



A Night to Remember

A Newsman and Sailor Recall
When the *Fitz* Went Down

Much of the world may not instantly remember November 10, 1975, but on Lake Superior's shores that date – 40 years later – still inspires memories, memorials and chilling visions of a perilous storm and tragic loss.

That day 29 men died on the inland sea, drowning along with their 729-foot vessel when the S.S. *Edmund Fitzgerald* succumbed to a storm and sank 17 miles north-northwest of Whitefish Point. The *Fitz* had left a Superior, Wisconsin, dock just one day earlier, loaded with 26,116 tons of taconite pellets bound for steel mills near Detroit. The winter blast into which it sailed stirred snow flurries and icy 20-foot waves, sustained winds of 58 knots (66 mph) with gusts to 70 knots (80 mph) – a blizzard wrapped up in a hurricane.

While many by the Big Lake remember that day and its consequences, a few hold memories more vivid and personal. This year, to broaden our collective memory of a shared tragedy, we present two reminiscences – one of the newsman, former WDIO-TV anchor Dennis Anderson, who broke the story and one of a retired sailor, Lon Calloway, who that day rode out his first Great Lakes gale, just 15 hours ahead of the ill-fated *Fitz*.

Top, from left: From *The Night the Fitz Went Down*, are, the new *Edmund Fitzgerald*, largest laker at the time; a sketch of the *Fitz* on the Lake bottom; a headline from *The Times* in Calumet City, Illinois. Right: "Every Man Knew," commissioned from artist David Conklin by the Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society, which has limited prints available.



Heart of Steel, But Not of Stone

by Dennis Anderson



WDIO-TV

“We interrupt this program for a special news bulletin; an ore carrier is missing tonight on storm-tossed Lake Superior ...”

Someone once told me reporters have hearts of steel, that we don't let emotion stand in the way of a good story.

That's not quite true. Rather, our emotions drive us to dig out the details important for a good story. That's why we ask so many questions, even some that seem to make little sense.

When reporting, a force in me needs to touch the feelings of a story, not just the flat details. Who are the people, the real people, in the story? How are they affected?

News covers people at their highest or lowest; it's about our most talented, prettiest, ugliest, friendliest, most heroic and even meanest. In other words, news compiles stories about how we relate to this gift of being alive. Sometime its impact lingers long after the event.

Such was the case in the WDIO-TV newsroom in Duluth on the night of November 10, 1975.

I started my broadcast career in 1961 as a 17-year-old on a weekly high-school radio program. And though I have a face for radio, my career dragged me into television.

In 1975, 14 years into my work, Lake Superior already made its mark on me. Born and raised in the northern Minnesota city of Virginia, I grew up far from whatever the Lake could conjure. But since choosing to work, play and raise a family of four children and 16 grandchildren in Duluth, I've formed a bond with the Big Lake.

You don't have to live here long to discover that Lake Superior has many faces. It can be cross and foreboding one day, calm and inviting the next. It is never boring.

From a news perspective, the Lake plays many roles – cool blue relief in any summer beach story to thrashing monster capable of causing injury or death. Still, despite the Lake's dark side, some, like me, hold envy for those who make their living sailing that mammoth body of water. From the shore, any career worked atop this inland sea looks exciting. It is a brave soul, I was tragically reminded that raw autumn night, who chooses to work on the Lake.

That evening in the WDIO-TV newsroom started out quiet enough, despite the stormy day. Television news back then was like radio with an occasional picture thrown

in. There was no satellite live link, no instant digital video.

Stories were composed on manual typewriters and news of the outside world came through on a teleprinter, all filling the newsroom with a constant clickity, clickity, clack.

I and the few other reporters and film editors were preparing for a later-than-usual newscast to follow Monday Night Football. Sports fans had quickly caught football fever when the Monday games premiered on ABC in 1970, creating a huge audience for affiliated stations like ours.

Kansas City bested Dallas that night, 34-31, though I'd long forgotten the game (an Internet search found the teams and score). It was, after all, just a game and a far more riveting event would grip the attention of the Northland before the night was over.

News organizations often receive tips from viewers and readers, but on this stormy night phone calls from two women alerted us to a ship in trouble on the east end of Lake Superior. Both explained that they were listening to “maritime radio”; one went as far as to say she believed an ore carrier “had gone down.” I don't know if they had family members on the Lake that night. I hope not.

That kind of tip, though, gets a reporter's adrenaline cranked. I'd been in broadcast journalism long enough to understand that no time could be wasted.

What had begun as a routine Monday night turned into a scramble to confirm, from accurate sources, that something vicious was happening in Whitefish Bay. An inland hurricane had parked itself over Lake Superior that would turn Ten November into a maritime tragedy.

I hit pay dirt on my second phone call, made to Coast Guard officials in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. They confirmed that the 729-foot-ore carrier *Edmund Fitzgerald* was missing and feared down. We were also told that another vessel, *Arthur M. Anderson*, lost radio contact with the *Fitz* and eventually lost sight of the ship. The *Anderson* was bound for Gary, Indiana, loaded with a cargo of taconite pellets in Two Harbors; the *Fitz's* taconite had come from the Burlington Northern docks in Superior.

Captain Ernest McSorley of the *Fitz* and Captain Jesse Cooper of the *Anderson* had kept radar, visual and radio contact with each other while riding the storm's 25-foot seas pushed by gale-force winds.

This gave me the necessary confirmation.

It was decision time. First, we called in extra help. All of us in the newsroom had to get on the phones and dig into our sources. We scrambled to find historical details of the vessel – when was it launched, who owned it, what and who were on it. Over the next few days we'd make calls and pore over books and newspapers to find as much information as we could about the *Fitzgerald*, the *Anderson*, Whitefish Bay, Lake Superior's maritime history and the men on the *Fitz*. There was no such thing as a “Google search.”

The next decision was harder. Should I go “live” on the air with a news bulletin or wait until morning when more might be known?

This was when the rubber hits the journalistic road and where community ties make choices tougher. I

‘It may be the first alert to family, friends and co-workers ...’

knew full well that any mention of the possible shipwreck may be the first alert to family, friends and co-workers of those on the carrier. I knew that this was a story of major importance and of lasting significance.

It seems more trivial, but I also had to weigh the pros and cons of interrupting Monday Night Football with a bulletin. With the popularity of the game, a huge share of the Northland's audience would become privy to what we had learned. Since we were breaking this news story, I had to be doubly sure of my facts.

Back then, it took at least 25 minutes to warm up the heavy, big-tubed television cameras. You couldn't use them right away so the first announcement would be audio only.

I gathered my notes and carried them into the broadcast audio booth. A full-screen slide announcing “News Bulletin” popped up on thousands of television screens, interrupting the game. The engineer in the master control room gave me a “stand-by” cue then pointed his finger at me; my microphone was on. There was no turning back. It was about 9 p.m.

“We interrupt this program for a special news bulletin. Channel 10 news has learned ...”

Over the next couple of minutes, I informed viewers across northern Minnesota, northwestern Wisconsin, Michigan's Upper Peninsula and a chunk of Ontario that the *Edmund Fitzgerald* was missing at sea.

Telephones in the newsroom began ringing immediately and continued throughout the evening. Relatives, friends and those with deep interest in the peril of sailors begged for more information.

“Say again the name of the ship.”

“How many were on board?”

“Had it really sailed the previous day from Superior?”

“Are there people in lifeboats?”

“What more do you know?”

On and on we answered calls. Some refused to believe what they heard.

Then a call came from the U.S. Coast Guard asking our help. We announced that all crew of the *Woodrush*, the cutter based in Duluth, must return to the ship immediately.

All night, we dug for details. We learned the Coast Guard dispatched two cutters, the *Woodrush* and the *Naugatuck*, from the Sault. (If memory serves me right, the *Woodrush* couldn't leave immediately, due to heavy seas.)

Most amazing of all, the *Arthur M. Anderson*, which had made it safely to port, returned into the teeth of the storm to help with the search.

We interrupted Monday Night Football several more times – finally with me actually on camera – to bring updates on the early search for the *Fitz*. We stayed on the air until midnight.

That night WDIO-TV became the pipeline for feeding information to the community. Looking back, I have never regretted my decision and have not received

criticism from anyone for what or how we reported.

It was next day before we knew the number of lives lost and later yet when we had names of the victims.

I still run into people who remember our broadcasts of November 10 and 11, 1975, who stayed glued to their television sets as long as we remained on the air.

Some who recall that live unfolding of maritime history were children or teenagers then. Today they share with their grandchildren the stories and their memories of that tragic night on Whitefish Bay.

The true story of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, broken in two and still submerged in 530 feet of water, may never be known because of disagreement over what caused it to sink. Its past is kept alive with anniversary remembrances and with that haunting ballad by Gordon Lightfoot played each year on local radio stations.

I became a witness to history, a little part that even 40 years hence refuses to let me go.

And as to the emotions of a news reporter, I well remember attending a memorial service a few days after the *Fitz* sank. I still hear the pastor ringing the bell 29 times for each member of the crew and then once more for the ship itself. I'm not ashamed to say that tears flowed freely out of my eyes then, and a lump still rises in my throat now thinking about all that transpired on that ship.

Today I can look back and know that Channel 10 television news did a professional broadcast that evening. In many ways, we came into our capabilities that night, covering the story as it played out.

So I take my hat off to all of those working in the newsroom that night. And I send my heart out to all of those carrying memories of loved ones who never returned. ■

Dennis Anderson retired after 42 years from his full-time work at WDIO to co-anchor “Almanac North” on WDSE-WIRT PBS 8 & 31. He wrote a memoir titled for his signature news sign-off: *Goodnight, Everybody ... And Be Kind*.

Dennis Anderson and Julie Zenner on the set of “Almanac North.”



WDIO-TV

Riding the Storm of a Tragedy

by Rick Fowler

As long as memory holds, Indian River, Michigan, resident Lon Calloway will never forget where he was November 10, 1975. Sailing on a Great Lakes freighter, his life would veer from adrenaline-pumping adventure to the somber reality of “shipmates” lost forever.

Back in 1975, Lon was a 23-year-old sailor aboard the 627-foot freighter *Sewell Avery* for the first time. He and his shipmates were nearing the end of the season.

Growing up along the northern edge of lower Michigan, not far from the Mackinac Bridge, gave Lon ample opportunities to fulfill his adventurous side. Canoeing, hiking and Jeep four-wheeling were natural, and nearly constant, pursuits. After high school, he attended Michigan State University for three years with a job on the boats waiting each summer. His first boat was a U.S. Steel freighter and during his 40 years of sailing, he served aboard 80 ships. From freighters to buoy tenders (four years with the U.S. Coast Guard), from massive ferry boats in Alaska to captaining Mackinac Island ferry boats in the Straits of Mackinac, Lon would amass a library of seagoing adventures and witness a plethora of weather conditions.

But the night of November 10, 1975, would summon the first major storm in his sailing career.

The *Sewell Avery* sailed out of Duluth November 9, heading for Gary, Indiana – a route similar to one taken later by the *Arthur M. Anderson*, which played so prominently in the *Fitzgerald's* tragic story.

This first voyage on the *Avery* was just about his last voyage of the season – just one more run after this

Lon Calloway sailed 40 years on the Great Lakes.



RICK FOWLER

would wrap up his sailing for the year as the shipping season came to an end.

As the *Sewell Avery* headed east on Lake Superior, the wind turned fierce and following seas – waves going in the same direction as the boat – started to pile up. The crew knew the St. Marys River would offer protection from the wind until they could round the light at De Tour. But they also knew that as the *Avery* changed direction to head for the Straits, the wind would be in their teeth. Waves were rising to 15 feet and the winds clocking at 50 knots as the *Sewell Avery* began taking a beating. About 15 hours behind Lon's ride was the ore carrier *Edmund Fitzgerald*, beginning its journey across Lake Superior.

“As it started getting worse, we started finding everything on the ship that was not tied down,” recalls Lon. “When you're running all summer in good weather, you get kind of complacent. Things stay where you put them. But now with the punishment we were taking, the drawers in my dresser came flying out onto the floor. My toothbrush came blasting out of its holder, hitting the ceiling. Every time a big wave hit, it was like being inside a big drum. There are so many things on a ship that are hanging or tied down that the noise is bedlam.”

This was only the beginning.

“It just kept getting worse as the night wore on. You could look down the deck, and sometimes you couldn't see the deck. This was a 627-foot boat, and all you could see was the stack and aft cabin. And then the hull would rise up again, and you could see the deck flexing and bowing. It was the first time I had seen that kind of action. ... You think a big ship like that is a pretty stable platform, but it was flexing like a whip.”

At that age, young Lon did not realize the peril of the storm. “I was stoked. I was where I wanted to be. What do you know when you're 23, and you've spent the last two years listening to the old sailors tell about storms they had been in? You can't wait! Let the wind blow! I was digging it. Cool!”

They made it through the St. Marys River system, but by the time they turned along the southern shore of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, they started taking on water.

“When we made the turn at Lansing Shoals, we were on a 30-mile haul. We were broadside to the northwest wind, and it got hairy fast. ... The captain secured the decks with no one allowed out. It was truly the worst I had seen and looked like it was going to get worse.”

As the night wore on, it did get worse. “It peaked in the middle of the night and then started to slacken. We had a pretty rough ride until we were down past Milwaukee. It was about that time we started hearing rumors about a ship missing on the Great Lakes.”

As the *Sewell Avery* steamed on toward Gary, the power of the storm became evident when the crewmen inspected their boat.

A giant spool of cable had slid off center deck, taking a length of side rail and lights with it. A lifeboat had jumped



its cradle and suffered damage. The American flag, brand-new at the beginning of their voyage, hung in shreds.

Also tattered, the young sailor found, were the emotions of his crewmates. Rumors of a lost freighter were eddying in the crew quarters.

“I knew at the time I was in a big one. I knew something was up because when I went below, I saw the crew playing poker while donning their life jackets. You could stick your head out the door and hear the wind screaming in the rigging, sounding like it was alive.”

“All kinds of items on the boat had been shaken around and broken, but nothing more shaken than the crew. It's a big family out on the Lake. We all sailed out of the same union. Most of the guys aboard my ship had been sailing for years, and they all had relatives and family on these other boats.”

“Everybody was pretty worried, and the Coast Guard wasn't talking much. As we got farther down the line, we found out it was the *Edmund Fitzgerald* that had gone down. We had crew who had served on the *Fitz*. And one man had a relative on the *Fitz*. It was pretty quiet shipboard for the rest of the trip.”

On land, relatives of those on all the vessels waited with held breath. In 1975, there was no Internet or

cellphones. Communication was sketchy. No news was considered the best news.

“Since my parents received no phone call,” Lon says, “they reasoned the news about my ship was good.”

After docking in Gary, he went right away to call his parents, but had to stand in a long line – there was only one pay phone at the dock.

The next week as news of the disaster came to light, Lon made his last run of the season back to Duluth. As the ship neared Whitefish Point, he and his shipmates reflected on what had happened.

“What are the odds ...” or “but for the grace of God ...” may have echoed in many thoughts.

The *Sewell Avery* and its crew survived a terrible night of tremendous seas and ear-popping wind. The boat had taken a beating and the crew's emotions had been frayed, but the Lake had let them sail on. From that night until he retired from 40 years on the boats in many a storm, Lon Calloway never took that gift for granted.

Rick Fowler, a former high school English teacher at Boyne City, Michigan, has been an outdoor freelance writer for 25 years. He and his wife Sue reside in Harbor Springs, Michigan.

Commemorations

MICHIGAN

The **Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum** at Whitefish Point, which houses the bell removed from the sunken *Edmund Fitzgerald*, will have its annual memorial ceremony November 10 with speakers and the ringing of the bell (906-635-1742, www.shipwreckmuseum.com).

MINNESOTA

Split Rock Lighthouse, November 10, the lighthouse beacon will be lit and the names of the lost *Edmund Fitzgerald* crew called out to the ringing of a ship's bell (218-226-6372, www.sites.mnhs.org).

The Lake Superior Marine Museum Association's **Gales of November** will include a performance, “Ten November,” based on the tragedy, November 6, and a special luncheon panel discussing the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* at the Duluth Entertainment Convention Center on November 7 (www.LSMMA.com).

Want to learn more? Try these books:

The Night the Fitz Went Down, by Hugh Bishop

The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald, by Frederick Stonehouse

“Passage in Moonlight” by artist David Conklin, commissioned for the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum and available at the museum or online.