

and the feeder roof. It looked totally resistant to all furry marauders, but strangely enough none came. No squirrels, no raccoons, no chipmunks. Even no birds. There is hung, utterly rejected, ostracized. Finches, chickadees and a red-breasted grosbeak visited the old feeder in the back of our house but they apparently disliked the front location. As days passed occasional birds visited the feeder and ate a few seeds. But there were no regular visitors. Surprisingly, I have not seen a squirrel since we returned and there was only one night raid by a raccoon which was unsuccessful. It had chewed the redundant non-functional end of the clothesline into four pieces as it hung loosely around the second cleat but had not touched the working end of the line. There are a few low IQ raccoons. That was the only raid that occurred. No beast tried to get food from the feeder by way of the metal roof or bottom platform, the dangerous pathways. Did the original marauders feel the shocks and carry the word back to their furry friends that we were dangerous people? But why don't the birds like the front yard location? Maybe next year they will. I have won a battle, but so far I have lost the war. I'm still frustrated.

Richard W. Vilter

BEYOND THE CALL

April 5, 1999

Milo R. Beran

There is a brotherhood of the highest order among seafaring men. The brotherhood displays no emblems, requires no rituals, never discriminates, is free of judgments. Its existence is rarely given voice. It is manifest in deeds.

In early December, 1942, it would have been impossible to foresee the several events that would

eventually overtake the merchant ship, Ironclad, her master, Josef Kral, and her crew.

Every man aboard the Ironclad had apprehensions about the impending north Atlantic crossing — Kral probably more so than any of his crew.

Kral's forebodings arose simply because he was a well-informed, intelligent professional who had a strong sense of responsibility for those under his command. He was a man of considerable warmth but as master of the ship maintained a correct and formal relationship with his crew. Foremost, he was supremely confident of his skills as a mariner. Tempering this confidence was the knowledge that he had absolutely no control over the actions of a Luftwaffe bomber pilot, a U-boat commander or the vicissitudes of the Atlantic.

For Kral, there were no illusions regarding the gravity — the danger — of the convoy passage to Europe. Moreover, he was aware of the military dominance exhibited by Germany throughout the summer of 1942.

June, July and August, 1942 had been the bleakest period of World War II for the allies.

The Germans had initiated a major campaign against the Soviet Union, effectively slashing through Russian lines of defense in making startling advances on the Volga and the Caucasus.

In the middle eastern desert British resistance had been crushed, German troops controlled most of Egypt; Tobruk had fallen along with some 30,000 men; the British Eighth Army was in retreat; the port of Alexandria had been evacuated and Cairo flooded with refugees.

In the Atlantic, well over one hundred allied merchant ships had been sunk in the past year, and half again that many in the Barents Sea.

Even before the German summer offensives of 1942, the dank, dark foul-smelling waterfront gin mills along the eastern seaboard — from Gloucester to Baltimore to Miami — became wellsprings of scuttlebutt, speculation

and harrowing accounts of convoys making the north Atlantic runs.

American seamen first experienced Arctic weather during the winter of 1941-1942. Gales raged across hundreds of miles of open waters with unbroken fury. Thick fog was a frequent challenge of stationkeeping. Drift ice to the height of a wheelhouse was a constant danger.

In winter, there was ambivalence regarding the perpetual nights. The night — as with fog — protected convoys from air attack by German Henkles and Junkers 88s, however, ships denied running lights in the impenetrable darkness were unable to determine the positions of other ships within a convoy. Collisions were only avoided by lookouts who relied more on the smell of stack gases from a closing ship, or the wash of the sea against a hull, than on sight, which was often limited to a point far aft of the bow.

Sixty and seventy knot gales precluded bow watches as did the tons of ice which accumulated on a ship's main decks — ice that formed by the constant washing of waves and spindrift over the bows.

Water temperatures in wintertime were at the freezing mark or even two or three degrees colder. A man might live five minutes if lost overboard into such a sea. Stories abounded of abandoned, sinking ships and survivors in open whaleboats and rafts.

Over and above the perils of an unremitting sea were the U-boat Wolfpacks which traversed the waters along latitudes through which convoys would pass enroute to Murmansk or Liverpool.

In preparing for Ironclad's departure from Philadelphia two immediate concerns were disquieting for Kral.

First, the Ironclad's cargo of nearly 7,000 tons exceeded the north Atlantic winter loadlines by almost a foot.

Second, the cargo was too diverse and unstable. In the hold were crates of ammunition cartridges, anti-aircraft shells, spare parts for B-24 Liberators and 3,000 tons of grain. Tanks and field artillery were lashed down on the main deck.

On both counts Kral's objections had been overridden by the Navy Department.

The Ironclad departed Philadelphia at noon on 13 December 1942 under destroyer escort.

The day was bright and brisk. After navigating through the restricted waters of the ship yard and the Delaware River, Kral stepped to the bridge wing as Ironclad proceeded into the broad reaches of the bay.

In an unusual – even uncharacteristic – moment of reflection – in a moment of solitude – apart from the helmsman and the deck officer – away from the charts and the gyro compass and the squawking ship to shore radio, the lines of Sea-Fever fell upon Kral. John Masefield, England's poet laureate, has always spoken to the seafarer.

I must go down to the seas again,
to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship
and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song
and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face
and a grey dawn breaking.
I must go down to the seas again,
for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call
they may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day
with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume,
and the sea-gulls crying.

It was a reverie that lasted but a few moments.

Once, long ago, Kral had been enchanted by the sea and her sublime charms – always changing – always the same.

Early on Kral learned that she was inconstant – and wanton – and he never again was beguiled by her beauty – he never trusted her.

Merchant ships from the ports of Baltimore, New York and Boston formed a convoy, under naval escort,, at 42°5' N latitude and 69°W longitude, northeast of the Nantucket Shoals and 67 statute miles due east of Provincetown.

From the rendezvous point, the convoy then proceeded toward Sable Island and the Grand Banks.

At 55° N latitude approximately midway between Iceland and the Azores those ships making the Murmansk Run continued northwardly to Reykjavik as the remaining vessels charted a course to Great Britain's North Channel, the shipping lane lying between Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The North Atlantic in winter is a gray, often sunless world. Weather systems create cloudbanks that obliterate all traces of the horizon, through all points of the compass. Without the sun – or at night, the constellations – the mariner has no reference to the passing of the hours – his world has no beginning and no end.

The Atlantic is more impatient, more restless, more persistent than her sisters. Her surges fall with great frequency and pound relentlessly at the weather side of ships. She can be a spoiled, frustrated child flailing her clenched fists. And, she can be much more – a violent, terrifying monster. In contrast, the winds of the Pacific have a greater fetch and the accompanying wavecrests are widely separated – she is more patient, not so persistent, not often given to fury.

Among the most alarming phenomena of the North Atlantic are the suddenness with which storms arise,

the intensity of many storms and the capriciousness of the winds.

More than most places on earth the winds of the North Atlantic jealously compete with one another – often with great ferocity.

Many seafarers have been caught among warring winds and have felt the effects across twenty points of the compass – all within a span of less than twenty minutes.

And so it was for Captain Kral and the Ironclad, in mid-afternoon, two days before Christmas. A gale arose from the southwest and before the dog watch was set the winds had intensified to near hurricane force. Kral was never unduly alarmed by weather and always confident in his ship-handling skills – certain in the belief that he could ride out any storm. As the convoy approached the coast of Ireland, it was the increased threat of U-boat attack that troubled the captain more than rough weather.

By nightfall the seas were battering the Ironclad all along her starboard side with the greatest pounding somewhat abaft the beam.

Kral grew impatient with the east-by-southeast heading that placed his ship in danger of rolling over on her beam ends. With radio silence mandated throughout the convoy and all vessels under darkened ship regulation there was no way for the convoy commodore to signal a course change.

Kral of course knew that all the ships within the convoy were rolling – some perhaps as much as 40°. He was tempted to break radio silence.

The fury of the storm was sustained. At or about 2100 hours the sea quartered and the Ironclad began to ship heavy seas aft. Her roll increased as she continued to heel to port, away from the oncoming waves. Within minutes of the windshift several riveted eyeplates were ripped from their mountings. Ammunition cases and crates of airplane parts were thrashing from side to side in the hold. A Sherman tank was rolling

on the main deck crushing stanchions, the port lifeboat, hatch covers, ventilators and tearing the midships crane from its moorings.

Kral did not hesitate. "All ahead one-third."

Simultaneously, he grasped the brass whistle handle and executed the general emergency signal — four blasts. Turning to the second mate he spoke in even tones: "Continue the signal every thirty seconds. There's one ship aft of us. Advise all hands that we'll be turning to port".

Kral communicated directly to the engine rooms: "Stand by to answer all bells — We're changing course to the north."

And then he moved to the starboard wing of the bridge to gauge the wave cycles and look for any slight moderation of the sea state.

At the reduced speed the Ironclad would fall astern of the convoy clearing the way for a turn.

The lookout on the port wing of the bridge sang out: "Ship! — four points abaft the beam, 100 yards."

Black against black — a shape darker than the night marking its course by a trailing fog buoy creating the pale run of a wake.

"Belay the whistle, Mr. Jenson."

Kral hesitated yet another ten minutes. The din of the shifting cargo — particularly the tank — overrode the sounds of screaming winds and waves crashing against the starboard side of the hull.

He calculated — correctly — that any ship that may have been aft of the Ironclad had now overtaken her.

Ironclad had been the third of four ships in the outboard column of the convoy. The columns were separated by 800 yards and the spacing between ships in a column was 400 yards.

Ironclad had decreased her speed to one-half of the convoy speed of five and a half knots. Kral's simple mental calculation told him that the ship directly astern of Ironclad would close on her at the rate of one hundred yards per minute. This she had done. The ship astern had passed Ironclad to port ten minutes earlier.

Kral began a series of orders to bring Ironclad to a new heading.

"Port Engine Back Two-Thirds"

"Starboard Engine Ahead Full"

"Left Full Rudder"

The Helm and the dependable three-phase steam reciprocating engines responded and the Ironclad started her swing to port.

And then halfway through the turn: "Rudder amidships"

"Come to 035°"

"Port ahead one third"

"Starboard ahead one third"

"Steady as she goes"

If the wind held, Kral knew the Ironclad would pitch and yaw but the threat of capsizing had been partially checked. Running before the sea the Ironclad was, in fact, yawing to an alarming degree. The helmsman fought the wheel with every surging wave.

Recognizing the danger of broaching to, Kral increased speed to two-thirds on both shafts.

Now on a more even keel, the crew of the Ironclad turned to the tasks of securing cargo within the hold, checking the security of hatch covers and taking soundings in all tanks, in the shaft alleys and in any spaces that may have opened to the sea.

To stabilize the Ironclad Kral knew that some or all of the main deck cargo had to be jettisoned. At the same time, Kral could not risk the lives of his men. Even with the life lines that had been rigged no one could withstand the force of the wind and seas on an open deck.

During the mid-watch the wind came around to the north and the seas fell heavily upon the Ironclad. Almost in repeated acts of submission she lowered her bows to the charging waves, accepted their punishment, struggled to rid her decks of burdens she could barely endure and laboriously lifted herself from the troughs toward the never-ending ridges. Slowly she started listing to starboard and Kral could feel that which he could not see through the impenetrable darkness and spume. The Ironclad was slowly increasing her period of roll and Kral knew that the ship was losing its righting moment. She was losing her stability.

The Captain remained on the bridge throughout the night. he had not slept in almost 30 hours.

Dawn broke to an empty and turbulent sea. The convoy had long ago disappeared toward the southeast or had dispersed during the storm.

The wind continued to mould the sea into mountainous amorphous shapes. The Ironclad continued to pitch and yaw and roll. She struggled to hold course.

The gray light revealed what Kral had instinctively known hours before. The Ironclad was now listing about 30° to Starboard.

Ventilators above the hold had been shipping water throughout the storm and the wheat grain had been soaked. The ventilator covers had been stripped away by the wind and sea. Cargoes of wood pulp or grain expand when soaked. The Captain knew that continue expansion of the grain could rupture the hull, flood the midships hold and swamp the ship in a matter of minutes.

The drift attributable to the Gulf Stream, the set brought about by the southerly gale and a northeasterly track throughout the night had carried Ironclad well to the north.

Dead reckoning placed the freighter somewhere between 8 and 9° W longitude and 58° N not far west of the Outer Hebrides.

It had been Kral's intention to gain safe harbor at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys. With a listing, unstable ship and shifting cargo the Ironclad would never reach Scapa Flow.

Kral's only hope of reaching port would depend on Ironclad's pumps and boilers and on making a landfall on the northerly tip of the Isle of Lewis, then turning southwardly into The Minch and steering for the Royal Naval Base at Aultbea, sheltered in Loch Ewe. Kral's charts told him that hope was not yet lost. Loch Ewe lay no more than 50 miles south of entry to The Minch.

The Minch is that body of water lying between the Outer Hebrides to the west and the Scottish Highlands to the east.

The Highlands, often shrouded in mists and wrapped in billowing fields of clouds, stand in solemn and tranquil loneliness. And yet when the stiff northwesterlies blow across the headlands or the setting sun glints off the moldering ruins of a fortress one can hear the clash of broadsword and cudgel as ancient Celtic tribes struggle for domination against each other.

There is a starkness and even a forlornness in the habitations of the highland Scots. Their stone and slate dwellings cluster in small villages within a glen or along the lochs and coves which open to The Minch and the seas beyond. And the isolated crofter's cottages, limed and thatched, bravely endure as expressions of independence and survival in a land that oft times is inhospitable.

Some have thought the Highlanders to be enigmatic, even given to a dark and brooding nature. Such a

judgment can only be a reflection of the harsh environment of this remote place for, in fact, these are a people of great good humor and sincere generosity. They are dependable and steadfast people who have the ability to face adversity without flinching.

What makes these Scots as they are? Explanations and surmise come from every quarter. There are attributions to diet, natural selection, interdependence, resourcefulness born of want, an uncomplicated existence in which each member of the clan can make a contribution, however modest. It is, apparently, a society in which each person values and respects his neighbor. It has even been postulated that the Presbyterian doctrine of predestination may have wrought exceptional equanimity, assurance and unwavering acceptance among the Highlanders.

What makes the Scots as they are? The answers are lost in the mysteries — the imponderables — the lives — of a hundred generations. And so we accept them as they are — and, sometimes we are astounded.

Fraser McDonald was a highland Scot and a Coxswain in the R.N.L.I. — The Royal National Lifeboat Institution. He was, for many years, First Coxswain of the Life Saving Station at Melvaig on the northwesterly coast of Scotland. Melvaig, a village of fewer than one hundred souls, is situated on the banks of The Minch two miles south of Loch Ewe. Cliffs exceeding a thousand feet in height rise precipitously above the hamlet.

In Melvaig and, indeed, from Oban to the Isle of Skye to Scapa Flow, McDonald was renowned for several heroic rescues, having been awarded the Institution's gold medal for gallantry, along with several silver medals.

He was a man of few words who shunned notoriety. His open face was marked by a wide and generous mouth often slightly upturned in a knowing smile. His steady gaze carried a suggestion of mirth and was further softened by crinkles at the edges of his eyes. He was a purposeful man without being overly zealous. He was

a quietly confident man with an indefinable quality of leadership – a man who commanded the respect and obedience of those who served under him.

McDonald and his wife lived in the village among kinsmen and friends – fishermen, boat builders, marine mechanics, shopkeepers and the crofters who occupied modest farmsteads on the high bluffs.

The life saving service was having great difficulty in maintaining its mission in the winter of 1942. Every able-bodied man between the ages of 18 and 45 had been called to the armed services. McDonald and many of his crew were beyond the normal age of retirement, but, with a strong sense of patriotism, continued to work.

Throughout most of the 22nd of December and well into the 23rd, Fraser McDonald had been working on his son-in-law's fishing boat – replacing the transom and repairing the power winch. His labors were exacting and, upon completion, McDonald looked forward to a deserved rest. He walked the short distance from the seawall to his cottage noting the glow of candles in homes throughout the village, marking the season. It was three in the afternoon, past sunset at 58° N, and darkness was enveloping the cove. A thin band of crimson lay along the southwest horizon below menacing storm clouds.

By four-thirty window casements were rattling and weather stripping on door sill screeching.

Before five o'clock storm warnings were posted up and down the coast. Waves were crashing against the sea wall and washing over the cobblestone quay. Wave crests were torn away and hurled through the air as spindrift, hitting windows with the sound of gravel thrown against a metal shed.

Windows were quickly shuttered. A combination of sleet and snow was flying horizontally against every vertical surface.

The gale had arisen suddenly and was roaring up The Minch with sustained winds of 65 knots.

At eight P.M. as the villagers huddled securely in their homes the call from the honorary secretary of the Melvaig life-boat station reached McDonald. The Naval Base at Aultbea had picked up distress signals from the U.S. freighter Ironclad. She had gone aground on a rocky bar in the Shiant Islands, eighteen miles off shore and almost due west of Melvaig.

The maroons (an explosive device that imitates the report of a cannon) summoned the crew who gathered in the gloom at the life-boat house. It was second nature for these men to be dressed for foul weather. Beneath their oilskins all wore wool sweaters or fleece-lined leather jerkins. Balaclava hoods and seaboots would further protect them from the elements.

Several other villagers had assembled to assist in launching the life-boat.

At 8:40 the life-boat ran down the boathouse slipway, entered the water with a jarring thud and spray of foam, and Coxswain McDonald set course for the Shiant Islands.

The gale was now blowing out of the northwest having veered some 90° in the past four hours. Wind gusts exceeded 80 knots. The temperature stood at nine degrees Fahrenheit and the seas mountainous — over thirty feet by McDonald's estimate.

The life-boat ploughed directly into the oncoming seas often taking the full brunt of a wave crashing down upon her. The Coxswain had to steer by instinct. It took McDonald over four hours to reach the stranded freighter.

Ironclad's hull was partially submerged. The seas were washing over her stern. Artillery pieces were piled atop one another on the main deck. Tons of water poured down upon her with every roller. Her derricks and boat davits had partially broken free from their moorings and were swinging wildly in the wind making any approach alongside extremely dangerous.

Ironclad's hatches had been torn away and cargo from the hold were strewn among tanks, davits, crushed

ventilators, and .40 mm gun tubs. Flotsam covered the water on the lee side of the ship.

As the life-boat maneuvered to find passageway through the litter of wreckage, the freighter was lifted over a crest and rolled lifelessly to starboard exposing her hull almost to the keel.

She was hard aground on the rocks, fore and aft.

She had no electric power.

A tattered, inverted ensign fluttered and whipped wildly at the signal halyards.

With the incessant pounding, she would soon break up on the bar.

Time was running out for the Ironclad. The sea would claim her within hours.

Thirty-nine members of Ironclad's crew had taken shelter on the bridge.

Even though a breeches buoy rescue was impossible in the raging sea, a line was fired toward the bridge in an initial effort to remove men from the stricken vessel. The gale carried the line away.

Visibility was so limited and the sea state so high that McDonald ordered his signalman to inform the captain of the Ironclad that he would stand off from the ship until first light.

Captain Kral was instructed to rig a ladder or a cargo net at the afterdeck in order to take off the crew. The force of breaking waves drove the Ironclad crew back to the bridge. They could not secure a ladder without being swept overboard.

At dawn, McDonald maneuvered the life-boat toward Ironclad's lee side to determine how best he might take the Ironclad crew aboard. Although the lee side afforded the shelter of the hull the rock bar could tear the bottom out of his boat.

McDonald would have to chance the weather side where the waters were churning with a running tide and the seas were rising and falling nearly fifteen feet at the freighter's side.

McDonald's approach to the ship was from the after quarter with only enough headway to maintain control of the life-boat. McDonald also employed his anchor at short stay and expertly reversed his twin 40 diesels to bring the boat alongside the freighter — now port engine — now both — now starboard — now port.

Second Coxswain McIntosh tossed the boat's painter onto Ironclad's afterdeck as the boat rode up the ship's starboard side.

"Take a hitch on your bollard," McIntosh shouted into the wind.

The boat dropped back into a trough and McIntosh let the painter play out.

Wave upon wave crushed the boat gunnels against the ship. The fenders offered little resistance.

Several of Ironclad's crew scrambled down the boat's painter. Each man's leap for safety within the boat was measured against the oncoming waves.

The line parted and a seaman fell between vessel and life-boat and was violently crushed. He screamed with the impact and disappeared beneath the water. McDonald withdrew the boat and frozen hands reached vainly for the body in a swirl of blood.

McDonald approached the ship several times throughout the morning — oftentimes unsuccessfully.

By mid-morning oil was spewing from the damaged hull of the freighter. The seas alongside Ironclad were slightly qualmed but the constant spray of oil over the life-boat decks made them dangerously slippery.

By employing more lines of greater length the crew of the Ironclad, one-by-one, gained the life-boat.

Eventually the boat reached capacity. The gunnels were badly damaged and nearly awash.

"We'll be back lads," McDonald shouted to Kral and four other men.

The return to Melvaig through the angry waters of The Minch was hazardous. The life-boat was overloaded and being tossed wildly across the crests. The fury of the storm had not abated and a quartering sea put the boat in danger of broaching to. For more than forty years, McDonald had fought the sea and on this day he would battle her again.

Ashore, the villagers had built bonfires to guide their son, Fraser McDonald, home. Mooring along the seawall would be impossible. McDonald would bring his craft ashore on a gravel beach. The bonfires of Melvaig blazed up as McDonald neared the coast. The return had taken almost five hours. All aboard the life-boat were so exhausted they had to be helped ashore.

For McDonald there would be no time for rest. The boat was refueled and repositioned for a launch into the surf.

The villagers were stunned.

They had been told of those who remained aboard Ironclad. Appeals were made to the crew to wait for a break in the storm.

Joy at the return of McDonald and his crew turned to dread. The villagers fell silent. The crew — oil splattered, soaked and drained of resolve — held back, waiting for McDonald to change his mind.

The wind howled. The waves dashed mercilessly against the shore. The Minch was black and seething.

McDonald took a step toward the small knot of men — his crew — in order to be heard above the storm. And then, in a composed yet authoritative tone, while looking directly into the drawn and impassive faces of his crew, McDonald loudly called out into the roar and

fury of the winds: "Launch the life-boat, lads! We have to go out - We don't have to come back."

The boat was launched.

It disappeared into the gloom beyond a line of surf.

It never returned.

TREE AND CROW

April 12, 1999

Rollin W. Workman

After Winston Churchill lost the Prime Ministership, he was knighted and given the ceremonial office of Warden of the Cinq Ports, where "Cinq" (Sink) is, of course, the anglicized pronunciation of the French word for "five". For some reason, the title fascinated me, perhaps because I thought it romantically medieval and I vaguely associated it with Olivier's wartime movie version of Henry V. Incidentally, in case you don't offhand remember, the five ports are Dover, Hastings, Sandwich, Romney, and Hythe.

Last summer, I spent a number of days wandering in imagination up the channel side of Great Britain. I had no aim except to stop off for at least a few hours in each of the Cinq Ports and also to gaze at the Wash, where King John lost the English crown jewels by trying to beat the tide to the crossing. One evening in a pub, I heard portions of the family history I am going to relate. And, since I was near the house in question, I visited it and met the owner, who told the story in full. I found later that it is also contained in a pamphlet, copies of which are for sale at the local inn. The tale is comparatively short, and begins here.