifeboat was on its cradle in the boathouse and had already been laid-up for the winter. But their shipmates were in danger and with unheard of speed, it was oiled, fueled, serviced and run down the rails into the water. It took a bare 18 minutes to get going at full throttle, bashing its way through the seas to the rescue. Burnet was at the helm. Six other Coast Guardsmen stood ready for action in the cockpit.

Afraid to try to lay the motor lifeboat directly against the rocks of the breakwater to rescue Mixon and Ruff, Burnet sent two men, Coxswains Sanford Gregory and John F. Black, over in a small skiff trailing a line back to the lifeboat. By this time Mixon and Ruff had made it about 1,600 feet down the breakwater. The hope was to get both men

into the skiff, then haul it to the big boat with the line. However in the fury of the gale, the skiff smashed against the rocks, stranding both rescuers and victims and losing the line in the process.

Deciding that Ruff and Mixon and his two men were in less immediate danger than those farther out, Burnet pulled away and headed out for the awash picket boat. When they found Wilson's body still floating, he asked for a volunteer to try to recover it. Seaman Second Class Andrew W. Cisternino volunteered, tied a rope to his waist and dove into the furious 40-degree water.

He reached the body and grabbed it tightly but as he was being hauled back to the boat, the cold numbed his arms and the body slipped away in the waves. Only with the greatest difficulty was the boat crew, numbed with cold and balancing precariously on the icy deck, able to drag Cisternino back aboard. Wrapped in blankets he was hustled below. When the boat eventually reached shore, he was immediately hospitalized for exposure.

To those on shore, the rescue effort was especially dramatic. The motor lifeboat repeatedly disappeared in the trough between the huge seas, giving the impression that it too had sunk. Each time it reappeared to continue on with its work.

Anxious family members waited at the Coast Guard dock for the motor lifeboat to return. Some hoped their men on the ill-fated picket boat had somehow been saved from an icy death. Others prayed for the safe return of the motor lifeboat crew.

With no other choice open to him, Burnet decided he had to risk the boat to rescue the four men on the breakwater. He knew that a mistake on his part could not only wreck the boat but put his crew into the same circumstance that the picket boat men ended up in. Using every ounce of skill and experience, Burnet brought the big boat right up to the rocks and neatly picked off the stranded men. It was a masterful piece of seamanship! The four bedraggled men were taken below to join Cisternino, and Burnet headed for the dock.

Ruff, Mixon and Gregory were immediately hospitalized. In a classic case of understatement concerning Burnet's work in rescuing them, Mixon said, "Bob did a fine job."

The broken, battered picket boat soon washed ashore and Coast Guardsmen waded out waist deep into the surf to search for the bodies of their shipmates. None were found in the battered boat. For several days, following the disaster, Coast Guardsmen and soldiers from nearby Fort Ontario patrolled the windswept beaches looking for bodies. Their efforts were fruitless.

History has a way of repeating itself. An old-timer remembered that during the 1913 gale lighthouse keeper Dan Sullivan was marooned at the west light for a full week. Part of the time he, too, was without food. After signaling his wife of his predicament, she told a friend who managed to fight his way out through the tumultuous lake with provisions. In 1913, it was tragedy averted. In 1942, it was death at Oswego Lighthouse.

The tragedy and heroism of that terrible day was ignored for over half a century. Happening when it did, in the midst of World War II, other events captured the public imagination. On December 4, 1996, 54 years to the day, the Coast Guard and the City of Oswego formally memorialized the event. Survivors of the accident, family members and representatives of the city boarded the station 44-foot motor lifeboat and motored to the vicinity of the disaster and placed a memorial wreath in the icy waters of Lake Ontario. The solemn ceremony occurred at 10:25 a.m., exactly the time of the 1942 accident. The

City of Oswego also plans to erect more permanent memorials, one near the lighthouse and the other in Veterans Park.

One of the participants was David Ginsburg, the father of Irving Ginsburg, killed in the wreck. Now 98 years old, he vowed never to return to Oswego until some kind of memorial was established. It took a long time, but finally the brave men received the recognition so richly deserved.