

Cape Cod Times

Pendleton hero Bernie Webber dies in Florida



Bernie Webber, the coxswain aboard Coast Guard Rescue 36500 boat that rescued 32 people off the Pendleton tanker in 1952, died Saturday in Florida. File photo

By **ROBERT GOLD**
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January 26, 2009 6:00 AM

Bernie Webber, who helped rescue 32 people off the coast of Chatham in 1952, died this weekend at his Florida home.

Webber, 80, was one of four Coast Guard crew members who braved storm-ravaged Cape waters on Feb. 18, 1952, after the 503-foot tanker Pendleton broke in two.

Webber and the other Coast Guard members were able to save 32 of 33 people on the tanker, huddling them onto their 36-foot motorized lifeboat. The men had to climb down a ladder rope and jump onto the boat. One man missed and drowned.

The four Coast Guard crew members were hailed as heroes and their boat, the CG36500, has been turned into a floating museum by the Orleans Historical Society.

"They considered it at the time one of the most dangerous (Coast Guard) rescues in the 20th century," said Bonnie Snow, the Orleans society's historian.

Chatham resident Bob Ledoux, a friend of Webber, said he died unexpectedly Saturday. He lived in Melbourne, Fla., but would come to North Eastham every fall.

Ledoux met Webber in 2000 on the Cape. Ledoux was struck by how modest Webber was, never talking about the rescue.

"He was a very mild mannered guy, very quiet, very unassuming. There was no bragging. He was just one heck of a person to be with," he said.

Ledoux said Webber's wife, Miriam, plans to hold a service on the Cape this spring.

Theresa Barbo, a Yarmouthport resident who co-authored a book about the Pendleton rescue, met Webber in 2002 after a 50th anniversary event. They quickly became good friends.

Barbo said Webber, who held several maritime jobs over his lifetime, including captain of a tug boat, accomplished far more than just the rescue. Barbo said Webber would often speak with Coast Guard cadets.

"He was just a wise person. He saw a lot," she said.

Cape Cod Times

My view

Webber made of 'right material'

By [WILLIAM COLLETTE](#)

January 28, 2009 6:20 AM

When Coast Guard vessels age and outlive their usefulness, they are modified, sold to private industry or foreign countries, scrapped or scuttled. Replacements with the same name are built and put back into service.

When great men, legendary heroes like Senior Chief Petty Officer Bernard E. Webber pass over the bar, they are succeeded by new, younger Coasties, but they are never truly replaced. They live on forever as men who have earned legend status for their heroic service. Webber died Saturday at his home in Florida. He was 80.

I first met Bernie at Chatham. He was more than the chief petty officer in charge. He was my hero and became one of my closest friends.

Bernie was indeed one of the greatest of the "Chatham Legends" — a group of Coast Guard men and women who have banded together over the years to keep our tradition of "service to others" more than a slogan.

Chief Webber was a good friend and supporter of the Coast Guard Heritage Museum in Barnstable Village. He has donated invaluable historic artifacts to us.

His heroism during the dramatic Pendleton rescue in 1952 earned him and his valiant crew of three volunteers the Coast Guard's highest honor: Gold Medals.

His experience with the Breeches Buoy apparatus brought seven shipwrecked fishermen safely ashore in Provincetown in 1962 in another dramatic rescue, which earned one of our museum's founding directors, Dan Davidson, a silver medal from the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The Coast Guard didn't give out medals for individual service since everything was "a team effort." Dan Davidson understands that and says "I was nothing without the team." Bernie saw it differently. He put Dan in for a medal because he went beyond what duty required when he risked his own life, plunging into the icy water (no wet suits back then), swam out and saved the fisherman who had fallen into frigid sea. Bernie was a hard taskmaster but a great champion for his men. He was a born leader.

But his entire life was one of service. He saved dozens of stranded boaters and fishermen during his many tours of duty here on Cape Cod. He taught those sailors who came under his command everything they needed to survive and help others survive.

He was tough but compassionate and humble. He never forgot what the commanding officer of a Coast Guard training station wrote to a recruit in February 1946:

"I welcome you into the U.S. Coast Guard. It is a tough outfit, proud of its long history of efficient service. It wants only men who are willing and eager to do their best at all times and who have the guts to see a hard job through to the very end.

"Hard jobs are 'routine' in this service. In a way, the Coast Guard is always at war: in wartime, against armed enemies of the nation; and in peacetime, against all enemies of mankind at sea: fire, collision, lawlessness, gales, ice, derelicts and many more.

"The Coast Guard, therefore, is no place for a quitter, or for a cry baby, or for a four-flusher, or for anyone who cannot 'keep his eye on the ball.' Your period of recruit training is a time"to determine whether or not you are made of the right material. It is up to you, as an individual to prove your worth."

Bernie Webber was made of the "right material" and he proved his worth time and again. He never quit. He never indulged in self pity. He led his men by example. He was a leader.

Some "legends" are made of myths. Bernie Webber was, and always will be, an authentic legend whose cherished memory lives on at the Coast Guard Heritage Museum and in the annals of Coast Guard history.

William Collette is president of the Coast Guard Heritage Museum. Francis Broadhurst, museum historian, and Bob Ledoux of Chatham, a Webber family friend, contributed to this article.

The Boston Globe

Harrowing night of heroism remembered



Coast Guardsman Bernie Webber helped rescue the crew of an oil tanker that sank off Chatham in 1952. Webber died at age 80 Saturday in in Florida home. (US Coast Guard)

By Bryan Marquard, Globe Staff | January 29, 2009

Strapping himself to the wheel of a 36-foot motorized lifeboat, wind and snow whipping his face, Bernie Webber steered through Chatham Harbor's rough waves early on the evening of Feb. 18, 1952. Ahead in the swirling storm floated part of the Pendleton, an oil tanker that had split apart in a northeaster.

No one knew if there were any survivors when Mr. Webber and three fellow Coast Guardsmen motored out into waves that would tower 60 feet. As they crossed the Chatham Bar, the shifting shoals that make getting in and out of the harbor perilous even in good weather, a wave tossed their wooden boat sideways into the air. The windshield smashed, the compass washed overboard, and the crew's confidence ebbed.

"It was half a miracle, if you think about it," said Mr. Webber's wife, Miriam. "He told me, 'I never thought I'd be back.'"

But more than two hours later, Mr. Webber guided the CG-36500 back to Chatham's piers, laden with 32 crewmen from the Pendleton.

Mr. Webber, who along with his crew was awarded the US Treasury Department's Gold Lifesaving Medal for heroism, died of a heart attack Saturday in his Melbourne, Fla., home. He was 80.

"I really wanted to go on that trip; I think all of us did," Andrew Fitzgerald of Centennial, Colo., last surviving member of the 36500's crew, said yesterday. "I knew there was a chance we might not make it, but I thought we would. I did know that we would end up being awfully wet and cold."

The Pendleton was one of two tankers that broke apart off Cape Cod earlier that day. A search plane spotted the Pendleton while flying near the Fort Mercer. Two daring rescue operations saved 70 lives, generating banner headlines, but 14 men died in the wrecks, nine of 41 on the Pendleton, five of 43 on the Fort Mercer.

A boatswain's mate, first class, Mr. Webber was assigned to the Chatham Lifeboat Station. Before heading out on the rescue mission, he looked out at Chatham Harbor with foreboding.

"The seas coming in there were mountains," he told a radio station 15 years later. Audio clips of the interview are on the website www.cg36500.org/rescue_audio.html.

"The boat seemed smaller than ever to me at that moment," he said in the interview.

Once he had navigated past the Chatham Bar, Mr. Webber headed in what he hoped was the right direction. Suddenly sensing a presence in the darkness, he told Fitzgerald to shine the spotlight ahead, and from the dark night the Pendleton appeared. Then they saw a crowd of men, 33 in all, on board, clad in lifejackets and waving their arms.

"I says, 'My God, what are we going to do?' I said, 'Where am I going to put these men? How am I going to get them off?' All of these different things passed through my mind," he told the radio station. "I said, 'If I fail, what a tragic thing. How can you ever live it down if all these people get killed?' The responsibility - you feel it, it's on your mind."

One by one, 32 men safely boarded the lifeboat, until the last man fell, disappeared into the waves, and perished.

"I think the thing that bothered us more than anything was the fellow we didn't save, the fellow who went into the water," Fitzgerald said.

Getting the crew off the Pendleton was only half the job, though. Without a navigation system, Mr. Webber had to find his way home.

"He always said to me, 'The Lord's hand was on my shoulder,' " said Mr. Webber's wife. "That's who showed him where to go."

The youngest of four brothers, Bernard C. Webber grew up in Milton, the son of a Baptist minister. His father wanted him to enter the ministry, but Mr. Webber joined the merchant marine at 16 and volunteered for the Coast Guard two years later. While stationed on Cape Cod with the Coast Guard, he met Miriam Pentinen.

"We met on a blind date, and he knew it that night," she said, "and then we were married in 1950. His father married us 58 years ago."

After the rescue, Mr. Webber stayed in the Coast Guard into the mid-1960s, serving a tour of duty in Vietnam. He retired from the Coast Guard and lived on Cape Cod, moved to Maine for about a decade, then to Florida, before moving to Melbourne in the mid-1980s.

Years after the rescue, the 36500 was restored and now is owned by the Orleans Historical Society. Mr. Webber returned to Cape Cod in 2002 for a 50th anniversary reunion with his crew from that night, but he was always reticent in the face of praise. "He didn't want any glory," his wife said.

"He had a quiet dignity about him," said his daughter, Patricia Hamilton of Shamong, N.J.

Mr. Webber also leaves a son, Bernard, along with two granddaughters and a grandson.

The family plans to hold a memorial ceremony on Cape Cod on May 9, which would have been Mr. Webber's 81st birthday.

"You know, it's often been said, 'Some are born to be leaders; some are born to be followers,' " Mr. Webber said in the radio interview, when asked if he would be so heroic again.

"I've, in the Coast Guard, been in both positions. But I think that I've always been a follower. When I was ordered to do something, that was my job. It was my business. It's what they paid me for. How can you humanly turn your back on your responsibilities?"

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The Cape Cod Chronicle

January 29, 2009

Gold Medal Coxswain Bernie Webber Remembered As A Humble Hero

by Alan Pollock

CHATHAM — The Coast Guardsman who orchestrated the rescue of 32 men from the stricken tanker Pendleton in 1952, and in so doing, gained a place in U.S. maritime history, has died. Warrant Officer Bernard C. "Bernie" Webber was 80.

A resident of Melbourne, Fla., Mr. Webber had a heart attack Saturday night and died suddenly, according to family friend and spokesman Bob Ledoux of Chatham.



Bernie Webber, at the helm of the CG36500 in 2002. FILE PHOTO

During a fierce blizzard on Feb. 18, 1952, Station Chatham dispatched one lifesaving crew to attend to the tanker Fort Mercer, and Mr. Webber was sent to help the crew of the Pendleton. He assembled an unlikely team and crossed the Chatham Bar into mountainous seas in the 36500, a wooden motor lifeboat; the first ocean wave to strike the boat nearly caused it to founder, breaking the windshield and sweeping the compass away.

With crewmen Richard Livesey and Irving Maske at the bow and engineer Andrew Fitzgerald in the engine room, Mr. Webber maneuvered the lifeboat close to the towering wreck, allowing crewmen to jump aboard, one by one from a Jacob's ladder. Of the 33 men aboard the stern section of the tanker, 32 were taken safely aboard the rescue boat. One man was crushed to death during the rescue, an image that Mr. Webber said haunted him for many years.

No one could explain how the crippled lifeboat made it back across the Chatham Bar. Mr. Webber said he was certain that there was a divine hand on the tiller that night. He and his crew received the Treasury Department's Gold Lifesaving Medal for what has been called the greatest small boat rescue in Coast Guard history. Mr. Webber became an overnight hero, a role he played reluctantly. At least in the public eye, the Pendleton rescue eclipsed the remainder of Mr. Webber's distinguished career.

A native of Milton, Mass., Mr. Webber was the son of the late Rev. A. Bernard Webber and Annie Knight Webber. He was one of four sons, all of whom served in the U.S. Military during World War II. When he was 16, Mr. Webber joined the Merchant Marine Service and then enlisted in the Coast Guard; his first assignment was duty at Highland Lighthouse in North Truro. It was while at this assignment that he met the woman who would become his wife, Miriam Pentinen. They were married on July 16, 1950 in Milton in a ceremony performed by his father. Mr. Webber went on to serve tours of duty at lighthouses, lifesaving stations, small boat stations, lightships and a Coast Guard tugboat. He served three tours of duty at Station Chatham, the last one as its commanding officer.

In 1961, Mr. Webber was sent to Coast Guard headquarters to evaluate a prototype 44-foot motor lifeboat. With his input, and suggestions from a handful of other accomplished coxswains, the 44-footers became a mainstay of the nation's search and rescue fleet. The last remaining 44-footer, the 44301, is still on duty at Station Chatham; it will be decommissioned in May.

Mr. Webber was promoted to Warrant Officer and served a brief tour in Vietnam before his retirement from the Coast Guard in 1966. He took a job as the Wellfleet harbormaster, and later ran a charter fishing boat from Rock Harbor. After moving to Florida, he served as a tugboat captain. It was during this time that Mr. Webber wrote his memoir, "Chatham: The Lifeboatmen."

"He was very quiet, unpretentious," Ledoux said. He spoke of the Pendleton rescue rarely, and when he did, "he only talked about one thing: he missed one guy."

After his retirement, Mr. Webber was pleased to learn that a group of Cape Codders were restoring the 36500 rescue boat.

"Until we resurrected things back in the '80s, he was very satisfied to stay in the background," said maritime historian and author William Quinn of Orleans, one of a group of volunteers who worked to convert the boat to a floating museum. Among maritime rescues, the Pendleton effort stands out because of the obstacles the crew overcame; it was heroism which was at least on par with the celebrated emergency landing of a U.S. Airways jetliner in the Hudson River earlier this month, Quinn said.

"I think the people of Chatham can be proud of what was accomplished there, and what the Coast Guard continues to accomplish each day," he said.

Parker Wiseman, Chatham's liaison to the U.S. Coast Guard, remembers Mr. Webber as a true American hero. Many people knew Mr. Webber's story, but few enjoyed the privilege of his friendship, he said.

"He was a retiring individual who thought more of others than himself throughout his life," Wiseman said. "It was heartwarming to watch the respect and warmth with which he was greeted every time he visited his old command, Coast Guard Station Chatham."

Mr. Webber was predeceased by two of his three crewmates. Richard Livesey passed away in 2007, several years after the death of Irving Maske. The sole surviving crewman is Andrew Fitzgerald.

In an interview with The Chronicle in 2002, Mr. Webber said the events of 9-11 put the Pendleton rescue in perspective.

“In this day and age, all you have to do is look out the window and see a so-called hero,” he said. “People are thrown into things. Whether it’s war or whatever it is, if you have a job, you can be thrown into a situation at any moment. People respond in various ways. It’s a matter of your mind, and a matter of your heart,” Mr. Webber said.

After the Pendleton rescue, Mr. Webber’s fame was spread by an aggressive public relations campaign by the Coast Guard, an experience that left him disillusioned. Having only spoken to the group commander once or twice in his career, he was now photographed shaking hands with admirals and cabinet members. Beyond his public relations value, “they had no interest whatsoever in me,” he said.

In the 14 remaining years of his Coast Guard career, Mr. Webber encountered lots of animosity and jealousy. “People don’t take too kindly to so-called heroes,” he said. “It kind of sets the pace for what the next guy has to do. What could any guy ever say, from then on at Chatham, if they said, you have to go over the bar tonight?”

Despite those misgivings, Mr. Webber was fiercely proud of the Coast Guard and of his crew. He came back to the Cape each fall for many years, and always visited Station Chatham. In addition to a plaque and some photographs commemorating the rescue, there is a tradition at Station Chatham: when a crewman attains the rank of Chief Petty Officer, they get to wear Mr. Webber’s anchor pins.

Mr. Webber is survived by his widow, Miriam (Pentinen) Webber; a daughter, Patricia Hamilton and her husband, Bruce, and two granddaughters, Leah and Hilary Hamilton of Shamong, N.J. and North Eastham; a son, Bernard E. Webber and a grandson, Shane Webber of California.

Mr. Webber will be cremated and his remains will be interred with military honors in a family plot in Wellfleet in the spring.

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Baltimore Sun

The heroes who rescued 32 seamen in 60-foot seas

Frederick N. Rasmussen
Back Story
March 1, 2009

Nearly 60 years have passed since Bernard C. "Bernie" Webber and his crew of three Coast Guard lifeboatmen braved a vicious Atlantic nor'easter with 70-knot winds and pounding 60-foot seas for one of the most daring rescues in maritime history.

Webber was coxswain of the CG36500 lifeboat, which responded to the SS Pendleton, a 503-foot oil tanker that broke up off Cape Cod. Webber died in January at his home in Melbourne, Fla. He was 80.

After running away from the Northfield Mount Hermon School in Gill, Mass., Webber enlisted in the merchant marine during World War II. Afterward, he enlisted in the Coast Guard and served at lighthouses, lifesaving stations and lightships and aboard a tug. He was commanding officer of the Coast Guard Motor Lifeboat Station in Chatham, Mass. After being promoted to warrant officer, Webber served a tour of duty in Vietnam before retiring in 1966.

But perhaps the defining moment of Webber's remarkable career unfolded early Feb. 18, 1952, when the Pendleton, and its crew of 41, with a full cargo of 122,000 barrels of kerosene and heating oil, was nearing the end of a voyage from Baton Rouge, La., to Boston.

The ship confronted blizzard conditions as it steamed through an intense gale. As raging seas began pouring over the stern, a series of explosive cracking sounds was heard as the vessel began fracturing. It made a final lurch as squealing, wrenching, sparking steel gave way.

The Pendleton's clock read 5:50 a.m.

The tanker had split. Aboard the bow section were Capt. John Fitzgerald and seven other crew members, including the chief mate, second mate, third mate and the ship's radio operator. At the moment of parting, electrical breakers tripped, casting the bow into darkness.

In the drifting stern section, 33 crewmen contemplated their fate, while all machinery and lighting continued functioning normally.

Forty miles eastward of the Pendleton, another tanker was in trouble. The SS Fort Mercer broke in two at 8 a.m., but not before the radio officer was able to get off an S.O.S.

Deprived of the ability to send a distress call, the Pendleton and its crew began losing hope as they drifted helplessly southward while being pounded by mountainous seas. They had a radio receiving set, which allowed them to hear transmissions of Coast Guardsmen who were racing to aid the wallowing Fort Mercer but who were unaware of the Pendleton's peril.

Eight terrifying hours would pass before the Coast Guard picked up the Pendleton on radar.

At 5:30 p.m., with the Pendleton's stern drifting dangerously near North Beach, the officer in charge of the Chatham Lifeboat Station ordered Webber, engineer Andrew J. Fitzgerald and two seamen, Richard P. Livesey and Irving W. Maske, to clear the Chatham Fish Pier in the CG36500 and make for the ship.

Chatham residents could hear the doomed ship's whistle blowing above the storm, said Richard Ryder, who was 12 at the time and at home recuperating from the flu.

At 5:55 p.m., Webber and his volunteer crew got under way. He gunned the boat over the treacherous Chatham Bar and was clobbered by 10-foot seas, which caused his self-righting boat to roll. When it surfaced, its compass had been torn from its mount, the windshield was smashed and the canvas canopy swept away.

Still, Webber, who had been knocked to the cockpit's floor, and his brave crew pressed on. Waves poured over the vessel, repeatedly dousing its engine, and Fitzgerald would scurry to restart it.

About an hour after leaving port, they reached the pitching and bouncing hulk. Webber snapped on his searchlight and saw PENDLETON written across its stern. Its crew then rushed on deck and dropped a Jacob's ladder over the side of the listing wreck.

As the men scampered down the ladder, Webber tried holding the CG36500 in the roiling seas. With the two vessels rising and falling, he had managed to land 32 crew members aboard the dangerously overloaded CG36500.

One crewman, George D. "Tiny" Myers, the ship's cook, was not so fortunate. He had stayed behind assisting fellow crew members, and then climbed to the bottom of the ladder. He jumped too soon, and was crushed to death by the rescue craft as it plowed into the Pendleton's hull, which moments later capsized.

"Bernie said he would never forget Tiny's face and eyes and the fact that he couldn't save him," Bonnie Snow, historian of the Orleans Historical Society in Orleans, Mass., said the other day.

Webber finally turned for home and managed to cross the Chatham Bar without incident.

"Actually, Bernie never thought they'd ever make it back," said Snow, an old friend.

Those aboard the bow, which grounded on Pollock Rip Shoal six miles off Chatham, did not survive. The stern came to rest off Chatham, where it was visible until several years ago.

Ryder, who later helped in the restoration of the CG36500, which was built at the Coast Guard yard at Curtis Bay and is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, described Webber's feat as an "amazing example of seamanship. They were also very lucky."

The grateful survivors jammed \$240 in water-soaked cash into Webber's drawer at the Chatham station, which he turned over to the station's commanding officer.

Webber and his crew were presented the Coast Guard's Gold Life-Saving Medal for what has been called "the greatest small boat rescue in Coast Guard history."

He seldom talked of the rescue and when he did, said he was just doing his duty and gave the credit to his fellow crew members, Snow said.

Webber, who wrote *Chatham: The Lifeboatmen*, said, "The Lord had a hand on the tiller that night.

"In this day and age, all you have to do is look out the window and see a so-called hero," he told Cape Cod Chronicle in an interview. "People are thrown into things. Whether it's war or whatever it is, if you have a job, you can be thrown into a situation at any moment. People respond in different ways. It's a matter of your mind, and a matter of your heart."

Andrew Fitzgerald is the only surviving CG3650 crew member.

Webber, who was cremated, will be buried in Wellfleet, Mass., sometime this spring.

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Baltimore Sun

The strange saga of the two halves of the SS Fort Mercer

Frederick N. Rasmussen

Back Story

March 15, 2009

"Many Brave Hearts Are Asleep in the Deep", 1897 sea chantey

The ferocious February nor'easter that severely disrupted Atlantic shipping more than a half-century ago nearly took the life of a Baltimore merchant mariner who was aboard a crippled oil tanker.

The gale that snapped the SS Pendleton in two off Cape Cod in the early morning hours of Feb. 18, 1952, inflicted a similar fate on another T-2 class tanker, the SS Fort Mercer that was steaming some 30 miles southeast of Chatham, Mass.

The Pendleton, a Boston-bound tanker loaded with a cargo of kerosene and heating oil, separated at 5:50 a.m., leaving its crew adrift on the orphaned bow and stern sections. Failing circuit breakers made it impossible to send

an SOS., and the fate of the officers and crew remained unknown to the outside world as they drifted amid 60-foot seas and 70-knot winds.

The 10,000-ton Fort Mercer, also filled with kerosene and fuel oil, had sailed from Norco, La., and was bound for Portland, Maine. Onboard were several dozen men, including quartermaster Louis D. Jomidad of Baltimore.

At 8 a.m., crewmen aboard the Fort Mercer reported hearing a snap and then seeing oil surfacing on the vessel's starboard side near the No. 5 cargo tank.

Sensing some urgency, Capt. Frederick C.C. Paetzel slowed the Fort Mercer and, because the ship's radio was still working, ordered the operator to notify the Coast Guard.

Survivors floating on the two halves of the Pendleton heard the Fort Mercer's distress call on their radio receiver, as Coast Guard cutters Eastwind and Unimak, 120 miles away near Nantucket, Mass., began steaming to the stricken Fort Mercer's side.

At 10:30 a.m., came another crack.

Twenty minutes later, Paetzel ordered a message calling for nearby vessels to stand by for possible assistance.

It was 11:40 a.m. when a third crack reverberated throughout the ship.

This time, the crack was accompanied by a seam of parting steel that crawled up the starboard side just above the waterline, immediately causing oil to begin hemorrhaging from the No. 5 tank into the sea.

Like the ill-fated Pendleton, the Fort Mercer lunged and parted, leaving the bow section partially submerged, while the stern section floated free.

"It happened suddenly at 12:10 p.m.," Alanson S. Winn, a Fort Mercer crewman, told The New York Times. "It happened like that - there was a noise as though a ship had rammed us. Then she lifted out of the water like an elevator," he said. "She gave two jumps. And when she'd done that, she tore away."

Nine officers and crew were stranded on the bow section, while 34 crewmen were left aboard the stern.

While the bow section was powerless and its radio no longer operable, crewmen on the stern section discovered that they were still able to operate the ship's engines. They jockeyed it away to avoid a collision with the bow in the heaving seas.

The pilot of a Coast Guard PBV out of Air Station Salem searching for the Fort Mercer accidentally discovered the floating wreck of the Pendleton.

Cutters pounded their way through the howling storm to rescue the Fort Mercer's crew, an effort that took more than 20 hours before they were all safely off the vessel.

Five crewmen on the bow lost their lives, while four others, including the ship's skipper, were rescued from a life raft.

Less than 20 minutes after the last four men abandoned the bow, it capsized and was then sunk by a gun from the cutter Unimak, to avoid navigation interference.

Nine other crewmen chose to remain on the Fort Mercer's stern section with its cargo of oil, while others survivors were dropped off in Boston and Portland. "The 'stay-putters' had light and heat because the boilers and almost all the ship's machinery were in that section. There was plenty of food in the galley," reported The New York Times.

Three days after the disaster, Jomidad, who lived at 517 N. Washington St. in Baltimore, called his family from Boston.

It was the first word his wife and four children had that he was safe and had survived the disaster without incident.

"Knowing my husband was out there like that, maybe dead, was terrible," his wife told The Evening Sun. "For three nights I haven't been able to eat or sleep or even comb my hair."

She told the newspaper that while his ship had been torpedoed during World War II, it was the first time he had been shipwrecked.

The stern, which had drifted some 40 miles from the bow, was picked up by salvage tugs Foundation Josephine and the M. Moran, which towed it to Newport, R.I., eventually through Long Island Sound to New York.

The strange fate of the Fort Mercer does not end here. Its owner, Trinidad Corp., had the stern towed to the Todd Shipyards Corp.'s Galveston, Texas, yard, where a new bow was attached to the stern section.

When the 545-foot re-christened vessel, the San Jacinto, left the yard in 1953, it was 40 feet longer.

But bad luck continued to haunt what was left of the Fort Mercer.

As it steamed 40 miles off Virginia in 1964, an explosion blew the San Jacinto in two during a routine cleaning of its tanks.

One member of its crew of 35 died aboard a rescue vessel, and, in an eerily reminiscent replay of the 1952 disaster, crew members remained on board the stern section as it was towed to the Newport News (Va.) Shipbuilding and Drydock Co. yard.

The ship emerged a third time, in 1965, not as one ship, but two: the Pasadena and the Seatrain Maryland.

The unlucky Fort Mercer saga finally ended in a Bangladesh shipyard, where the Seatrain Maryland was broken up in 1983.

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