

THEY DON'T HAVE TO COME BACK

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

The Columbia River bar is the place where the River of the West and the mighty Pacific Ocean meet, with dramatic and often violent results. Hundreds of ships and boats have been lost on the bar. Seafarers and river-cruisers have lost their lives by the score. Mariners call it the Graveyard of the Pacific.*

U.S. Coast Guardsmen are required to respond to every maritime distress signal along this rough stretch, no matter what weather or time of day. They have saved countless numbers of vessels and lives, an average of 600 persons a year on the lower Columbia alone. They are ordinary men and women who take extraordinary risks in small boats and aircraft. Most of the time they get back safely, but sometimes their luck runs out. One January night 45 years ago, the Columbia River bar claimed the lives of five Coast Guardsmen and two ocean fishermen they attempted to rescue. Three Coast Guard vessels were lost, as well as the fishing boat they set out to save from gale-stricken seas.

Two men who survived that failed rescue attempt visited Astoria in the spring of 1990 to recount the tragic night of January 12, 1961. Darrel Joseph Murray and Larry Edwards were Coast Guard coxswains of two of the three rescue boats that sank that night. The coxswain of the third boat died in the attempt, along with most of his crew.

When Murray walked into the Columbia River Museum, it was as if he had seen an apparition. Visiting the Museum that day was Larry Edwards' son, Blaine Edwards, a fisherman at the time, so resembled his father as a young man that Murray felt for a moment he was in the presence of his old friend, looking just as he did three decades earlier.

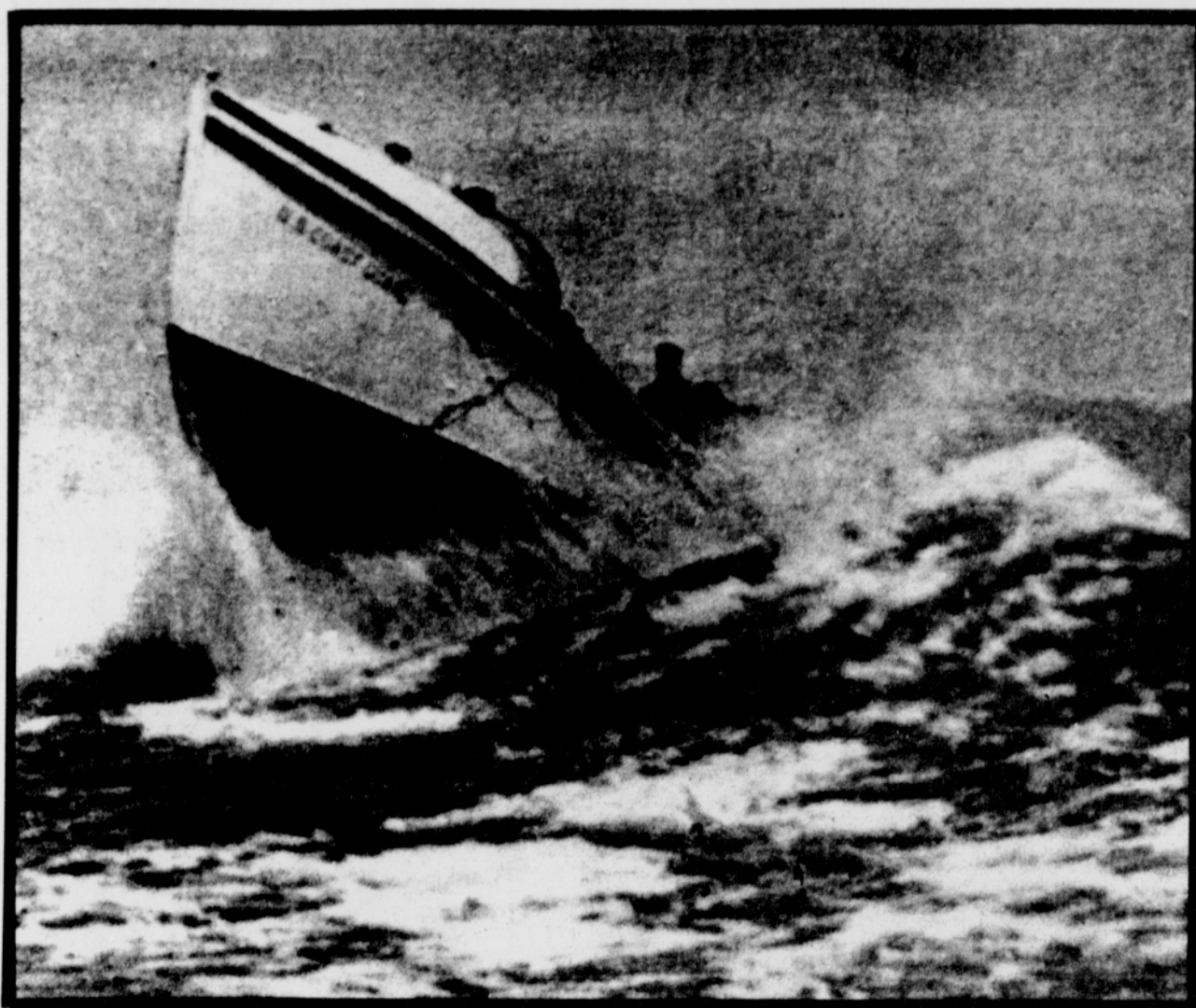
Murray had never forgotten that night in 1961. Even after 20 years spent in the Coast Guard in motor lifeboat stations, the disaster continued to affect and define his life. The events of that evening began late in the afternoon of January 12 with a distress call from the fishing boat *Mermaid*, received by Cape Disappointment Lifeboat Station just inside the mouth of the Columbia River on the Washington side. The *Mermaid*, of Ilwaco, Washington, had lost its rudder trying to beat into the river ahead of a storm, and was drifting helplessly toward the surf north of Peacock Spit.

Murray, a boatswain's mate described as a petty officer of long experience and established competence in lifeboat stations, quickly dispatched two boats. "I sent Larry Edwards out in a 36-foot boat and I took a 40-foot boat," Murray said during his visit to CRMM 16 years ago. The solid and sturdy, but slow, 36-foot boat was the standard motor lifeboat used by the Coast Guard at the time. It was constructed of wood and was capable of righting itself if capsized. The 40-footer did not have that capability. Not meant to be used as a lifeboat, it generally served as a utility and patrol craft. "The 40-footer was not designed for rough water, but it was faster than the 36-footer," Murray explained. "I thought I could get out there and get a towline to the *Mermaid* before it hit the beach, and turn the tow over to Larry when he reached me."

After another hour of plowing full-throttle through the storm, the 36-foot boat piloted by Larry Edwards only barely reached Lightship *Columbia*. The stern was awash, the engine room half full of water and rudder control almost gone. Edwards circled the lightship for nearly two hours in an attempt to transfer the men. Knowing time was running out, he finally managed to come alongside. One member of his crew was swept from the Jacob's ladder by a wave, only to be snatched again from the water by the lightship's chief engineer as he rose on the crest of another wave. As the last man's foot left the 36-footer, it broke its lines and sank from sight — the only 36-foot motor lifeboat ever lost by the Coast Guard in over seven decades of service.

Despite the storm, other Coast Guard vessels and aircraft searched for the missing men the rest of the night and into the next day. Flares were dropped. Shore parties combed both sides of the river. Only two bodies were found. Culp's body came ashore near Cape Disappointment later that night, close to where his surviving crew member, Gordon Huggins, beached. The body of one of the fishermen was found a few days later.

The disaster shocked residents of the small towns on the lower Columbia. Local newspapers questioned the quality of the Coast Guard's rescue craft. A three-day inquiry was held and all survivors provided details of what happened that night. The irony



USCG 36-FOOT MOTOR LIFEBOAT (PHOTO FROM CRMM ARCHIVES)

of the situation was that change was already in progress. A 44-foot all-steel motor lifeboat was going into production to replace the 36-footers. (The 44-footers, which have been called the best lifesaving craft ever developed, were succeeded in 1990 by a new class of 47-foot aluminum motor lifeboats that are still in service.)

A plaque to the memory of the lost crew of *Triumph* was placed near the Point Adams Lifeboat Station in Hammond (closed in 1967 because it was deemed too far upriver from where it was most needed). John Culp, coxswain of *Triumph*, received a posthumous Gold Lifesaving Medal, the Coast Guard's highest award. His crew received Silver Lifesaving Medals, four of them awarded posthumously. Larry Edwards, coxswain of the 36-footer lost that night, received a Gold Lifesaving Medal for his role in rescuing the crew of the 40-foot utility boat.

Darrel Murray, coxswain of the 40-footer, received a Commendation Medal for his part in the ill-fated rescue. He made a 20-year career of the Coast Guard. His visit to Astoria and CRMM in 1990 was prompted by the haunting memory of that night.

What happened instead was that the weather, bad to begin with, continued to get worse. Unable to establish direct radio contact with the *Mermaid*, Murray lost valuable time searching for the fishing vessel. Neither of the Coast Guard boats had radar. The *Jana Jo*, a fishboat from Ilwaco skippered by Roy Gunnary, assisted by relaying *Mermaid's* calls. It was after dark before Murray was able to talk to the *Mermaid*. "I told them to turn their spotlight on the clouds," Murray said. "I spotted them immediately after that. When I reached the boat, I told the two men aboard they should transfer to my boat. They refused, so we took them under tow."

Edwards in the 36-foot boat finally reached the other two vessels near Buoy 1, which marks the beginning of the shipping channel into the Columbia River. His boat had taken a beating crossing the bar. It was leaking at the seams and the radio antenna was broken. He did not take over the tow. Plans had changed due to the worsening weather. The 52-foot motor lifeboat *Triumph* from Point Adams on the Oregon side of the river was coming out to take the *Mermaid* in.

The *Triumph* was a 25-year veteran of rescues in all types of weather at the Columbia River bar. It was wooden-hulled, one of only two boats of the same design, built in 1935. The man at the helm that night was Boatswain's Mate John L. Culp, a 31 year old career Coast Guardsman who was considered an excellent lifeboat commander. By the time Culp left the Point Adams station, four miles upriver from the bar, gale winds from the southwest had whipped up huge swells. The *Triumph* did not reach the other three boats at Buoy 1 until two hours later. Culp took over the tow of the *Mermaid* from Murray. All four vessels started toward the river.

Then everything went wrong at once. Murray's boat capsized trying to cross the bar. A few minutes later, *Triumph* went over while attempting to retrieve a parted towline to the *Mermaid*. Culp and four of his men were lost. Only one member of the crew of *Triumph* survived, later washing ashore unharmed.

Murray and his two-man crew survived only because of Edwards' quick thinking. His boat was near Murray's when it overturned. Responding to the 40-footer, Edwards smashed against the upended keel of the other boat during the rescue of the three men. He turned his battered lifeboat out to sea and headed for the Coast Guard Lightship *Columbia*, anchored on station about seven miles outside the river entrance.

In the meantime, the *Mermaid*, still afloat, was taken into tow once again by another 36-foot boat sent from Point Adams

to assist in the rescue. The 36-footers' coxswain also set out for the lightship, but lost the *Mermaid* to a large swell that capsized the fishing vessel, killing the three men aboard — two brothers, and a survivor from *Triumph* they had pulled from the water.

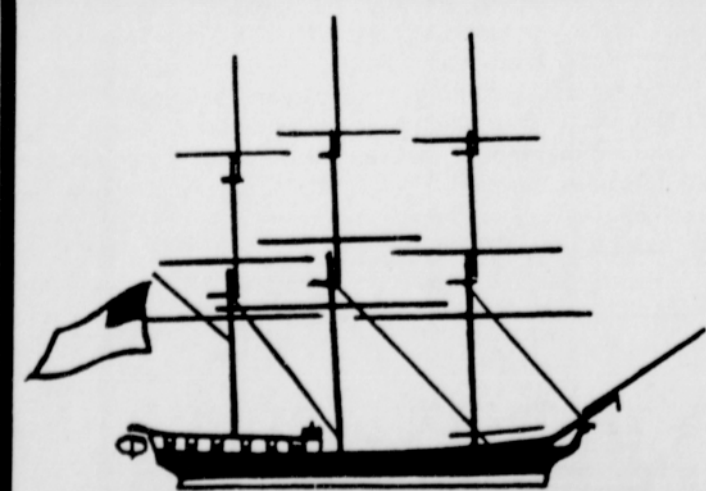
Larry Edwards also spent 20 years in the Coast Guard and afterward worked for the Alaska ferry system. A few weeks after Murray's unexpected arrival in Astoria, Edwards visited his fisherman son Blaine, who lived in Ilwaco. Asked about the night of the *Triumph* disaster, he responded that he had been off-duty waiting for a friend when the *Mermaid's* call was received at Cape Disappointment. He said it was "dumb luck" that he had seen Murray's capsized boat in the darkness and storm. He remembered seeing the *Triumph* with *Mermaid* in tow starting across the bar just after his crew rescued Murray's from the capsized 40-footer. No one now living saw the *Triumph* sink. Edwards said he chose to head out to sea because he was afraid his battered lifeboat would not survive crossing the bar. He drove it full-throttle through mountainous seas because of his concern the sputtering engine of the 36-footer would quit. He said, "I never thought about not making it."

Lightship *Columbia*, which figures prominently in this story, was retired in 1979 after nearly 30 years service with the Coast Guard, replaced by an automated light buoy (which locals joke looked like a large sparkplug) — replaced by an even more sophisticated electronic beacon. Today *Columbia* is on display at the Maritime Museum, and is designated a National Historic Landmark. Visitors explore her deck and interior at her quiet berth at Astoria's 17th Street Pier, where two Coast Guard cutters are often moored alongside.

There have been changes in Coast Guard philosophy since the night of January 12, 1961. The old motto, "*You must always go out, but you don't have to come back*" has been altered to reflect the discernment of on-call rescuers.

A tragic postscript to the January 12, 1961 disaster occurred on January 11, 1991, a day before a 30th anniversary commemoration and reunion in Astoria of the 11 survivors of that night initiated by Darrel Murray, coxswain of the 40-foot boat that was lost. A Coast Guard rescue swimmer and two fishermen died when a fishing boat that had been filling with water sank while under tow by a Coast Guard rescue vessel crossing the Columbia River bar. Not only did the three men die in the same area — near Peacock Spit — the dead Coast Guardsman was from the crew of the *Triumph II*, which was named after the 52-foot boat that capsized with the loss of five of its crew 30 years earlier. Gordon Huggins, the single survivor of the first *Triumph* was at the reunion, which was also attended by families of participants and by locals who remembered that deadly night.

This article has been revised from one that originally appeared in the Spring 1990 issue of the Columbia River Maritime Museum's publication, *The Quarterdeck*.



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*Columbia River Bar Pilot Kevin Murray fell into the Pacific Ocean on a stormy night January 9, 2006 while jumping from an outgoing cargo ship to the bar pilot's boat *Chinook*. Captain Murray's body washed up at Copalis Beach, Washington and was found two and a days half later.