Commandant's Bulletin

Issue 48-80 Serving the U. S. Coast Guard November 24, 1980

The miracle rescue

by PA1 Day Boswell, Bulletin Staff

Valdez, Alaska, was behind the U.S. tanker **Williamsburgh.** Full of oil, the ship headed for Texas. The bridge crew sighed relief; one more successful trip through the narrow channel. Midnight was approaching, bringing Oct. 4 and what the crew thought would be a quiet, normal day.

Not far away, the games of the first night at sea were over on board the luxury cruise liner, **Prinsendam.** The ship had left Vancouver on a 30-day cruise to the Orient, first stop — Singapore. Some were asleep, some were trying to fall asleep. Some had closed the bar and were just heading for their cabins.

At about 1 a.m., the ship was jarred from sleep.

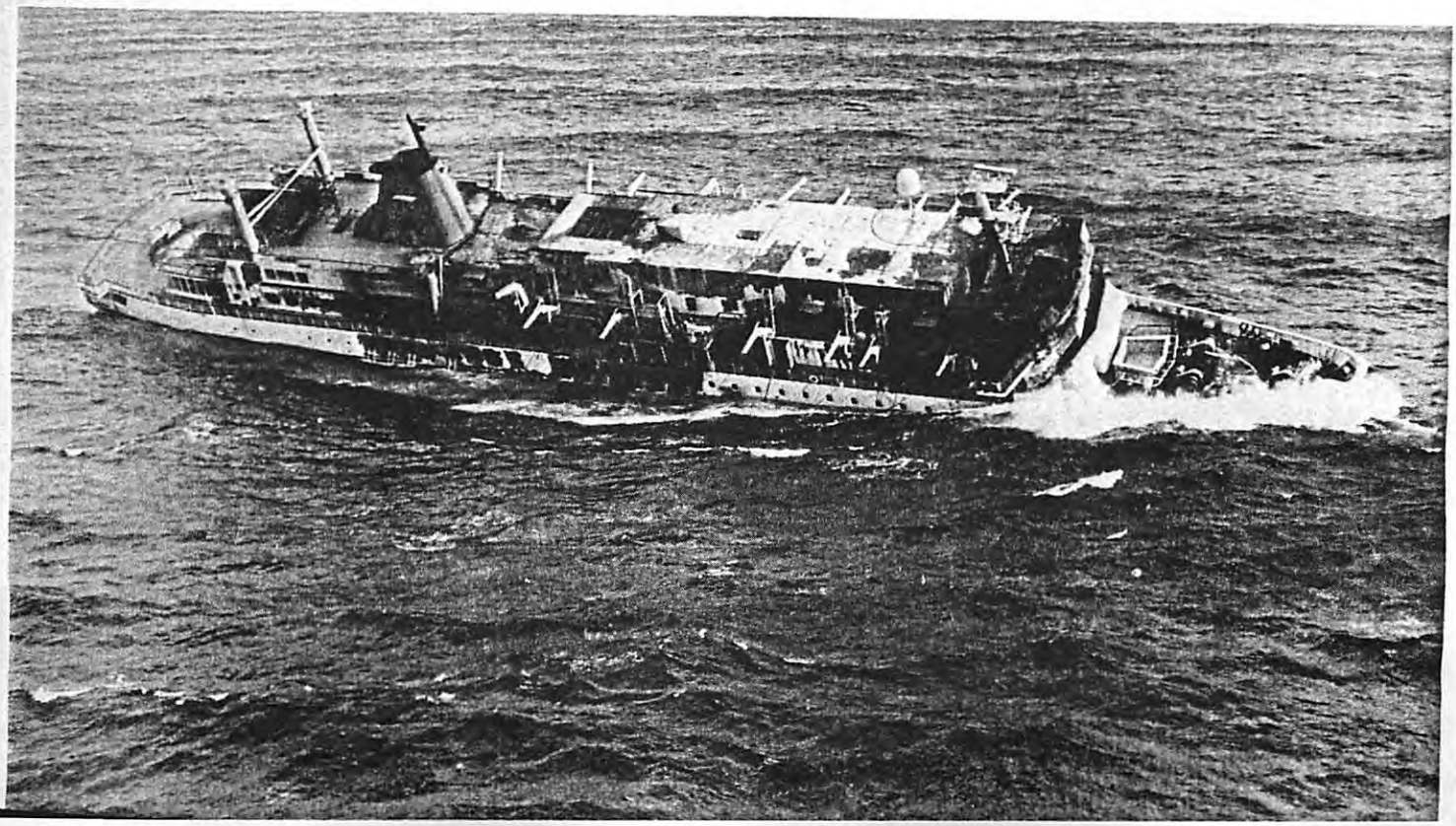
Fire had started in the engine room. Alarms and bells rang, the sound of explosions and the smell of smoke filled the passageways. **Prinsendam** had stopped dead.

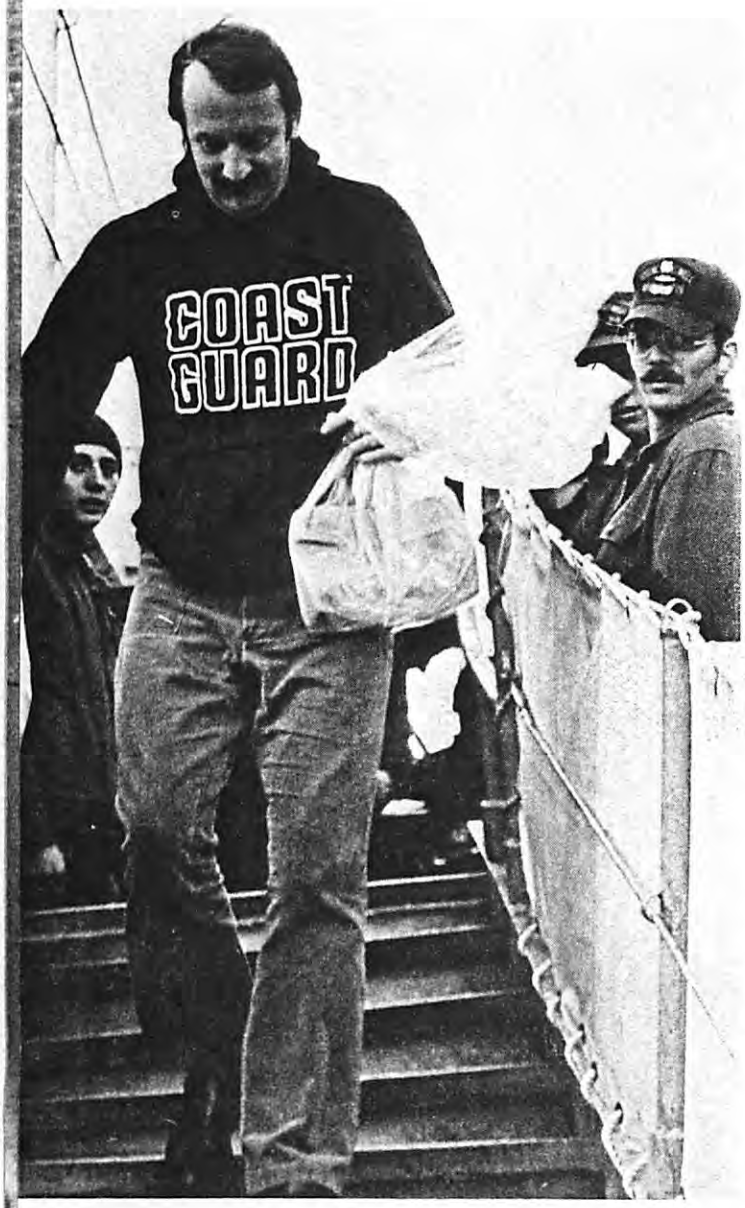
Firefighting pumps were among the first equipment knocked out by the fire. With carbon dioxide and foam extinguishers, the Indonesian crew fought the blaze. The fire spread. The international distress call went out a half hour later.

"SOS! SOS! This is the **Prinsendam.** We have fire in the engine room and we are dead in the water. SOS!"

The call reached the ears of the Coast Guard in the North Pacific and of Radio Operator Jim Pfister on the **Williamsburgh.**

Everything moved into action. 17th District air stations were alerted. Cutters got underway. Being closest, **Williamsburgh** moved toward the stricken Dutch liner. On board **Prinsendam,** passengers and crew were herded into the lounge and on the weather decks in bare feet, pajamas, and whatever other clothes were handy.





*A **Prinsendam** passenger walks ashore in Sitka wearing clothes loaned him by the crew of **Boutwell**.*

While the crew fought the fire, the passengers waited. They were told everything would be under control soon. Most of them were elderly Americans. Not many young people could afford the $3,000 - $6,000 fare.

The cruise staff entertainers strolled the deck performing selections from "Oklahoma" and other shows to ease the tension.

Some passengers were complaining about not having a chance to get their clothes or valuables from their cabins. At 3:30, they knew why. The fire had spread to the dining room, several decks above the engine room, and to the decks of cabins between.

Captain Cornelius Wabeke told the Coast Guard he had lost water pressure and most of his firefighting capabilities. Firefighting pumps were air-dropped and the rescuers began looking for more equipment.

In Yakutat, Alaska, a staging area was being built to support whatever disaster might lay ahead. Kodiak and Sitka were supplying two helicopters each, the Canadian Forces were adding two helicopters and two fixed-wing aircraft. The U.S. Air Force in Anchorage was sending another helicopter.

Medical, firefighting and logistics personnel and equipment were grouping with the aircraft at Yakutat.

The order to "Abandon ship" came from Captain Wabeke shortly after 5 a.m. He and a 40-50 man crew would stay with a Coast Guardsman who would help with the new firefighting equipment, but the almost 500 passengers and other crewmembers had to leave. The ship was beginning to list, and the captain suspected that lower decks were taking on water.

Passengers and crew jammed into the lifeboats, sometimes 80 or more in a single boat. Some married couples were separated in the scramble. No one had a chance to change. Many were still in pajamas and bare feet with drapes from the lounge as their blankets, or sweaters from the gift shop for wraps.

The tanker **Williamsburgh** was still 2 1/2 hours away but the sea was finally calm. It had been rough since dinner.

David Levin, a 77-year-old California passenger, managed to don a purple jogging suit before going on deck. "When we began (getting into the boats), we were singing. The stars were shining and the sky was clear," he said.

With only six or seven lifeboats and two or three liferafts free, it's hard not to imagine fear among the more than 500 people. Levin said they started off singing "Row your boat".

Some boats had problems releasing from the ship. Lines got tangled, and boats slammed into the side of the ship. In one case, a boat was being lowered on top of another one. The crew had not counted on the engines going bad so quickly, or on the many broken rudders.

An ex-Coast Guardsman and ex-senator, Fairleigh S. Dickinson, Jr., took "captainship" of his lifeboat. He rigged a sea anchor to steer the lifeboat. His wife, Betty, said that they all called him captain. He commented later to a daily newspaper, "This is silly. It's just what you'd see in a grade B movie. The only person missing was Tallulah Bankhead."

Then the storm hit.

In the boats without motors, people bobbed in the cold water, hid under blankets and got seasick.

John W. Gyorkos was still in the tuxedo and dress shoes he had worn to the festivities on the ship. Just before the rescue, "I began to have doubts that we would all make it," he said.

The **Williamsburgh** arrived just before 8 a.m. It was the first large ship to arrive. Captain Fertig pulled it into position more than 200 miles west of Sitka.

Radio Operator Pfister described the scene. The ship was "listing to the right and in danger of sinking. I saw passengers and crew bobbing in lifeboats in the storm."

The tedious, ten-hour rescue began. The few boats with operating engines headed toward the **Williamsburgh.**

"(The sea) started splashing. And we couldn't see the tanker nor the **Prinsendam** (even though it glowed with the blaze from below decks) for a long time, until the helicopter came," Levin said.

The weather got worse. One by one, the helicopters covered a lifeboat, dropped a sling or a basket, and hoisted until they met their weight limit. They left the survivors on the **Williamsburgh** and returned to the lifeboats for more.

"It seemed like an impossible task. The wind was strong, the waves were very high. At first, there was no space on the lifeboat where the

basket could be lowered, our boat was so crowded," Mrs. Lois Berk, a passenger wrote the Commandant.

"Somehow," she went on, "after a few passes some people in the stern of our boat were able to make room and catch and firmly place the basket in the boat and one at a time, nine persons were raised to the helicopter, and flown to the tanker **Williamsburgh.**

"The 'copter came back five times before I was lucky enough to be helped into the basket, hauled up, and quickly helped out of it, and taken to the tanker.

"I don't know how many more trips were made by that copter, but I know not all the people were removed from Lifeboat #3 (by that helicopter). One copter ran out of fuel, one had an engine fail. I just wish I knew the number of the copter which rescued me and the names of its crew to express my tremendous gratitude for a job done beyond belief of ordinary service.

"I heard that the crewman who worked the basket was operating his first real rescue. I was among the first 45 he plucked from death.

"We were older people and stiff and frozen, many seasick and had to be lifted out of the basket. He must have had extraordinary strength," she commented.

When the victims reached the **Williamsburgh,** they were taken below for coffee, hot drinks and warm conversation.

In the first hour, 150 people were airlifted to the deck of the **Williamsburgh.** At the end of that hour, the seas had reached 25 foot swells and the winds lashed the Gulf of Alaska at 50 knots.

The rescue continued. More people were plucked from the ocean and more and more became seasick and suffered from exposure. Those who were in poor condition were taken directly to Yakutat for treatment. From there, some were transported to Juneau or Sitka for further treatment.

Most of them were in good health, glad to be alive. Several of them had to leave their medicines behind — for diabetes, heart problems and other ailments.

For hours, some lifeboats continued bobbing, waiting for the helicopter to appear from the storm. "When the seas started washing over the rail into the lifeboat, the cold was almost unbearable," Gyorkos said.

Most people spent their waiting moments in prayer and song. Many of their small craft had run out of fuel making progress to the **Williamsburgh** impossible, slowing rescue work. As boats with engines tried to tow those without, the lines snapped.

The cutter **Boutwell** showed up and began taking on passengers with **Williamsburgh.** The merchant ships **Sohio, Intrepid** and **Portland** were also standing by to help, if necessary.

By noon, the seas had gotten worse and there were still more than 200 people to rescue. At least, there were no casualties or serious injuries yet.

Pfister reported the situation from the **Williamsburgh** four hours into the rescue, "We have very difficult sea conditions. We have 250 survivors on board now but more are still in the water."

The rescue continued, plucking one after another from a boat or a raft. The total number on board **Prinsendam** was hard to determine. The sail list of passengers was accurate, and for the most part, the ship's crew numbers were reliable, but several people were not listed at all. Among them were the entertainers and the cruise staff, who managed to escape in a separate lifeboat. Luckily, they had two Air Force paramedics on board who were not forgotten. They had been dropped to the ship earlier to assist. They were not found until 2 a.m. on Oct. 5, when the paramedics caught a glimpse of the cutter **Boutwell,** fired flare guns, and were picked up by the cutter.

The seas were fighting success. By nightfall, Captain Wabeke and his firefighters had given up. After they left the ship, flames engulfed the upper decks of the **Prinsendam.** The captain of the Dutch liner poetically was the last to leave the ship. When he reached safety, he looked skyward and saluted with hands clasped high above his head.

The final count was made: 360 passengers, 190 crew, 13 cruise staff and two paramedics. But just to be sure, the Coast Guard went to every lifeboat and raft for a double check, marking the craft with paint as they went. It was confirmed — all rescued, no life lost.

The 1,095 - foot **Williamsburgh** changed course and headed back to Valdez with more than 450 new faces crowded between its decks and into its passageways. The rest were on board the cutter **Boutwell,** on their way to Sitka.

Still 360 miles east of Kodiak, the **Prinsendam** listed, on fire.

Sunday began with more promising events. The survivors were on their way to shore and the weather had calmed considerably. A small damage control team from the **Prinsendam**'s crew returned to assess the damages. The major fire was out, but the main passageways still smoked and smoldered.

By Monday, **Commodore Straits** was en route to tow the 427-foot Dutch ship to Portland, Ore.

As the week went on, the team continued to check the ship. The tow progressed slowly.

On Oct. 8, things changed for the worst. The fire reflashed about 5 a.m. and erupted when two portholes blew out. The fire spread through the ship, blowing out portholes and exploding what liferafts or boats remained.

Each day, the ship rode lower and lower in the water. By Oct. 10, A and B decks were submerged and the Promenade deck was taking on water.

One week after the rescue began, the $25 million ship rolled on its side. Within three minutes, it sank. Though it carried 188,000 gallons of fuel and oil, the only signs left were bits of debris and one liferaft.

Since the ship ran into trouble outside U.S. territorial waters, the investigation is being conducted by the ship's flag country, the Netherlands. The U.S. Coast Guard intends to have a representative present to act as an interested observer.

Overflights are still conducted to check on oil that may escape from the ship that rests

beneath one mile of water.

One survivor wrote of the most vivid part of the week — sight of the Coast Guard. "All I have heard for the last several days is how well the United States Coast Guard performed. Some may call the rescue effort a miracle, but it was only accomplished because of the experience and dedication of the Coast Guard," wrote the president of Sears, Roebuck and Co., Ed Brennan. He continued, "Again, thank you very much personally. It's an experience I shall treasure for the rest of my life."

In a letter to Admiral Hayes, Mrs. Muriel L. Marvinney, also a survivor, wrote, "As a passenger on the ill-fated **Prinsendam**, I want to express my very deepest gratitude to the men of the Air-Sea Rescue squad who through their daring and devotion rescued me and my fellow passengers from a very certain fate. I want to congratulate you on your magnificent organization."

Other letters have poured in from commercial organizations, federal agencies, well-wishing citizens and Congressmen and Senators, all praising the Coast Guard's rescue efforts.

Most of the survivors said they intended to write their representative in Washington, D.C., praising the Coast Guard and asking for more money for Coast Guard operations.

Mrs. Berk knew it was more than just a helicopter crew that conducted the rescue. She wrote, "Another job done way beyond the ordinary was the Coast Guardsman who answered the phone in Juneau from anxious relatives of the survivors.

"My daughter phoned him every two hours for about 36 hours. He was constantly courteous, well-informed, generous with his information. Unfortunately, she didn't get his name.

"The purpose of this letter (and many like hers) is to express my extreme gratitude to the many men who participated in this miraculous rescue — saving so many, with no serious injuries. The greatest sea rescue in history.

"It's a great, heroic, exquisitely trained group, who can achieve such a record.

"Could you express my gratitude to those men who participated?

"And my congratulations to you for heading such an organization."

Prinsendam Rescue Units

Air Station Sitka
Air Station Kodiak
17th District
Marine Safety Office Valdez
Boutwell
Mellon
Woodrush
T/T **Williamsburgh**
USAF EDF C-130
USAF EDF C-12
USAF EDF A-3
TAS C-130

Canadian Forces:
Argus 713, 718
Buffalos 5454, 5456, 5458
Labs 1303, 1306

The Lifesavers: *Crewmen of Air Station Sitka were the first on scene when* ***Prinsendam*** *sent out a distress call. Air Station Sitka flight crews: (back row, left to right) LCDR Ron Simond, CDR Chuck Peterson (commanding officer), LTJG Tom Vasilou, CDR Tom Morgan (executive officer), LCDR Ray Hiner, LCDR Joel Thuma, AT3 Richard McManigal, AE2 Andrew Falenski, LCDR Robert Knapp, AD3 Carl Saylor, ASM3 Richard Driscoll, and AT2 Dave Cook. Front row: AE3 Ron Dupont, LT Dave Barnes, LT Bruce Melnick, AD3 Mike Oliverson, AM3 Sam Overman, AT1 Larry Weygandt, AD2 Tim Burkholder. Photo by AD1 Barfield*

RADM Knapp honored for rescue

RADM Richard Knapp, commander, 17th District, was named by his homestate "Jerseyan of the Week" last month for his part in the rescue of the passengers and crew of **Prinsendam.**

Several hundred showed up for the ceremonies on the plaza of Passaic's City Hall. City officials and Rep. Robert A. Roe presented a plaque and a specially cast medal honoring him for his accomplishments during the rescue.

A 3rd District color guard also took part in the ceremonies.

The admiral graduated from Passaic High School in 1947 and is a 1951 graduate of the Coast Guard Academy.

"The sea is so unpredictable you never can be really sure of how things are going to go," he told the crowd, "but the situation always must be approached with professionalism; if the leadership gets excited, then everyone gets excited and if that happens it makes it all but impossible to accomplish a difficult rescue mission.

"It was due to the professionalism exhibited by everyone who took part in the **Prinsendam** rescue that made it all possible. The dedication of those on the scene, including the crew, and the fact panic among the passengers was prevented, also were vital factors in such a happy outcome in such a potentially disastrous situation."

CAPT Edward Nelson, chief of staff at the 17th District, said of the admiral, "He waited at his office far into the night until the last lifeboat was found during the **Prinsendam** rescue. He was the man they needed in an operation like that.

"Dick is my friend, as well as my boss, and I can tell you he's a no-nonsense guy. He's experienced enough to take any dangerous situation with a grain of salt; he has a great tolerance for this sort of thing."