



Region – Pacific Coast

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“Those Guys Got Plenty of Guts, Take it from Me”: Hilman J. Persson and the Rescue of the Crew of the Trinidad

By John J. Galluzzo (Wreck and Rescue - Volume 5, Issue 1)

As a young boy growing up in Sweden at the beginning of the twentieth century, Hilman John Persson could never have dreamed of what the future held in store for him.

Born September 3, 1888, Persson first stepped foot on American soil at eighteen years old in 1906, sponsored for citizenship by his uncle Mattis Persson, a surfman at the Gray’s Harbor Life-Saving Station in Westport, Washington. His only assets at that time consisted of a sturdy frame and a definite desire to find work. His greatest liability was his complete inability to speak English.

After a short, uncomfortable, and unhappy stint pushing logs through an Aberdeen sawmill, Persson followed his uncle’s advice and began work as a temporary surfman at the Gray’s Harbor Life-Saving Station, keeping himself available as a substitute to fill in when others became sick or had to attend to family concerns. Recognizing the young man’s competence in the required skills of the U.S. lifesaver, the station’s keeper, Captain Charles Jacobson, hired him to a full-time position before the end of 1907.

Two years later Persson married Eliza Jane Armstrong, a member of one of Westport’s pioneer families. Together they raised two healthy boys, Nathaniel and Fridolph, although, sadly, their only daughter Minnie died at just seven years old.

Soon the years spent in the Life-Saving Service added up to form a decade. In 1915, as the Life-Saving Service merged with the United States Revenue Cutter Service to form the Coast Guard, Persson realized that he had found his life’s career path. In 1919, at thirty, he accepted a transfer to the Willapa Bay, Washington, Coast Guard Station as second in command, “where he got some experience being in charge because Captain Winbeck, as he was known, was on sick leave a great deal of the time.” (*Memoirs of Fridolph Persson*, in the possession of the Westport Maritime Museum, Westport, Washington, p. 1). In 1922, upon the death of the skipper of the Gray’s Harbor station, Persson transferred back home again, to take his first command. There he would remain until 1938.

Persson’s reminiscences of his early working life echo those memories of most Life-Saving Service and Coast Guard surfmen. Working for low pay with little chance for advancement under the motto “You have to go out, but you don’t have to come back,” many of the lifesavers of the chronically-underfunded services nevertheless remained loyal to their jobs, either for fear of joblessness or simply because of the personal satisfaction gained by knowing theirs was a humanitarian trade.

“At the time I joined the lifesaving service, none of the boats at the station were equipped with motors because no dependable small gasoline motor had been invented

yet, and besides, we were always slow in receiving up-to-date equipment. We, the oarsmen of the station, considered ourselves fortunate because, in going to the assistance of a vessel in distress, there was nearly always a seagoing tug at the Westport dock that we could depend on towing us to the scene. The vessel could mean a case of salvage for the tug and we could assist in getting a tow line to the vessel if she was stranded in water too shallow for the tug.

“Unfortunately there were many times when there was no tug available, as they always left for their headquarters in Hoquiam on Saturday afternoon for the weekend unless there was a vessel expected. This was the case one Saturday night when two Westport brothers were hunting ducks near the old County dock in South Bay. They were sitting close together in a sinkbox when one of the guns fired and most of the pellets hit the other man in the abdomen. This was before there was a road to Aberdeen, and we were called upon to get him to a hospital. The only means was the lifeboat under oars and we pulled hard all night, arriving at the Hoquiam dock at daybreak, where it was discovered the man was dead. On questioning, the brother said he had died about halfway to town, but he was too shook up to say anything.” (*Memoris of Hilman John Persson*, in the possession of the Westport Maritime Museum, pp. 1-2).

By the late 1930s, after three decades with the Life-Saving Service and Coast Guard, Persson thought he had seen it all. He had been in for so long that he began to lose track of how many missions he had been on, how many lives he saved, and where exactly most of the ships sunk in the area rested. In 1910, he aided in the rescue of the crew of the British bark *Torrisdale*, saving thirty men. Twenty years later, he reported, “we were trying to get a stranded fishboat off the beach at that spot and nearly hit the encrusted hulk with our boat in the trough of the sea. I thought she was buried long ago.” (*Memoirs of Hilman John Persson*, p. 1).

Some things he had learned the hard way. “For sometime we had been transporting the Willapa Harbor Pilot to and from steamers entering or leaving the harbor. Our boat had a sliding canvas hood in the bow, which afforded some shelter from wind and sea, but the steerman was in the open.

“One cold winter day, around 1921, we were returning from putting the pilot aboard an incoming vessel about three miles west of the harbor. The ship was out of sight as she traveled much faster than we could, when a blind break, a sea breaking without warning, came over the stern. This knocked me away from the rudder and we became waterborne. The boat, as was usual without rudder, broached and I went over the side. When I finally located the boat it was about a quarter of a mile away.

“We had failed to put on life preservers, as they were of cork sewn to a canvas belt that slipped over the head and tied with straps and were very cumbersome in a boat, especially over winter clothes. I was dressed for the cold and over my normal underclothing had on a pea jacket, rubber hipboots and oilskin trousers and coat. All of these clothes became soaked, I was floating pretty low in the water. I was treading water and determined not to panic or to swim towards the boat as this would have been impossible burdened as I was.

“The Captain had gone to the rudder and one of the crew heaved a preserver overboard as they came towards me, but a breaker swept it away. I managed to get a hold of one on the second try and in about ten or fifteen minutes I was picked up. After that experience,

there was no more transporting pilots by the station boats.” (*Memoirs of Hilman John Persson*, p. 7).

Still, after thirty-plus years of stormy seas and battered ships, risk taking and lifesaving, Persson’s defining moment had yet to come.

On Friday, May 7, 1937, “Captain” Persson set his crew about their daily tasks. At 8 a.m., they sent up the morning colors. Between 8:15 and 9:00, they ran through their typical resuscitation and fire drills. As the temperature rose to sixty by noon time, one man mowed the station’s lawn, while the rest of the on-duty personnel tackled fence, truck door, and boat repairs. At sunset, as he ordered the colors down for the evening, Persson noted a slight change in the wind’s direction, from southeast to south. By 8 p.m., the slight winds from early in the day had steadily grown to a force eight gale, more than sixty miles per hour.

At 8:10, after inspecting the grounds, Persson fielded a telephone call from the Willapa Bay (North Cove) station to the south. From the watchtower at Willapa Bay, a surfman had spotted an unidentified steamer shooting off flares, obviously in distress. He reported, too, that the station’s powerboat had already left on another emergency call, rendering assistance to a fishing vessel. At 8:30, after dispatching a message to the district commander of his intentions, Persson rounded up a crew of four – Motor Mechanics Roy I. Anderson and Jesse W. Mathews and Surfmen Roy N. Woods and Daniel Hamalainen – and set out on motor lifeboat 3829 to find the imperiled mariners. For Hamalainen, this trip represented his first actual search and rescue case.

An hour and a half after launching, they crossed the bar out of Gray’s Harbor and turned to the south, taking notice of the strong northerly current. Instructing his four crewmen to watch for any signals from either the steamer or Willapa Bay lifeboat, Persson crawled into the cramped quarters of the forward compartment to monitor the radio, a receiver only. “This is the most uncomfortable place on a boat, with the bow diving and pounding into the sea and I did not want to subject any of the others to this torture.” (*Memoirs of Hilman John Persson*, p. 8). Before leaving the station, he ordered that the boat be called every fifteen minutes. No useful news was reported.

Miles to the south, the steam schooner *Trinidad*, destined for San Francisco with a full load of lumber, battled the storm. “Head on into a sixty-mile gale went the vessel, staggering like a drunken man... her flexible hull had yawning seams, and her master would have bet on a stack of holystones that his crew had pumped the entire North Pacific through her hull twice.” (James A. Gibbs, *Pacific Graveyard*, p. 152). After several hours of battering by the sea, she rode hard aground atop a submerged shoal one mile to the west of Willapa Bay Lighthouse.

When she struck, the lumber on deck broke loose, smashing and slamming its way through the ship’s sides. The second mate, Werner Kraft, lost his footing and flew overboard, perishing in the churning seas. The remaining crew of twenty sailors gathered on the bridge, hopeful that their captain, I. Hellestone, would find a way to keep them all alive.

Around 3 a.m., Persson glimpsed a flare in the distance, and answered with one of his own. Bringing the 3829 around, the lifeboat crew headed for the *Trinidad*. All told, “for fourteen miles, lifeboat 3829 battled walls of water, shaking herself like a wet poodle and going back for more” (Gibbs, p. 153).

At daybreak, around 5 a.m., they reached the North Spit of Willapa Bay, finally able to see the damned vessel. While the lifeboat was crossing the South Spit to come around to calmer water, a high breaker engulfed 3829, submerging her completely, pushing her back. Looking for a safer route, Persson “noted an oil slick coming from the stern of the vessel from her ruptured fuel tank, and as oil is supposed to calm breaking water, I followed this in the next try.” (*Memoirs of Hilman John Persson*, p. 9). Coming around the bow to the starboard side, the Coast Guardsmen finally found calmer water.

Calmer water, but not necessarily calm. Careful to steer clear of the ship’s rigging, which by now hung over the side in the water, Persson and his crew began their rescue procedure. “Each breaker brought with it the power to crush the lifeboat against the side of the wreck, but by moving in at the opportune time and pulling out with each swell, the lifeboat somehow managed to remove twenty-one crew members from the bridge.” (Gibbs, p. 153).

One of the sailors saved from the *Trinidad* gave this description to the *Aberdeen World*: “It didn’t look like we would get away alive, then just about daylight the Coast Guard began working in... and were we glad to see ‘em. I don’t believe I ever lived a happier moment in my life than that, when they came up under the lee side. Captain Persson was hanging on with one hand and waving directions with the other. The boat would rise up on a sea and then plunge down in the trough... I was afraid sometimes they would never come up again but the boat would bounce up like a cork, and kept inching in closer. To this hour I don’t see how they made it. They would claw their way up to the *Trinidad*, take off a couple of men and then the sea and wind would beat them away. They would haul around and pitch and roll their way back again and take off two or three more men. We almost prayed for them. They could sure take it and come back for more. And it wasn’t only the sea... there was rigging and gear plunging around, masts swaying, loading booms, lumber, and any minute that fore deckload was due to go... but they didn’t pay much attention to it... which was plenty lucky for us. Those guys got plenty of guts, take it from me. I’ll praise them to my last day.”

Making contact with the oil screw vessel *Ruth E.*, Persson arranged for it to transport the *Trinidad* survivors back to their port of debarkation, Raymond. At 6:40 a.m., 3829 arrived at Lakeland, and the crew headed for Willapa Bay Station. At 8 a.m. Motor Machinist’s Mate Albert Canaris, just reporting back to Westport from leave, immediately headed for Willapa Bay by truck to retrieve the exhausted crew. At 9 a.m., twelve and a half hours after heading out, Persson, Anderson, Mathews, Woods, and Hamalainen finally returned home.

On September 20, 1937, the crew of 3829 stood proudly on the deck of the USCG cutter *Onondaga*, before family, friends, and fellow Coast Guardsmen. After a short address to the gathered crowd of more than 100 people, Captain R. W. Dempwolf, Commanding Seattle Division, presented each man with a Gold Lifesaving Medal, the United States’ highest award for the rescue of life from danger at sea, and a congratulatory letter from Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau.

A few months later, Persson left on a ten-day furlough, and headed for the East Coast. Stopping at Washington, D.C., he attended yet another medal ceremony, to accept the Second Division Post, American Legion of Baltimore’s Medal of Merit, an annual award for the most outstanding act of heroism in the United States, on behalf of the Gray’s Harbor crew.

But before he headed home, and while he still had the time to do so, Persson wanted to make one more East Coast stop. Going directly to the west as he had in 1906, he had lost contact with his sister Adina for 31 years, and by now he had a younger brother, born in the United States, whom he had never met. He felt the time had come to see his family again.

And so in March of 1938, Hilman Persson made his way up Nantasket Avenue in Hull, Massachusetts, turning left on B Street to look for house number thirty-four. He knocked on the door and when it opened, for the first time in more than three decades, he came eye-to-eye with his sister Adina Halvorsen. That day he also met his younger brother Berger Persson.

Before leaving Hull, he visited the Point Allerton Coast Guard Station, the historic home of Keeper Joshua James, on a tour of inspection hosted by the station's commanding officer, Captain Isaac L. Hammond.

Shortly after returning to Washington, Persson transferred to the Coast Guard's district office in Seattle, retiring there in 1939, after thirty-two years of service. Before he transferred, though, he convinced his son Fridolph to join the Coast Guard at Westport, to continue the tradition of having at least one Persson at the station from the time of its commissioning. At the outbreak of war in 1941, he rejoined the Coast Guard, remaining on active duty until the end of hostilities in 1945. On December 28, 1944, Technician 5th Grade Arnold W. Halvorson, U.S. Army, Adina's son and Hilman's nephew, died in battle in Belgium. A street in his hometown in Hull, Massachusetts, is now named for him.

Hilman John Persson died at eighty-four years old on December 20, 1973, after a steady decline in health. In the words of his son Fridolph, "He came to the United States a young, naïve boy, but became a loyal patriotic American to the end of his life."