

# May Day-May Day

## WORDS NO ONE EVER WANTS TO HEAR

By Warren J. Toussaint

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*There are some Coasties who think that duty on a "sweet water" ship is a piece of cake, calm weather, easy duty, etc. Nothing could be further from the truth. This article should enlighten all of you old salts. - Jack -*

Tuesday, Nov. 18, 1958, at 5:31 p.m., the limestone carrier, *Carl C. Bradley*, was up bound on Lake Michigan, having delivered her last limestone cargo of the year to Indiana on November 17, 1958. She stayed close to the Illinois and Wisconsin shores because of reports of severe weather conditions rapidly developing from the west. As it reached the area of Sturgeon Bay, Wis., it had to turn to the northeast in order to cross the upper area of Lake Michigan on its way to the homeport of Rogers City, Mich., on Lake Huron. Suddenly, the *Bradley's* steering wheel went slack, as if the gears had suddenly disconnected. On the course it was on, the winds and waves were striking the ship on the aft quarter of the port side causing the ship to rock severely. First Mate, Elmer Fleming, knew the ship was in trouble. He jerked the radio telephone from its cradle and shouted a desperate call "**Mayday, Mayday, \_Mayday**. This is the *Carl C. Bradley*. **Mayday Mayday Mayday.**"

The Captain slammed the engine room telegraph to stop engines and sounded the general alarm. He grabbed the whistle cord and began to tug seven long blasts and one short - the signal to abandon ship. Fleming again called out the Mayday. For a moment there was silence on the channel. All who heard the call were stunned.

A voice finally responded. It was the radio operator at marine radio station WAD, Port Washington, Wis. His response, "This is an emergency, this is an emergency. Clear the channel." He then asked Fleming to repeat the ship's position. Fleming did so and added that the ship was beginning to break up and sink. There were more thuds rumbling through the ship as he spoke. As he glanced aft from the rear windows of the bridge he thought he saw the deck heave up amidships. The sound of the alarm bell echoed up the stairway from one of the cabins below. Again, Fleming was on the telephone calling the Mayday. The wheel house lights blinked out as the spar deck heaved up amidships and severed the power cable from aft. The radio telephone went dead in Fleming's hand.

Almost every Coast Guard unit on the Great Lakes heard the calls, including Ninth Coast Guard Headquarters in Cleveland. The duty quartermaster on the *USCGC Sundew*, moored at its

homeport in Charlevoix, Mich., had gone to the bridge to listen to the weather report when he heard the distress call. The call was also heard by all ships underway or at anchor on the lakes. In fact, many ships had to put anchors fore and aft to prevent drifting due to high waves and strong winds. Big ships rarely anchor on the Great Lakes, but many did that late afternoon. Waves were 25 to 35 feet high and winds were blowing up to 60 miles per hour. Whole gale warnings were in effect. Those ships that were underway were moving slowly, especially those downbound on Lake Michigan.



**CGC SUNDEW Underway on Lake Michigan - Courtesy of Fred's Place**

Minutes after the Mayday call, the Coast Guard responded through Ninth District Coast Guard Rescue Coordination Center in Cleveland. Some Lifeboat Stations in Northern Lake Michigan began to ready their 36-foot motor lifeboats, even before word reached them from Cleveland. Before the duty quartermaster on the *Sundew* could notify the commanding officer at the lifeboat station in Charlevoix, he called LCDR Muth, skipper of the *Sundew*, at home to tell him of the sinking and to notify him that Cleveland wanted him to get underway immediately. *Sundew* initiated a recall for its crew. Meanwhile, repeated attempts were made to contact the *Bradley*, but to no avail.

Even before help was on the way the 636-foot *Bradley* had broken in two and sunk beneath the waves of Northern Lake Michigan. Four men, including Elmer Fleming, jumped into the water as the forward section began to turn over. They surfaced alongside the sole life raft which had floated free from the forward section. After a few minutes all four men climbed aboard the raft.

One foreign vessel, downbound to Chicago, had spotted a ship on their radar. The foreign ship had seen the forward section go black, watched the lighted rear finally passed through the highway bridge. Citizens of Charlevoix, along with anxious Coast Guard wives, were standing on the shore and could not believe the *Sundew* was actually going out in the storm. She had to go. "You have to go out, but you do not have to come back", is an old Coast Guard saying. Many believed they would never see the *Sundew* again.

As the *Sundew* passed the Charlevoix Lifeboat Station a 36-foot motor lifeboat followed her out the channel and entered Lake Michigan. The 36-footer was pitching so violently that LCDR Muth ordered her back to the station. His reasoning was that he would be looking for one big ship and did not want have to be looking for a small one.

The *Sundew's* journey to the vicinity of the last known section begin to dive under, then saw smoke billowing.

Moments later nothing was visible by naked eye or radar.

The *Sundew* was moored port side to at the Coast Guard Buoy Depot in a small channel between Round Lake and Lake Charlevoix. It was customary to get underway by going through the open railroad bridge in Lake Charlevoix, turn around, go back through the railroad bridge into Round Lake, blow the signal to open the highway bridge, then proceed down the channel out into Lake Michigan. The *Sundew* had trouble getting back through the railroad bridge opening because the strong winds kept blowing the ship off course until finally the ship had to proceed at an angle in order to reach the opening at just the right moment and at the correct speed.

The location of the *Bradley* was proving difficult. The maelstrom now caused almost all of the crew that had responded to the recall to be seasick. After rounding a point of land and moving in a West to Northwest direction the real fury of the waves took effect. Some of the radio equipment shorted out because water sloshed into the radio room, just aft of the bridge. Radio Cleveland could be heard calling the *Sundew* but she could not reply. Everyone on the bridge heard Radio Cleveland ask everyone in the area if the *Sundew* could be seen.

After reaching the last location of the *Bradley* and not finding any trace of the ship, a search grid was initiated, which meant the *Sundew* took the full fury of the wind and wave ultimately on the port, then the starboard side. The only relief came for a few brief minutes as the ship turned to run with the wind before again turning in the grid.

The searchlight on the flying bridge was turned on and swung from side to side. Occasionally, what happened to be a body was seen, but before any attempt to recover the body was made, it was out of the beam of light. The *Sundew* also made contact with a foreign vessel, the only ship that had seen the demise of the *Bradley*. It was difficult to communicate with the foreign ship because of language problems. She did offer to search the immediate area but informed Capt Muth that she had to get to Chicago in order to return and clear the St. Lawrence Seaway before it was closed to navigation for the winter.

During the entire rescue effort the *Sundew* was sealed. No one was allowed outside. Even the bridge was sealed. Because of the mooring status not everything on board was tied down and there was no time to do so before sailing. Gas bottles broke loose and were lost over the side. Every can of paint in the forward locker burst. Paint was sloshing two feet deep in the locker, which was discovered when the locker was finally opened several days after the event. Because of the difficulty in moving about, many of the crew tied themselves to the mess tables to prevent injury. No one went below to the crew's quarters. Between manning the searchlight and checking on the crew, the corpsman had to report their status to the captain. To state that there were some anxious moments is stating it mildly. Several rolls in excess of 50 degrees were

made along with water spraying down the stack, causing sputtering in the main electric board in the engine room.

At 4 a.m. on the 19th, the corpsman was told to lay below and try to get some rest because the Captain determined that the corpsman's services would probably be needed after daylight. The HM2 lay below to sick bay, where he loosely tied himself to a bunk. The winds had begun to abate, the seas were not as rough. Suddenly about 8:15 a.m., the corpsman was awakened by a crew member and told that a raft had been sighted with at least two men on board. He ran out to the buoy deck and saw a raft about 500 feet off the port side. Blankets and Stretchers were brought out. All hands responded to the welcome sight of possible survivors. The Captain maneuvered the *Sundew* alongside the raft, which was then tied to the ship. A cargo net was let over the side. A Bos'n mate went down the net to assist the two survivors. He literally threw each of the men up on the buoy deck where they were wrapped in blankets, placed on stretchers, and taken to the chief's quarters where there was sufficient room for them to be attended to properly. The two survivors were in good shape, despite their ordeal. At 9:15 a.m., the *Sundew* was able to send a message stating, "Picked up two survivors on raft 5.25 miles from Gull Island." The two survivors had been on the raft for almost 15 hours and fell into the water several times when the raft capsized. The other two men that had been on the raft attempted to swim ashore during the night but both were lost.

Coast Guard aircraft notified *Sundew* of bodies in the water, and sighting an overturned lifeboat on the shore of one of the small islands in the area. After making sure there were no more survivors, the *Sundew* sent a small boat out to recover the lifeboat, which was empty. All the bodies were taken from the lake and checked for any sign of life and identified. All personal effects were placed in envelopes and marked accordingly.

By the afternoon of the 19th it was decided to return to Charlevoix with the two survivors where they could receive extensive medical attention. The bodies on the buoy deck were covered with a tarp. At 4:23 p.m. the battered *Sundew*, her flags shredded, weary crewmen leaning on the rails, returned to Charlevoix, escorted by boats from the Lifeboat Station and planes overhead. The silence of the city around the mooring area was eerie. The only sound was that of the ship moving through the channel and waters at a slow pace. Everyone in the area knew of the loss of life. The local contract doctor came on board to officially declare the men dead and to check on the status of the two survivors. After removing the bodies, the two men who survived were taken to the local hospital for further treatment and reunion with their wives who had been flown to Charlevoix from Rogers City. The long night and day was over -- for now. The *Sundew* returned to search the area at dawn on the 20th and 21st and spent all the daylight hours there, but found no trace of the Bradley and no more survivors or bodies. Out of a crew of 35 on the *Bradley*, just two survived, 18 bodies were recovered, and 15 bodies were never found.

Terror manifests itself in many ways. All the crew of the *Sundew* recall being very hot, then very cold. However, when the seas calmed and help was needed for the survivors and assistance in bringing bodies on board, everyone responded immediately. Some of the younger members of the crew had never seen a dead boy, yet they too responded when the call for help was issued.

The life raft was delivered to the Coast Guard Buoy Depot in Charlevoix, along with the life boat. The life raft has since disappeared. In 1994 the lifeboat was found at Put-In-Bay in Ohio and is now at the marine museum on Beaver Island. The First Mate, Elmer Fleming, passed away several years ago after retiring from the Bradley Steamship Company. The other survivor, Frank Mays, never sailed again on the lakes and is now retired and living in Florida. Mr. Mays returned to the area in 1995 and participated in a search of the wreck, which had been found. He descended in a mini-sub and viewed his old ship, even noting that the red paint was still on the rails that he had put there only a few days before the disaster.

Capt. Muth is retired from the Coast Guard and resides in Florida. The corpsman retired in 1981.

The *Bradley* was lost because she was at the wrong place at the wrong time. With wind and waves coming at her from the rear and riding high in the water, despite full water ballast, she simply broke in two and was lost.

*CWO Warren J. Toussaint, US Coast Guard Retired, was the HM2 aboard the Sundew.*

From Ken Laessar's CG History Site: