



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

The Hurricane of 1938: A Rescue

By

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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 oldest Surfman still alive today, for taking the time to write down what he remembers about that deadly hurricane.

Editor, 2010

Biography:

I was hired by the Coast Guard as a surfman to fill a vacancy at Ashtabula, Ohio, however, the guy I was replacing changed his mind about leaving his surfman's job. I was still hired and sent to Oswego, New York. I was initially assigned to take fingerprints for ID cards: all of those who came near the lake had to possess this card the Coast Guard issued--that was my daily task. After five p.m. I went on beach patrol as a lifeguard, as everyone came to the surf station to swim because of the security of the life guards. Remember in 1938 there were no other life guards or harbor police--the surf stations or later named lifeboat stations did all of those activities. That was the case at least, in harbors which were fortunate enough to have the so called "Surfboat Station." I was then sent to Galloo Island where a new station was being constructed. This is the station where Mr. Wilson [Warrant Boatswain (L) Alston J. Wilson, USCG] was the skipper, the guy I loved and faced the 1938 hurricane with.

I left Galloo and was assigned to the Navy and the Marines as an instructor. I was then further assigned to the USS *Alcyone* (AKA-7) where I served as Boat Division Commander--one hundred four people in the division. I instructed Marines as well as Navy personnel. My DD-214 shows combat before war started; twice after war started. I transferred from the Navy Department back to the Coast Guard. "Name my assignment," anywhere--OCS, flight school--whatever I wanted, name it. Name it I did, I wanted to go back to the security I knew before I was transferred to the Navy, I wanted to go back to Galloo, that secure place of my childhood where my roots were--it was secure. After a while, on Galloo, I was impatient to get back to more active duty. So I asked for Alaska. In Alaska I was assigned to the school for aids to navigation stations. There were five of us in the class. The major function of these aids to navigation facilities were their radio beacons, which could be heard around the world. It is understood that my classmates were all killed on their first year assignment.

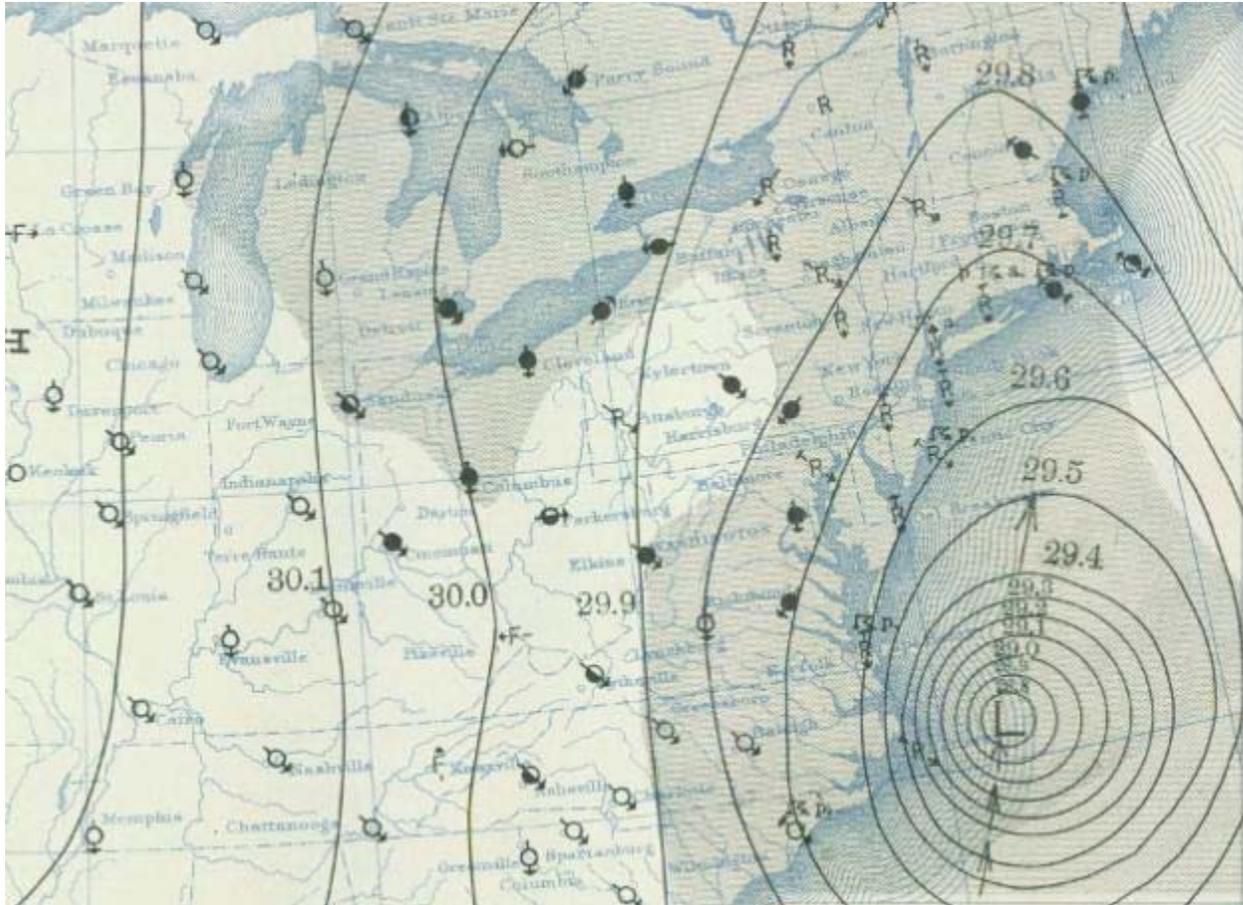
After three years of remote, isolated duty, I was offered aviation school. Midway through my training there the fellow running the school was killed in an aircraft accident. I was assigned to run the school in his place. After about nine years in Air-Sea Rescue, I was assigned to Headquarters. I then retired from the Coast Guard.

I went to work for a large aerospace company and found myself assigned to production tasks. After being evaluated and taking many exams, I was assigned to engineering management. Still wanted to be a licensed professional engineer with an identification number in California. The licensing board was contacted requesting that I be able to take the written exam which was declined, because, as they stated, I had no formal engineering education. Again, their decision was challenged. Their response was the professional engineer's written examination--the written exam that would be taken after completing college. Just the opportunity that was needed; I was licensed as a Professional Engineer, Industrial Engineering # 3618 in California.

I retired from the aerospace company. I then started certifying aircraft for the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] and flying patrols for the Coast Guard Auxiliary, from the Mexican border to Santa Barbara,

every weekend. I flew other assignments for the Auxiliary on weekdays. I then retired from the Auxiliary after seventeen years of service.

I am spending my final years writing memoirs and taking care of my beautiful wife who is afflicted with senile dementia, that wonderful lady.



On that September morning of 1938, just before the storm's arrival there was a surround-all, eerie feeling, which seemed to permeate everything. The visible horizon had a purple and coppery cast to it, there was complete silence, creating an ominous feeling. Not a breath of air was stirring. No one was sure of what was approaching--the conversations were hushed and speculative about the silence, and the threatening sky. The lake was like a mirror, not a ripple.

All these unusual weather condition this September morn had everyone guessing what was actually going to happen, which would turn out to be the mightiest storm ever to strike North America. NOAA [National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration—in 1938 it was known as the Weather Bureau] was aware and tracking the huge disturbance, they realized what was happening and were trying desperately to warn all of those in the storm's path. Their warning task was difficult. Ocean waves generated by the storm, striking the New England coast, were being recorded on seismographs in Canada as earthquake tremors.



Galloo Island at the eastern end of Lake Ontario was going to be within the western limits of this apparent gigantic metrological disaster. The lifeboat station which was being constructed on the east end of Galloo Island was nearly complete; the new station was in the path of the storm. There was still work to be done on the boat house, and the water system. The dredging of a navigable channel to the lake from Gill Harbor was nearly complete; this channel permitted deep draft power boats, such as the station's motor lifeboat, to travel to and from the small protected waterway named Gill Harbor and the lake.

The crew of the dredging barge was busily securing the dredge to the shore in an attempt to keep it from breaking away when the storm hit. Large lines and cables were secured to suitable tree trunks. The two anchor steel cables were trapped in rock crevasses. The huge dredging bucket was placed as far as possible, away from the barge for the bucket to act as an additional anchor. All seemed secure for the dredging barge as the storm approached.

In most of the life-saving stations or lifeboat stations, there were eight personnel. Each man had a number [Surfman #1 through #8]. The number one guy was the Captain or the Skipper, in the case of Galloo Island it was Mr. [Warrant Boatswain (L) Alston J.] Wilson, who ran the station with an iron hand.

Mr. Wilson was a great swimmer; he seemed totally relaxed above or below the surface. We had met before, when I was a child--he was firing a Lyle gun to get a line to the SS *McTear* when it foundered on the rocks near the family farm. He was a friend of my mothers, he knew her as "a physicist." The 1st Mate, # 2, was the guy who ran most everything. That guy was Mr. Ralph Matteson. The station's cook was # 3. The rest of the crew were numbered according to seniority. [The author was Surfman #8.]

Colors, both morning and night, were strictly observed at the Galloo Island Lifeboat Station. The crew also sang patriotic songs before and after the colors ceremony. Each crew member was supposed to have one day off each week if he could be spared. The surfmen below #3 stood a continuous lookout watch and after dark made patrols to the Canadian side of the island, the north side of every two hours. The lookout watches were generally two hours also. These five men who did the tower watches, and the patrols by boat or on foot were always sleep deprived.

Back to the hurricane of September, 1938. This gigantic meteorological phenomena would encompass Galloo Island. As was said previously, this hurricane was the most powerful storm ever to strike the continent of North America. The day and night before the hurricane arrived [the Weather Bureau] was broadcasting expected wind velocities and the approximate time of arrival. The sky



in the afternoon turned a bronze color. Darkness was falling fast. The copper colored sky encompassed everything. It was very depressing. The velocity of wind was increasing rapidly. Mr. Wilson headed outside, opening the main door which swung inward and then he opened the heavy screen door which swung outward, and it was yanked out of his hand by the wind and disappeared in the darkness.

Mr. Wilson stepped back inside and leaned against the remaining door. At this time the lake water was surging four to six feet around the island. The dredging barge was straining violently against the tethers. Her faithful, one-man-crew was gallantly stoking her boiler fires to keep the steam siphon going in order to pump the bilges of the barge. As we watched, in horror, an extremely large and powerful wave smashed the dredging barge a mighty blow and she was free of her moorings heading for the lake.

She struck the reefs that form Gill Harbor beam on, pausing a moment and then she was free in the lake, Mr. Wilson witnessed the entire breakaway—he turned to Matteson and said “Mr. Matteson, is there anyone on the barge?” Matteson replied: “There is, Sir, one man.” Mr. Wilson quickly ordered: “we have to go get him

or he will drown. Tell the gang to ready the lifeboat and you and I and another will be the crew.”



Again the wind increased, with torrential rain, near the lake breathing was difficult as the air was so permeated with water from rain and the wind lifting the lake surface water and combining it with the down pour. Wind velocity as reported by [the Weather Bureau] was read and forecast as nautical miles per hour. However we are used

to reading speeds in statute miles so if the wind velocity was said by [the Weather Bureau] to be blowing 95, this in our world was over a hundred miles per hour. The rain now was a torrent, letting up once in a while to get a new start as Mr. Wilson suggested. The screaming of the wind was deafening. The size of the waves on the lake shore was very large and the sound of them hitting the shore was very loud.



The size of the seas created by wind action may be calculated by knowing the fetch of the wind. Fetch is the distance the wind blows [over open water] without obstruction, how long the wind has been blowing and the velocity, whether the water is salt or fresh and the temperature of water. 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 generated were extremely large and steep.

Mr. Wilson and Matteson were busily getting dressed for the ordeal ahead. Matteson asked who the other crew member would be and Mr. Wilson casually said “let’s take Gerrett.” The die was cast. 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 as a physicist. 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, the three of us will probably die trying to save one guy, who will die also. Get in the boat—we have a job to do.”

The remainder of the station personnel, five guys, were all trying their best to hold the boat while we boarded, harnessing up and at the same time turn the boat around so that it would be pointed in the right direction for us to confront the terrible seas as they curled and crashed in the shallow waters of Galloo Island. The sound of the breakers crashing down on the point of land was terrifying. The lights on the dock and boat house reflected off the top of the seas as they curled higher and higher—their immense size was terrifying. The wind velocity made it difficult to stand or walk. The terrible shriek of the wind was much louder now.

When we climbed on the boat, its engine was purring softly as it idled, patiently waiting, and it radiated confidence seemingly unperturbed by the frightful storm going on around it. The boat we are in was known as a “motor life boat.” It was thirty six feet long with an eight foot beam, it was unsinkable with three water tight compartments, its exposed areas were self bailing with scuppers, it was also counter-capsize-able and its engine would run inverted. The keel weighed about a ton, and it had a communication system. This so called “motor life boat” was the right tool for a terrible storm such as this. The man at the helm of this boat was the man that was the best man for this catastrophe. The feeling of the men on board was: “if you can hang on you may survive.”

The Master, Mr. Wilson, was in his safety harness at the helm—the Mate stood beside him lashed to the boat in his harness and I was in the same cockpit, attached to the aft towing bollard, clinching it as if I were some type of human vise. Mr. Wilson, an excellent boat operator, sensed the boat’s needs constantly,

seemingly giving it strength to fight the terrible storm. As we started out into the channel the range lights were lined up perfectly. The lights from the shore reflected off the gigantic seas as they broke on the sides of boat channel leading to the lake, where we were headed. Suddenly the rain stopped, the breaker sizes seemed to double instantly and the breaking seas were mammoth, there was no way Mr. Wilson was going to be able to make his downwind turn without being pitch poled end-over-end, killing us all [yet] we all knew he would make the turn, come hell or high water—we were enduring both. Mr. Matteson and I heard Mr. Wilson say to himself and to the storm: “If it would just rain like hell for a few minutes we would be able to make the downwind turn without killing everyone. And if by magic a terrific rain storm hit us, the seas flattened out a little and the downwind turn was made—we were on our way to catch the dredging barge. We were on our way—into history—into the hurricane of September 1938. We had job to do.

Traveling downwind was a different story. The seas were traveling faster than we were so we were now surfing and taking breaking sea after breaking sea over the stern. Hanging on to the bollard, getting hit with tons of water, was not a nice thing to endure or a great place 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 more 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 to the barge and with a megaphone, 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. Then we would be able to retrieve him from the water as 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 and pulled him to safety. Mr. Wilson set a course for a safe harbor and there we stayed until the storm had subsided a little. We then returned to Galloo Island. Mission accomplished.

Note: The dredging barge foundered on a west facing rocky shore and was demolished. If the crewman had been on the dredging barge, he surely would have been killed. Saving the crewman’s life made it all worthwhile.

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