

# **The stranding of the Robert E. Lee**

In 1928 a large Boston-to-New York steamer fell afoul of the Mary Ann Rocks off Manomet Point. The ensuing rescues and attempted rescues make a remarkable tale of heroism.

By BARBARA BROWN

The night of March 9, 1928, started out like any other stormy March night for the men stationed at the Manomet Coast Guard Station — near-blizzard conditions with snow, sleet and hail, 45 mph winds, temperatures near freezing, the surf pounding on the rocks below, the fog drifting in and out.

Suddenly, seemingly from out of nowhere, lights appeared off Manomet Point, much too close to the treacherous Mary Ann Rocks. It was the Boston to New York steamer, the 400-foot, 5,284-ton "Robert E. Lee," with 273 passengers aboard. Frantically, the Coast Guardsmen sent up two flares to warn the Lee.

But it was too late. She cleared the first set of rocks, but hit the second. She began to ship water on her starboard side, and in the raging sea, began to roll and pitch. According to Edward Rowe Snow in "Great Atlantic Adventures," "apparently snow had drifted into the wheelhouse and began to affect the compass, taking her considerably off course."

## Sinking feared

The captain of the Lee, Harland W. Robinson, decided to open the seacocks and let the ship settle down to end the rolling and pitching. As the tide began to come in, the water entered the lower staterooms and rose throughout the ship. It was feared that there were holes in her hull and that in two hours, when the tide was full, the steamer would sink.

Because of the weather, the men at the station determined the condition of the ship, whether it was hung up on the rocks and therefor somewhat stable, or whether it was in danger of immediate sinking. For an hour, the station's blinker flashed, but no answer from the Lee was forthcoming. Its lights would appear and disappear as the fog lifted and descended again.

As a result, the men at the station tried throughout the night to launch their only craft, an oar-powered surfboat. But, because the surf was so high and the storm so fierce, they were unable to do so until the following morning.

## Surfboat finally launched

Shortly after dawn, the surfboat was finally launched, under Boatswains Mate William H. Cashman. The crew was one man short, for Arthur Young was sick at home in Orleans. Another man was needed, and without hesitation Ernest Douglas, a Manomet garageman, jumped into the boat. But he had no life-preserver, so Cashman threw his to Douglas, and off the boat went into the pounding seas.

Despite the storm, the men felt they had to reach the Lee and let the passengers know that help was coming. Little did Cashman and his crew realize

that the ship had settled nicely on the rocks and most of the passengers had spent the night sleeping or singing.

The crew had great difficulty getting to the Lee because of the storm swells. But reach her they did. They decided it would be too risky to try to take passengers to shore in their own boat and sent for larger surfboats from the Sagamore Coast Guard Station.

A 75-foot picket boat could not get near the Lee because of the low water and dangerous rocks. So small motor launches were sent out to ferry the passengers from the Lee to larger boats. Overhead two small planes and a seaplane circled.

Realizing they could help no further, Cashman and his crew, consisting of Coast Guardsmen Frank Griswold of Manomet, Edward Stark, Alden Proctor, Irving Wood, Joseph Ducharme, Earl Sampson, and civilian Douglas, left the Lee and headed back to shore.

## Boat pitchpoles

Suddenly, when the surfboat was not too far from shore, an enormous wave built up, described by Proctor as "fully 25 feet high," and by Douglas, "as big as a house." Snow adds, "Approaching the surfboat, the billows built up higher and higher, gradually raising the stern. Then with a jar, her bow hit bottom and she pitchpoled, spilling out every member of the crew."

A crowd of over 200, helpless, watched with horror the tragedy occurring before their eyes. When the waves receded, Griswold was seen briefly, but then he disappeared under a huge comber. Cashman, the only one without a life jacket, was seen hanging on to an oar, exhausted and nearly frozen.

Stark was hurt, and Proctor noted, "He complained of severe pains in the heart." Wood added, "Stark must have been hit by the gunwale when we went over." Stark was helpless and nearly frozen, so Douglas and Wood pushed him up onto the top of the overturned surfboat to which the rest of the crew were clinging.

The other Coast Guard launches were busy ferrying passengers and failed to note the plight of Cashman and his men. So, seeing the trouble, Russell Anderson of Manomet, his friend Earl Sampson and State Trooper John Horgan found a leaky dory belonging to Frank Brooks of Manomet.

They slid it down into the sea, narrowly escaping the crashing waves, and with only one pair of oars and without thought for their own lives, cut the safety line to shore and headed for the overturned surfboat. And from around the point Herbert Eddy, a Manomet lobsterman, appeared in a

second leaking dory with Daniel Sullivan.

Although Sullivan had to bail while Eddy rowed, they rescued Stark and Ducharme, whom they reached just in time, for he was sliding off the surfboat when they got to him. Douglas proved himself a hero again, for as he was about to be saved, he said, "I can hang on. Take someone else first." Eventually, these two small dories rescued all of the crew except Griswold, who had disappeared beneath the sea.

### "No use"

Nurses and an ambulance had arrived from Plymouth, and Dr. Walter Shurtleff of Plymouth stayed at the station throughout the night. They had a terrible time getting the stretchers up the cliff. Cashman was given resuscitation and a pullmotor was applied to him on the beach.

Dr. Edgar Hill worked a "long, long time . . . then he stood up, raised his hands in submission and said, 'No use.'" The Rev. William Kerrigan of St. Peter's Church gave him the last rites. Cashman died of overexposure and exhaustion, the second fatality.

Stark, who was put aboard the USS Pauling, died that afternoon enroute to Boston. Proctor, Douglas and Wood were treated at Chelsea Naval Hospital. Ducharme and Sampson were treated at the Jordan Hospital.

A day or two later Griswold's body washed up on the beach about two miles from Manomet Point. The surfboat was also found, washed up and relatively undamaged.

### "Greater love . . ."

The roads to the point were clogged and by the second day, an estimated 10,000 had thronged to the point to see the site of the mishap, fatalities and daring rescues. Manomet Point Rd. was finally closed to traffic. Sightseers parked on State Rd. and walked to the point. Then the road to the Idlewild Hotel, which had been kept open to its owner, W.H. Pridhorn, as a refuge for passengers, was also closed.

The three Coast Guardsmen who died in the service of their countrymen were given full military funerals: Griswold at the Second Church of Plymouth, Congregational, in Manomet; Stark in the Winslow Congregational Church in Taunton; and Cashman in the Star of the Sea Church in East Boston.

There is a stone marker at Manomet Point which can be seen today. The bronze tablet says, "In memory of Boatswains Mate William E. Cashman, Surfman Frank W. Griswold, Surfman Edward P. Stark, who of Station 31 USCG lost their lives in the performance of their duty March 10, 1928, when the Steamship Robert E. Lee stranded on the Mary Ann Rocks southeast of this station. 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down

his life for his friends.' Erected by the citizens of Plymouth, Mass. Dedicated May 30, 1928."

## Controversy raged

Following the tragedy, A.B. Rogers, father of Alcott Rogers, who still lives at the point, and former captain of the station, noted that he was "almost certain that the light of the gas buoy marking the Mary Ann Rocks was out Friday night." He could not see the buoy's light, although he could see those of the Lee plainly. "The mechanism of the buoy goes awry occasionally," he said, "and is repaired as soon as it is reported." Rogers took over at the station when Cashman and his crew set out for the Lee.

Questions were raised, and recriminations aimed at the Coast Guard were voiced in various New England newspapers at that time. Why were there no motor launches at the station? Why only two rowboats? How come no Coast Guard replacements were sent to the station, yet droves of photographers and reporters and sightseers could get there fast enough?

Others advocated that a lighthouse with a fog-horn be constructed. Still others recommended a radio compass station. In all newspaper accounts, the three who died were called heroes. In some, they were called martyrs, underlining the prevalent feeling that had the station been better equipped, they might not have lost their lives.

Paul Bitteringer, present publisher of the OCM, was first on the scene the next morning with his late brother Fritz. In subsequent editorials, Bitteringer noted that the station had no toilet facilities, was heated by coal stoves and lighted by oil lamps, and had running water only in the kitchen. He also observed that the guardsmen manning the station had been on duty for 36 hours straight, with no reserves to help or relieve them.

## Conditions criticized

He believed "that had the reserve men been ordered to the Manomet Station and had the station been equipped with a power boat, it is possible that three brave men would not have been the victims of the storm-tossed sea."

How did the men of Cashman's crew feel about this mission? There were no complaints about the weather, their 36 hours on duty, the lack of replacements, or conditions at the station. Proctor summed it up with "It was part of a day's work."

During the many unsuccessful tries to launch the surfboat that night against almost impossible odds, Cashman was asked if they were really going to try it again. And he replied, "It is our service to go."