How Many People Will a Lifeboat Hold?

By Ralph Shanks (Volume 1, Number 4)

Having spent the past two decades writing maritime history books, my work has allowed me to become friends with many a veteran surfman. One of those I remember especially well was Garner Churchill. During the 1930s Chief Churchill had been the commanding officer of the Humboldt Bay Coast Guard Lifeboat Station near Eureka, California. He ran 36-foot wooden motor lifeboats out of both Humboldt and San Francisco Bays and saved at least 300 lives from shipwrecks. Mr. Churchill was perhaps the greatest lifesaver in Pacific Coast history. What Joshua James was to the Atlantic Coast, Garner Churchill was to the Pacific Coast.

The motto of these brave Coast Guard lifeboatmen was "You have to go out, but you don't have to come in." This meant that regulations required that the surfmen go out to the rescue no matter what the sea conditions were, but there was no guarantee they would ever return.

One of the Garner Churchill's finest rescues involved the rescue in 1931 of the steam schooner *Cleone* off Cape Mendocino. When Churchill and his men reached the sinking ship they encountered huge waves and a sea full of 30-foot long bridge timbers that had been the *Cleone*'s deck load. The bridge timbers were 30-feet long and 14-inches square and they were heavy on one end. Having been torn off the sinking ship by the sea, the bridge timbers floated vertically in the storm tossed waves. They would sink far below the surface and then suddenly rise up on a big swell and fly into the air and then fall over. Garner Churchill told me that "If even one came up under (the Coast Guard motor lifeboat), I'd have been a goner."

But Garner Churchill piloted his lifeboat in among the flying bridge timbers. Maneuvering skillfully, he took everyone from the *Cleone* safely on board his rescue boat. Once away from the wreckage, Churchill faced a new problem. His lifeboat now had so many people in it that it was so low in the water it was barely afloat. Yet eventually, Garner Churchill managed to reach a safe harbor and brought everyone ashore alive.

After he told me this story, I asked Garner how many people his motor lifeboat would hold. He looked up and smiled. "I never found out," he replied.

I sat there in silence thinking of the magnitude of what this great lifesaver had just said. He was saying that no matter how great the risk there was always room for one more person in his lifeboat.