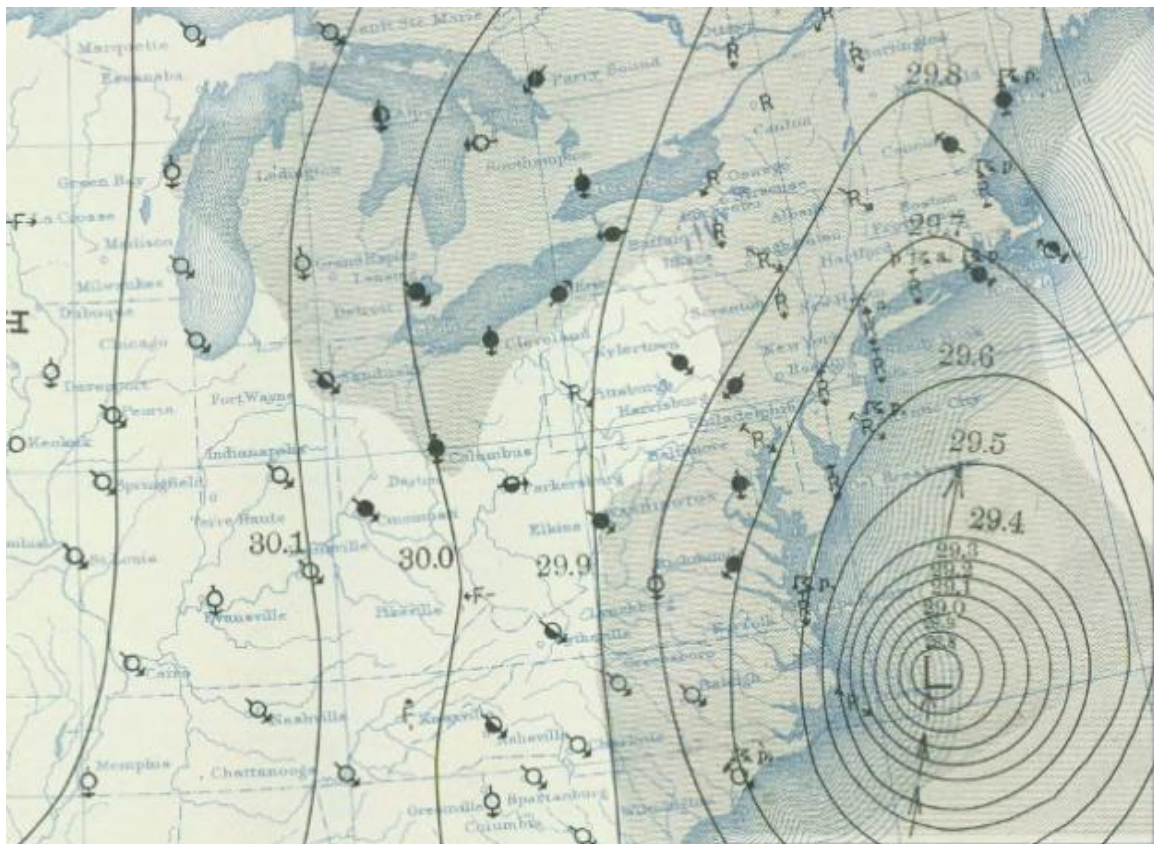


U.S. Coast Guard History Program

The Hurricane of 1938: A Rescue

By

Gerrett Gregory



This article is an autobiographical account written by Coast Guard Surfman Gerrett

Gregory regarding his experience in responding to the 1938 Hurricane that devastated

New England, northern New York and Canada. Official records note that the Coast Guard assisted 509 vessels and “rescued from positions of peril” 1,011 persons.

Although the Coast Guard once again performed magnificently as it always had during a national emergency, there was a terrible cost. The deadly storm claimed three Coast Guard victims: Machinist (T) Frederick T. Lilja, MM1c Hayward T. Webster and RM3c John A. Steadman. They perished in the line of duty after being swept overboard by the storm from their cutter, USCGC General Greene. Additionally, sixteen stations were damaged or completely destroyed.

This is the first account the U.S. Coast Guard History Program has received regarding the storm from one who experienced it first-hand and it will probably be the last due to the passage of time. We are grateful to Surfman Gregory, perhaps the last Surfman still alive today, for taking the time to write down what he remembers about that deadly hurricane.

Editor, 2010

As I had been very recently transferred from Oswego Lifeboat Station to Galloo Island Life Boat Station the station was very new to me. It was very new, so new, in fact, it was not completely finished when I arrived.

At the edge of water, where the boat docks were situated, a boathouse was in the final stages of completion. Near the boathouse a dredging barge with an enormous dredging

bucket was secured/anchored in a small body of water known as Gill Harbor whose perimeter was defined by either a manmade or natural reef between it and Lake Ontario.

In most of the Life Saving Stations or Lifeboat stations, at that time, there were eight personnel. Each was numbered. The number one guy was the Captain or the Skipper who ran the Station with an iron hand. "Colors," both morning and night, were closely observed. At the Galloo Island Lifeboat Station the crew sang patriotic songs and whatever other songs the Skipper wanted sung from 0730 to 0800 colors. Sometimes breakfast was served before colors and sometimes after, depending entirely what was transpiring at the station that day. After the Skipper # 1, was the mate #2. In this case at Galloo Island Lifeboat Station it was a giant of man named Ralph Matteson. This was the guy who really ran everything under the guidance of # 1 Mr. Wilson. His title was Surfman #2. Then the guy who did the cooking was generally # 3. The five remaining personnel were numbered according to their seniority to each other from #4 through # 8. My number was # 8. Each crew member was supposed to have one day off each week if he could be spared. These Surfmen stood continuous lookout watches and after dark made foot patrols to the Canadian side that is the side facing Canada or north side of the Island every two hours. The lookout watches were generally two hours also. These five men who did the tower watches, patrols by boat or on foot were always sleep deprived.

Now back to the hurricane of September, 1938 whose storm fringes encompassed Galloo Island. This hurricane historically is the most powerful storm ever to strike the continent of North America.

Twenty-four hours before the hurricane arrived, NOAA [*National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration—in 1938 it was known as the Weather Bureau*] was broadcasting “expect wind velocities and the approximate time of arrival.” The sky in the afternoon turned a bronze color. The crew working on the boathouse construction began the task of securing the dredging barge running a series of lines from the barge to shore, attaching them to trees that were large enough and to the places that appeared secure. The anchor was removed from the barge and one of its flukes was imbedded in crack in the rocks which on Galloo were everywhere just below the surface of the shallow soil covering most of the Island. To the anchor was shackled the main restraining line to the barge. All those present believed this arrangement would be of ample strength to moor the dredging barge.

Darkness was falling fast. The copper color sky encompassed everything. It was very depressing. The velocity of wind was increasing by the second. Mr. Wilson headed outside, opening the main door of the dwelling. He then opened the heavy screen door which disappeared into the night torn from its hinges. He stepped back staying inside. The wind velocity increased to around 80 mph NOAA reported.

Wind velocity is forecast and read as nautical miles per hour. However, we are used to reading speed in statute miles per hour, so if the wind velocity is said by NOAA to be blowing at 95 this in our world is well over a hundred miles per hour in statute miles. One man was left on the barge to maintain the steam siphons and to keep the steam siphons going at least one of the boilers had to be fired. The siphons were in service constantly to remove the excess water in the barge's bilge.

The barge now securely moored securely, started rising and falling about 6 feet as the level of the water rose and fell from wave action. The water in Lake Ontario was being pushed to the east end of the lake by the hurricane-force west wind to such an extent that the reef surrounding Gill Harbor usually exposed was now 5 feet below the surface of the water. The rain was a torrent most of the time, letting up occasionally to get a fresh new start as Mr. Wilson suggested.

The size of the seas created by wind action may be calculated by knowing the fetch of the wind, how long the wind has been blowing and at what velocity and whether the water is salt or fresh and whether it is very cold or warm. The waves at the extreme east end of the Lake were much larger than anyone had ever seen. The wind had been blowing forever it seemed to the Galloo Island Lifeboat crew. The waves were extremely large and steep.

As the storm increased in its ferocity so did the motion of the dredging barge. The water seemed to rise very suddenly with the arrival of a huge wave. When the water receded the dredging barge seemed to pause above the water for a second or two, then dropped to the water breaking all of her restraining ropes chains and cables. The exception, being the anchor chain did its job, however the anchor fluke was broken off the anchor still embedded in the opening in the rocks. The next large sea arrived and when it receded the barge and its sole occupant were on their way to a ride on the lake in a hurricane. The pump operator, the sole occupant of the free barge, quickly sized up his fate. He lowered the gigantic dredge bucket to the end of its cable so the barge had a little stability and slowed it a trifle. Just enough that is so the barge could be caught by the Galloo Island Motor Lifeboat.

Mr Wilson immediately took command, saying "we are not going to let this guy on the dredge die. We are going to go get him. Get the Motor Lifeboat ready and in the water at the dock."

That assignment was a very large one in the face of the storm outside. Mr. Wilson said he was going and I want you, Mr. Matteson and one other. Mr. Matteson, who was the mate, second man in charge expected the assignment. Then he asked "who will number three be"? Mr. Wilson replied "Gerrett". Then Mr. Wilson said a strange thing, "Mr. Matteson aren't you and Gerrett related?" Mr. Matteson replied, "I think so he has Bullfinches and Nuttings in his family and so do I." Mr. Wilson went on to say he knew

my mother. Mr. Matteson started talking to Mr. Wilson. He was saying "Have you thought this through Captain?" Mr. Wilson was the Captain and it showed. He replied "I know exactly what you are thinking, let's go. They must have the boat ready for us by now".

When we stepped outside the wind had increased its velocity considerably. The rain had stopped.

When we stepped on the boat it was purring softly, as it idled, patiently waiting. It radiated confidence seemingly unperturbed by the frightful storm going on around it. The master, Mr. Wilson was in his safety harness at the helm. The mate stood beside him, I attached myself to the aft towing bollard and off we started. Mr Wilson, an excellent boat operator, sensed the boat's needs constantly. My confidence rose just a little.

The shore handlers turned us around and headed us out into the night headed to our fate. We were on our way into the hurricane of September 1938. We had job to do to save a guy, the lone individual on a dredge barge. As we headed toward the open lake the channel the range lights used for night guidance were all lined up just like they should be. All in row one underneath the others. To windward was a different sight-- huge waves were crashing on the shore beside us, I felt a little better and then realization took over. We had to turn down wind to catch the barge. We will be

broadside to those monstrous breaking seas. I thought we were probably doomed as we will be rolled over and over.

After I saw Mr. Wilson and Matteson tighten their restraints, mine was tightened again. A very rough ride we all feared. The wind seemed to increase. I could hear Mr. Wilson and Matteson discussing the situation. The wind was blowing their voices back to me. Then Mr. Wilson added "if it would just rain like the devil for a few moments and knock these breakers down, we would make our down-wind turn so much easier. As if by magic a torrential downpour hit us, the breakers were a little subdued. Mr. Wilson grasped the moment and, as smooth as silk, we were headed downwind in a chase to catch the barge before it foundered. Mr. Wilson was a master with a boat and it showed. The boats motor was purring away seemingly nonchalantly doing its job.

Traveling down-wind was a different story. The seas were traveling faster than we were so we were now taking breaking sea after breaking sea over the stern. Hanging on to the bollard was not a nice spot to find oneself. Suddenly Matteson yelled "Did you see that? I just saw a light. It must be the light of the boiler fire as the door is opened as coal is being fed to the fire." Happy day. The large dredging bucket that had been put over the side was slowing the barge enough so that we could catch her. As we approached the derelict the gigantic boom was crazily swinging from side to side making approaching the barge very hazardous. We made a few runs in, calling to the crewman to jump into the water which he was very reluctant to do. Mr. Wilson called to him

saying we would send a line and for him to tie it tightly around his waist and we would wait until the barge sank and he floated off. We would be able to retrieve him because we had a line on him. As soon as we determined that he had the line tied to him, Mr. Wilson said “ok let’s get him into the water and picked up. Then we will get out of here. I have had about enough of this hurricane.” The survivor was pulled off the barge and into the water. Eager hands from the lifeboat grabbed him pulling, him to safety. Mr. Wilson set a course for safe harbor and there we stayed until the storm had subsided a little. We returned to Galloo Island. Mission accomplished.

Note:

The dredging barge foundered on a west-facing rocky shore and was demolished.

Some facts that might be of interest to the reader—Gerrett Gregory.

Mr. Wilson was a friend of the family. We were first introduced when he was at a ship wreck in a blizzard on our farm. The farm borders the Lake Ontario shoreline. My mother introduced us. I was eight years of age. The ship in distress was the SS *McTear-* - a collier. He was firing a Lyle Gun, attempting to get a line out to the wreck.

Early in 1939, I was transferred from the CG to the Navy to the Marines as an instructor. I was in the North Atlantic, the Caribbean, the south Pacific. While I was with the Navy Mr. Wilson was drowned in a boating accident. I returned to Galloo after my Navy

assignment. While on a routine boat patrol I found [and] recovered Mr. Wilson's body which had not been found since the X-mas boating accident. This was June.

The Lifeboat that Mr. Wilson piloted during the hurricane rescue was damaged when it grounded during the exercise. The lifeboat that replaced it was on display at the World's Fair of 1939 in New York City. It stole the show at the Coast Guard display.

Also, at the time of my Uncle's drowning, Gerrett S. Nutting, in 1926, he and his crew searched many hours trying to locate anyone from the accident. Mr. Wilson was one of the best swimmers I have had the pleasure to observe, swimming on the surface or below.

The type of Motor Lifeboat that Mr. Wilson used, to make the rescue during the hurricane, in my estimation, is the only boat design which could have completed the rescue successfully.

The waves of this storm striking the New England coast were detected in Canada on a seismograph.

Gerrett Gregory

