

United States Coast Guard SAR Stories

LT Robert Prause and the Coast Guard's First Rescue Swimmer Program



LT Robert Prause, graduate of the Coast Guard Academy class of 1939, provides a classic example of the Coast Guard's core values of honor, respect and devotion to duty. On June 22, 1915, Robert Henry Prause, Jr., was born in Charleston, South Carolina. He spent most of his childhood in Norfolk, Virginia, where he attended Matthew Fontaine Maury High School. He excelled in the technical preparatory curriculum offered by that school and became a member of Maury's math, science and literary clubs. Based on his academic achievements in high school, Prause received a scholarship at the Norfolk Division of William & Mary College, now known as Old Dominion University, and studied engineering in the Virginia Polytechnic Institute's Division of that school.

After over a year of studies at the Norfolk Division, Bob Prause decided to follow his passion for technical studies and took the entrance examination for the Coast Guard Academy. In 1935, he passed his examination and received an appointment for the class of 1939. After graduation, Prause served on board the cutter MODOC homeported in Wilmington, North Carolina. He next served as watch officer and navigator on board the cutter ONONDAGA based out of Astoria, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington.

In early 1942, LTJG Prause received orders to serve as executive officer on board the cutter ESCANABA, homeported in Grand Haven, Michigan. By June, ESCANABA changed stations from the Great Lakes to Boston to serve as part of the Coast Guard's Greenland Patrol. Soon after ESCANABA joined the Greenland Patrol, Prause received a wartime promotion to full lieutenant. Over the course of the next year, ESCANABA served as a workhorse of the Greenland Patrol's convoys. The cutter escorted cargo vessels and troop transports between U.S. and Canadian ports and on to Greenland in arguably the worst and most forbidding conditions in any theater of operations of World War II.

On June 15, 1942, an event took place that made a lasting impression on Prause. During the early evening, while escorting a convoy from Nova Scotia to Greenland, ESCANABA made sonar contact with a U-boat, depth charged the submarine and likely sank it. Within an hour, ESCANABA depth-charged a second U-boat, but could not confirm a kill. Around midnight, a U-boat attack on the convoy sank the transport USS CHEROKEE, sending 173 personnel into the icy waters. Within minutes, the shock of the water's temperature had incapacitated CHEROKEE's survivors. Desperate to retrieve as many men as possible, Prause dangled head first over the side of the cutter while his crewmates held his legs. In spite of the threat of submarine attack and a heavy seaway, ESCANABA rescued a total of the twenty-two survivors.

The difficulty of retrieving men from the frigid heavy seas of the North Atlantic motivated Prause to work with the ship's commanding officer, LCDR Carl U. Peterson (CGA class of 1930), to develop a safer and more effective method for recovering debilitated survivors from Greenland's cold waters. Prause relied on his technical

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background to devise a system based on tethered rescue swimmers equipped with rubber exposure suits normally issued to aviators that flew over expanses of cold water. Prause experimented with one of these suits, which trapped water kept warm by body heat. Prause worked with three crewmen that volunteered to serve as retrievers and drilled them and their support crew, so that all rescue swimmer operations could be conducted smoothly from the ESCANABA's rolling deck in blackout conditions.



On February 3rd, 1943, a convoy bound from Newfoundland to Greenland provided the ultimate test of Prause's experiments and training. Cutters ESCANABA, TAMPA, and COMANCHE escorted a group of three steamers, including the U.S. Army Transport DORCHESTER, which carried 904 passengers and crew. At 1:00am late that night a torpedo ripped through DORCHESTER's hull and the transport sank within twenty minutes. It was forbidden to use lights in U-boat infested waters, but Prause's team was ready, donning their exposure suits and preparing to put their training to use. In addition, life preservers on board DORCHESTER were specially equipped with blinking red lights, making it easier to locate the floating survivors in the dark.

Prause's tethered rescue swimmer system proved a great success. Operations on deck and in the water were far more effective in recovering survivors than any previous attempts. Equipped with their exposure suits, the retrievers swam out to the DORCHESTER's men and determined whether they were still alive and ESCANABA's deck crew pulled in



those that had survived. Prause supervised this operation in less than ideal conditions and by the end of the eight-hour evolution ESCANABA had saved 133 lives, far more than the twenty-two rescued from USS CHEROKEE.

Unfortunately, the success of Prause and his system proved short lived. In June, ESCANABA joined cutters STORIS and RARITAN to

escort a convoy bound from Greenland to Newfoundland. At 5:00am on the morning of June 13, almost a full year after the CHEROKEE rescue, ESCANABA fell victim to a catastrophic explosion whose cause has remained a mystery to this day. In a matter of minutes, the cutter went up in smoke and sank, taking 100 crewmen and LCDR Peterson down with it. According to ESCANABA survivor, Ray O'Malley, he and two others lived through the ordeal, including Lt. Prause. The crew from Cutter RARITAN threw Prause a line, pulled him on deck and took him below for medical attention; however, Prause lost consciousness and could not be revived. Due to the distance to land, he was buried at sea with full military honors.

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Despite its success, the systematic use of tethered rescue swimmers developed by Prause failed to catch on after the loss of ESCANABA. For his efforts and deeds, Prause received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, Purple Heart Medal and several World War II campaign medals. And while his system may not be characterized as a prototype or antecedent to the Coast Guard's modern rescue swimmer program, it represents one of the first successful cold-water rescue methods that worked in some of the worst sea conditions experienced in World War II.

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