

# Book Review

## Two Tankers Down

The Greatest Small-Boat Rescue in U.S. Coast Guard History

By Robert Frump

The Lyons Press 2008, 212 pages

by Raymond J. Brown

*Two Tankers Down* is an improbable true story of men against the sea. In a fierce nor'easter offshore Cape Cod on Feb. 18, 1952, two tankers broke in half. The U.S. Coast Guard rescued 70 of the crew amid deadly dangers. Noted maritime author Bob Frump has rescued this all but forgotten story that should be told as long as men go down to the sea in ships.

The two ill-fated tankers, *SS Pendleton* and *SS Fort Mercer*, were T-2s, a ship type mass produced during World War II when the United States had to build a bridge across two oceans. T-2s were just over 500 feet in length and displaced 15,850 long tons. Both *Pendleton* and *Fort Mercer* were bound, on what would turn out to be their last trips, from the Mississippi River watershed in southern Louisiana to ports in New England. *Pendleton's* intended track was to Portland, Maine, while *Fort Mercer* was bound for Boston.



The T-2s were able ships, with large capacity, remarkable power, and the ability to come up to speed quickly. However, some of them carried a flaw due to new and hurried welding technology of the war. Simply stated, some of the hulls had a tendency to crack.

Close to one another in space and time, both *Pendleton* and *Fort Mercer* broke into two pieces, leaving the ship's companies separated in broken hulls and at the mercy of heavy seas, high winds and a blizzard. It was the U.S. Coast Guard to the rescue.

The two rescuing units were *USCGC Yakutat (WHEC-32)*, a cutter 311 feet long and displacing some 1,800 long tons, and a 36-foot motor lifeboat, *CG 36500*. The bulk of the tale is actually told from the vantage point of *CG 36500* and her coxswain, Boatswain Mate 1st Class Bernie Webber. Webber led his crew of three from Chatham Lifeboat Station into incredibly dangerous seas to rescue 32 souls suffering from hypothermia and the dangers of a rolling, sinking after hull.

Webber located *Pendleton* and maneuvered to where the stranded seamen would throw over a Jacob's ladder and proceed one by one down to the waiting *CG 36500*. Actually, "waiting" is the wrong word; Webber was constantly maneuvering with consummate ability and courage. The heaving hull and the high seas were a danger to everyone. Timing the 32 individual rescues was a feat of incredible seamanship. So was proceeding to safe harbor in a dangerously overloaded boat.

Ultimately, the Coast Guard would rescue 70 sailors out of the 84 in peril. Five Coast Guardsmen, including Webber and his three crewmen, received the Gold Lifesaving Medal. In all, 24 Coast Guardsmen were decorated for valor.

*Two Tankers Down* was not an easy read for this reviewer. I have been involved in rescues in those same dangerous seas and in similar conditions. Frump's simple prose had my stomach tightening as the description of the perils became all too familiar. Moreover, in 1952 there were no survival suits and communications were nothing like today. And after the compass got knocked loose early in transit, Webber did not even have that to guide him.

*Two Tankers Down* is a prequel to Frump's earlier book, *Until the Sea Shall Free Them* (PM #66). Therein, he told the story of *SS Marine Electric*, which went down off the Virginia capes in 1983. For years, American shipping had relied on ships built in a hurry for the immediate exigencies of World War II. But with victory, the lives of those ships were extended to well beyond what was safe or prudent. Only a number of disasters and near disasters would eventually demonstrate the folly and halt the practice.

That is one message of the book, but another is just as important. There are those sailors who risk their lives for others. It certainly is not for recognition or remuneration. And heaven knows that there are easier ways to make a living...but not a better one.