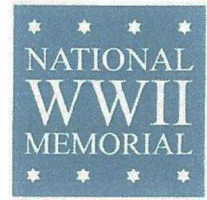




Massachusetts National WW II Memorial Committee



"Don't forget what those who sacrificed would want us to do!" –Congressman Joe Moakley, Chairman, South Boston, MA

July 4, 2012

Constituent Report: General Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman
U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff

Honorable Deanie Dempsey, 1st Lady
U.S. Military Families

1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Re: "Passing ships in the sea" – an "Ode to Admiral Knapp"

An Eyewitness Report of the Largest Land/Sea Rescue in the History of the Sea

Dear General Dempsey & Honorable Mrs. Dempsey:

On behalf of the MA National WWII Memorial Committee please accept congratulations and appreciation for your Co-Chair message for "May Military Appreciation Month." Your leadership stands as an inspiration for all Americans to carry your patriotic message throughout the year.

Often in military personnel correspondence when we express our "pride to salute members of the armed forces" negative news may emerge in the form of casualties. This belated report to the contrary is one of "saved lives!" A report that has a happy ending for 519 mostly American families due to the heroic life -saving training that the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Air Force, and Merchant Marine receive.

For General Dempsey in meetings with the Joint Chiefs this report represents a historic military case study that stands as an invaluable lesson to our nation of the intrinsic value to military training and preparedness.

For 1st Lady Dempsey who so often meets with the wives and families of those who serve it is an invaluable lesson why so many young American volunteer for service. One of the proudest days for US Service personnel who gave a very memorable day for the 519 families who against difficult odds got their loved ones back home to have a 2nd chance at life together.

It is with great pride that I report to you that in a few months it will be 32 years to the day of the sinking of the Dutch passenger liner Prinsendam in the Gulf of Alaska. Although this report is submitted belatedly to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for review of the Senior Officers executive decision-making, for the 329 mostly American passengers, 164 Indonesian crew members, and 26 Dutch officers it is a day that will forever live in their memories.

For those on the Prisendam enroute to the Far East on that fateful day of October 4, 1980 all owe their lives to the combined efforts of the United States Coast Guard, the U.S. Air Force, the Canadian Armed Forces, and the United States Merchant Marine whose combined efforts were integral with this historic rescue mission.

U.S. Coast Guard historians record the rescue mission of the Prisendam as one of the greatest example of the U.S. Coast Guard completing their mission to “save lives,” Considered second only to the USCG combined response to Hurricane Katrina. For without the heroic roles of the combined rescue units that responded certain death awaited the lucky passengers and crew of the Prisendam.

The fire that consumed the Prisendam is now considered an international Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) fire safety test case for adherence to maritime fire standards. The Prisendam was built according to the requirements of IMCO Resolution A-122(V) for structural fire protection, requirements which were later incorporated into the 1974 SOLAS guidelines. The Prisendam was not equipped with a sprinkler system; however none were required due to the ship being constructed with as few combustible materials as possible. The ship had fire-resistant doors and insulated steel bulkheads. The doors and bulkheads contained the blaze long enough for the passengers to abandon ship. The now maritime fire safety case raises serious safety issues for the remaining 65 passenger ships that call on American ports.

The Prisendam was equipped with a swimming pool, a restaurant, 3 bars, a cinema, a shopping center, and 209 staterooms. The fire was reported to have started as a high pressure fuel supply line ruptured causing diesel fuel to spill on to the main engine #2's exhaust manifold which, in turn started an engine room fire. Unfortunately the passenger ship itself became the only casualty to the internationally studied fire at sea.

The Prisendam was built at a cost of \$27m at the ‘De Merwede’ Dockyard and Machine Factory in Hardinxveld-Giesendam, the Netherlands. The ship was launched by Holland American Lines in November of 1973. She was the pride of the fleet and the last cruise ship built in the Netherlands. The Prisendam was built for Indonesia cruises in the winter and Alaskan cruises in the summer.

I am hopeful this story could be considered an “Ode’ to Admiral Knapp” of the U.S. Coast Guard who stands as a silent unsung hero of the Prisendam rescue mission. Rear Admiral Richard Knapp provided the deck of the CC Boutwell for award ceremonies honoring others throughout Alaska after the rescue mission. It is important to note that there remains no written accounts that record the leadership role of Rear Admiral Richard Knapp whose years of USCG experience provided the wisdom to make the logistic decisions to successfully oversee saving 519 lives. Rear Admiral Knapp's prudence in choosing the rescue staging site of the oil tanker Williamsburgh, equipped with a helicopter pad, and accommodations for the 500 passengers, while simultaneously coordinating the sealift capability and critical personnel decisions was integral with the mission's success.

These actions were provided on a world stage under the glare of international media coverage presenting a challenging role for the U.S. Coast Guard. The USCG under the leadership of Rear Admiral Knapp rose to the challenge with the greatest single incident example of the Coast Guard living up to its motto of "saving lives!" With the increased prominence of the U.S. Coast Guard's role to defend our nation since 9/11 this branch of service is long overdue for just recognition of its service, and the outstanding performance of its duty officers.

Actually the appropriate guy to compose an "Ode to Admiral Knapp" is not this sailor but the young upstart pianist Yiannis Hrysonmallis whose life was saved onboard the 427 foot, 9,000 ton ocean liner while entertaining the Prisendam passengers for the long cruise to the Far East. He is known today too many Americans as "Yanni." For without the combined efforts of the USCG, Air Force, Canadians, and Merchant Marine the world may not have experienced the 2nd best selling music video of all time, "Yanni, Live at the Acropolis," nor would all of the Olympic Games since 1988 have the Greek-born Yanni's music compositions for international broadcast of the games. More importantly for those locally in Beverly Hills who are close to the entertainment industry, public television may not have had in Yanni one of the top fundraisers of all time for public television viewers.

At approximately 1 AM in the early morning hours of October 4, 1980 the U.S. Coast Guard received the following distress call at its Sitka Communications Center, "passenger ship Prisendam position 57 degrees, 38 minutes N, 140 degrees -25 minutes west. Fire engine room. Flooding engine room with carbon dioxide. Conditions unknown. Passengers 320 crew 190."

At approximately 2 AM onboard my oil tanker the Sohio Intrepid which was enroute to Valdez for a load of oil I was awoken by a call for "all hands on deck" by the 12-4 able-bodied seaman Tanker-Jack Mayerle, a grizzly veteran of WWII who had survived the battle of Anzio with General George Patton. Tanker Jack flipped on my overhead light and yelled "all hands on deck" "There's a sinking passenger ship!" Tanker Jack got a shoe thrown at him in my room. All hands I could hear were gathering in the galley for coffee laughing about Tanker-Jack arousing our ship with the unusual call that a Passenger ship was sinking in the Gulf of Alaska. For the crew of the Sohio Intrepid who were skeptical of the ships joker who was a seasoned China coaster from WWII. 72 year old Tanker-Jack, was often witnessed doing hand stands on the steel decks for over a half hour were rudely awoken to the reality of Tanker- Jack's call with the sight of the burning Prisendam on the horizon. Later that day Tanker-Jack administered some old fashioned maritime justice in delivering one punch knock-outs to a couple derelict Indonesian crew who were taken onboard but whose unprofessional behavior of knocking down elderly women to jump in the lifeboat first did not escape the eye of Tanker-Jack Mayerle.

In the early morning hour of 1 AM on Oct. 4, 1980 the Prisendam was situated about

150 miles west of Sitka, Alaska, passenger Richard Steel, the publisher of the Worcester, Massachusetts Telegram-Gazette records for history that over the Prisendam loudspeaker system came the voice of Captain Cornelius Wabeke saying, "this is your Captain speaking. We have a small fire in the engine room. It is under control but for your safety, please report to the promenade deck." Capt. Wabeke ordered all passengers and crew to report to the lifeboat stations due to a fire in the engine room.

Standing over on the deck of the Prisendam was southern California attorney John Gyorkas dressed in his black velvet three-piece tuxedo with shiny black shoes still in his formal wear from a night of dinner and entertainment onboard the cruise as it navigated the choppy waters of the Gulf of Alaska. California attorney Gyorkas didn't have the time to change clothes as did many of the other passengers mostly senior citizens who were unfortunately in their nightgowns and pajama's. California Counselor Gyorkas was appropriately dressed for dinner at the Lido Restaurant and late night cocktails at the Prinsen Bar who now were open giving out free drinks!

Added to the fact that most passengers were scantily dressed in night gowns the National Weather Service reported that gale force winds were coming in from the east at 35 knots that were accompanied by 14 foot seas.

Through my binoculars I could see firsthand the importance to the USCG mandatory lifeboat training drills. Before my eyes toward Indonesian unlicensed seaman unschooled in the USCG mandatory lifeboat drill procedures were rushing past the elderly ladies to launch lifeboats which they piled into exhibiting a direct dereliction of duty to a rich maritime tradition of passenger safety first! When these derelict Indonesian crewmembers couldn't reach shore due to the rising ocean swells they reached the cargo net hanging over the side of the Sohio Intrepid and for a few unfortunate fellows met the right hand of Tanker-Jack Mayerle. While the derelict Indonesians were stunned by the blows, it made it convenient for the crew to handcuff them and give them a warm dry passage in a storage room.

My ship the Sohio Intrepid enroute to Valdez from San Francisco was traveling light to receive a load of black oil. The supertanker M/V Williamsburgh was a God send to happen to be nearby the Prisendam in the Gulf of Alaska. Not only did the Williamsburgh have a helicopter pad, but also was loaded with fuel and low and buoyant in the water, and more importantly had the accommodations to house 500 passengers. The other merchant marine vessel to respond was the container vessel the Portland bound for Anchorage.

Back on the Prisendam deck stood Mrs. Henry Fields of Dorset Vermont, who was quoted as saying, "I have enough fresh air and cold air for the next year." And if I get through this, "I don't think I want to go in even a canoe from now on!" Friends of Mr. & Mrs. Fields were survivors of another ill-fated cruise ship the Andrea Doria that sank two decades earlier.

The Coast Guard vessels that responded were the USCG cutter Boutwell a 378 ft. high endurance cutter that had moored in Juneau as part of the city's centennial celebration and needed a round-up at the Juneau bars to muster the crew for the order of "all hands back to the ship". The Boutwell cast off from the Port of Juneau and once clear of the shipping channel proceeded with open throttle at 27 knots towards the burning Prisendam. The Boutwell was designated as the command ship and supported by the C.C. Woodrush a 180 ft. buoy tender home ported in Sitka; and the Coast Guard Cutter Mellon a 378 ft. vessel home ported in Seattle that was enroute to an offshore fisheries patrol and diverted to the scene.

Standing on the open air deck of the Prisendam Isabella and Irving Brex of Seattle reported they were awakened when they felt a shock or explosion on the port side of the ship. The first of a few explosions that were contained within the engine room state of the art fire proof bulkheads which were built to conform with the safety standards of the 1960 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS). Irving and Isabella Brex were prudent enough to dress quickly and warmly before reporting to the promenade deck as ordered by the Captain. Isabella and Irving took their life jackets and walked out onto the rear fan deck with Irving being quoted as saying, "he was shocked to see so many people still in night clothes!"

Also joining the rescue effort was Four H-3 helicopters, two from Air Stations Sitka and two from Kodiak. These helicopters were critical to the mission as they are equipped with twin jet engines and can hoist a rescue basket or harness while hovering over open water. 2 HC-130 cargo planes were dispatched from the Coast Guard station in Kodiak.

The Canadian Armed Forces responded in true maritime tradition sending two CH-46 helicopters were supplied by the RCC Victoria. They also sent two Canadian "Buffaloes" and were assigned and one "Argus" all which were fixed wing aircraft.

In support of the rescue mission the US Air Force at Elmendorf Air Force base provided an H-3 helicopter and an HC-130 re-fueler. These resources were critical as the Coast Guard helicopters had to return to land for fuel every couple of hours, however the US Air Force team could stay on the scene with their fuel capacity for 12 hours. It would fall upon the duty of Capt. John Walters of the U.S. Air Force to solve the mystery into the foggy night of where was the elusive Prisendam lifeboat number six?

Patiently milling about on the promenade deck of the Prisendam was passenger Mrs. Teddie Friedinger from Detroit who was quoted with an interesting observance that may have been a critical factor to the rescue mission's success. Teddie praised the performance and behavior of the predominately senior citizen passengers. "There was no panic at all," the passengers were relatively calm throughout the ordeal. What was amusing to Mrs. Fields and Mrs. Friedinger was a young tour guide who tried her best to calm the passengers standing on the deck from 1 AM till 6 AM asking the anxious passengers if "they have seen the beautiful, beautiful sky?" The calm

passengers had stood for hours watching a “glittering display of the aurora borealis.”

However, the still of Mother Nature’s light display was broken when Capt. Wabeke at the stroke of the 6 AM watch bells ordered, “Abandon Ship!” All was not calm as Edna Marcus of Cleveland, Ohio was gagging and coughing on the deck due to the billowing smoke coming out of the engine room fire. Due to the thickness of the smoke Edna got separated from her husband and to add to the stress of the elderly couple they got loaded into separate lifeboats unsure of each other’s safety until reunited at our celebration party at the hotel in Valdez.

The majority of the Prisendam passengers were between the ages of 60 to 80 years old and had paid between \$3600.00 and \$5,000.00 for the 30 day cruise that truly ended up to be an unforeseen adventure of a lifetime.

According to an old Hollywood tradition that the show must go on many passengers moving about from the open deck to the Main Lounge and the Lido Restaurant recalled that members of the ships’ cast in an effort to calm the nervous passengers spontaneously sang in rousing renditions of the musical Oklahoma and many Rodgers and Hammerstein hits. An elderly lady was noted to be sipping from a whiskey flask tucked into her purse as the smoke continued to rage toward the Main Lounge from the engine room.

Worcester Telegram-Gazette publisher Richard Steel noted that as the crew ran up and down the stairs with fire-fighting equipment the smoke increased in the direction of the dining room. Steel realized there was no going back to get blankets or clothing in the cabins with the thick black smoke that was pouring from the engine room.

The first rescue resource to arrive on the scene was a Coast Guard C-130 who at 4 AM on Saturday Oct. 4th reported seeing flames and heavy smoke coming from the midsection of the Prisendam. What was alarming was the fact that the ship had lost power and therefore couldn’t generate the necessary water pressure to operate the fire-fighting pumps and fight the fire onboard. The fire began to spread forward towards the bridge of the ship which at 6 bells prompted the Captain’s order to abandon ship.

Six lifeboats, one covered motor launch, and four life rafts from the Prisendam were used to carry the passengers and crew from the burning vessel. The lifeboats were launched fortunately into 5 to 10 foot seas with 10 knot winds being reported. Of concern was the impending storm conditions forecasted for night fall by the National Weather Service. The USCG Command Center under the direction of Rear Admiral Richard Knapp was aware that the rescue mission was time sensitive to get the passengers to safety during the daylight hours due to the pending rough weather conditions predicted after nightfall.

The process to abandon ship was not and orderly process and unfolded with

unforeseen glitches. Of the 6 lifeboats 4 were designed to handle 65 passengers but due to the lack of lifeboat training from the Indonesian crew the first boats were jammed with as many as 90 passengers. Four small inflatable rafts were launched carrying 25 people. The Prisendam's motor launch what may be considered its best emergency vessel got fouled on its davits by the inexperienced Indonesian's and hung useless banging against the side of the Prisendam.

Coast Guard petty officer Michael Oliverson helped to illuminate the launching with a floodlight from a Coast Guard helicopter and recalled that the unlicensed crew's exercise "looked like a mess." Petty Officer Oliverson is credited with saving a lifeboat launch mishap by blinking his floodlight and alerting the crew that they were lowering one lifeboat directly into a lifeboat that was already launched.

Some of the lifeboats were lowered with no one in charge. For newspaper publisher Steel from Massachusetts the lifeboat he chose to descend into the sea got its cables jammed 30 feet above the 10 foot waves. Finally the cables were broken loose and the lifeboat fell the remaining 20 feet into the water. He reported it took them nearly a half hour to get away from the hull of the Prisendam because the motor in the lifeboat wouldn't work.

As the fire raged on into the early morning hours of August 4th the Prisendam began to list to the starboard side due to taking on water through the portholes.

Fortunately for all involved the supertanker Williamsburgh under radio direction from the USCG Command Center arrived at the scene at 7:45 AM. The tanker was the largest oil tanker ever built in the United States. It was coming south from the Alaskan oil terminal and was carrying a full load of oil. It rode low in the water from its 65 foot draft and literally represented a high degree of stability as the staging site authorized by Rear Admiral Knapp's staff for the rescue operation.

Coast Guard helicopter pilot Lt. Bruce Melnick was credited with plucking nearly 110 survivors with his wire hoist cable and metal basket from the lifeboats and putting them onto the Williamsburgh. It was determined this was the safest process as the 40 foot climb up a rope Jacob's ladder along the side of the ship was too risky and strenuous for the elderly passengers.

When the helicopter reached its weight limit from hoisting survivors they would fly over and unload within 5 minutes on the deck of the Williamsburgh and begin the process all over again.

As the day wore on the weather deteriorated steadily making the hoisting operation more difficult. The winds increased from 5 knots to 25 knots and the sea's increased from 10 foot to over 35 feet.

At 1:45 PM the Coast Guard Cutter Boutwell arrived on the scene and the tanker Williamsburgh was dispatched to head towards Valdez, Alaska as the Coast Guard determined under the command of Rear Admiral Richard Knapp that Valdez was the

only port that could accommodate the 225,000 ton tanker fully loaded with oil.

As luminous sky's and deteriorating weather set in with approaching darkness 6 helicopters simultaneously continued to airlift survivors to safety. Taking over as the on-scene command the cutter Boutwell used their motor surf boats to transfer the remaining survivors from the Prisendam's lifeboats. By 8 PM everyone known was removed from the lifeboats and the remaining crew and captain were recovered from the now severely listing Prisendam. With nightfall now set in only one lifeboat of survivors remained unaccounted for in the now turbulent seas. The elusive lifeboat number six with passengers and crew!

Not mentioned in any of the official rescue records was the incredible human response from the good citizens of Yakutat, Alaska. When Alaska State Trooper Warren Grant rang the fire bell in the early Saturday morning hours nearly half of the 500 residents of the fishing village that is 320 miles east from Anchorage responded and prepared to do what they had never done before, taking part of in a land/sea relief mission. Yakutat resident Lani Mapes and her fisherman husband Ray answered the call to help the Prisendam. The Yakutat residents made tuna, fish, ham, and peanut butter sandwiches and took shifts serving hot coffee to the wet and weary passengers rescued from the Prisendam's lifeboats. Yakutat resident Alice Bethei cooked up a giant order of vegetable soup which she took to the airport and fed the passengers as they awaited air travel to Sitka. Mallots General store and Ryman's Department store donated jeans and socks to the wet passengers. The Lakeside Chapel St. Ann's Catholic Church and the Yakutat Presbyterian Church donated other clothing. Yakutat Fire Chief Jerry Pond coordinated the many Yakutat volunteers was excited how smooth the rescue operation went with so many coming forward to help.

The Chief Mate of the Sohio Intrepid ordered two able-bodied (AB) seaman to prepare wire and turnbuckles to lash down an Air Force PJ helicopter that was cleared for an emergency landing on the narrow deck of our oil tanker. One spark and we are all ignited by the combustible nature of an empty gas-laden oil tanker. A footnote to this rescue mission was another ocean tragedy that would follow. Able-bodied seaman Philip Corl Jr., was the son of Capt. Phil Corl Sr., the Captain that would go down at the wheel of the coal carrier Marine Electric off the coast of New England two years later; joining AB Phil Corl Jr. was able-bodied seaman Ed Sullivan Jr., the son of Bosun Ed Sullivan Sr., a decorated naval gunner from the USS Francis Scott Key that served in the "Forgotten Convoy," to Murmansk.

An after-story to this mission was upon arrival of the Sohio Intrepid back in the Port of LA Phil Corl Jr., & Ed Sullivan Jr. were met at the dock by Capt. Phil Corl Sr. and taken to dinner to congratulate us on doing our part in the Prisendam rescue mission. Capt. Corl Sr., a professional took the time over dinner to make clear to two young sailors the importance of professionalism. Less than two years after that dinner to receive accolades for service from Capt. Corl Sr., AB Ed Sullivan Jr. would keep sailor tradition and sing "Fiddler's Green" at the funeral service for the Marine Electric crew who perished with Capt. Corl Sr. in the icy waters off Virginia. Capt. Corl ordered Sullivan's

fellow national maritime union member Dewey off the wheel and bravely took the helm of his ship the Marine Electric into Davy Jones locker. Dewey dove off the wing of the bridge and within one of his first swim strokes found a rope tied to an inflatable life raft. Dewey jumped in and was one of three that lived owing his life to Capt. Corl Sr. It was the tragic Marine Electric sinking that prompted a national maritime lobbying effort with Sen. Ted Kennedy who sponsored legislation to provide survival suits for each sailor on U.S. Flag ships.

Back in the Gulf of Alaska, while the Chief Mate of the Sohio Intrepid escorted the Air Force Capt. John Walters and his helicopter crew to the bridge of the ship to report the coordinates of the lost Prisendam lifeboat #6. Capt. Walters reported that he had lowered two "Pararescuemen Jumpers" known as "PJ's" Sgt. Rios and Sgt. Cassidy into the lifeboat to assist the survivors along with a radio and 13 flares. This information was critical and led to the rescue of the last passengers that were left in the water. The alert computer experts at the USCG Command inserted the latitude and longitude of the last known coordinates along with factoring for the set, drift, and weather conditions to produce an accurate computer projection of the elusive lifeboat #6. The Air Force tradition of not leaving men behind was being put to the test. The Prisendam cruise photographer Terry Allen was in the elusive lifeboat #6 and reported how Sgts. Cassidy and Rios "literally saved people's lives." The alert Air Force PJ's aware of the increased weather conditions due to the remnants of typhoon Vernon and the now 35 foot sea's and 40 knot winds rigged a tarpaulin over the passengers to ward off the rain and sea spray from the swells. Irving Brex from Seattle a diabetic who was prudent enough to dress warmly was now suffering shock from not having received his insulin shot. As darkness set in Irving reported he "forced himself to stay awake and fought hallucinations a couple of times during the night."

AB Phil Corl Jr., and AB Ed Sullivan Jr., having directed USAF Capt. Walters onto the volatile deck of the Sohio Intrepid from his fuel empty chopper with Capt. Walters leaving just inches to spare from keeping his tail blades away from sparking on the Sohio Intrepid hand rails. Now AB's Sullivan and Corl lashed the helicopter securely on deck as 35 knot winds picked up and rain howled across the deck of the oil tanker. Enclosed are pictures of the Air Force helicopter that located the missing Prisendam lifeboat #6 and landed on the deck of the Sohio Intrepid averting the need for the Air Force helicopter to ditch into the sea due to lack of fuel to make land. USAF and Sohio Intrepid each played a critical role to solve the mystery of where lifeboat #6 went in the now stormy sea?

With coordinates provided by the USCG Command Center the Coast Guard cutter Boutwell was dispatched to turn back to sea and locate the elusive Prisendam lifeboat #6. At approximately 1 AM on Sunday October 5th the Coast Guard Cutter Boutwell's sweeping searchlight cut through the darkness and found the missing lifeboat #6. Ironically Air Force veteran Cassidy used a survival mirror to bounce the saving light from the Boutwell back to the vessel. The watch officer of the Boutwell caught the flash of light and edged up to the tossing lifeboat in 40 foot seas. It was most appropriate

that the Coast Guard cutter assigned as the on-site command vessel for the mission would answer the “call to duty” and successfully end the largest land/sea rescue in the history of the sea’s.

So many individuals were instrumental in the success of the overall mission which resulted with no casualties. Such as, the medical team airlifted to the Williamsburgh headed by Air Force doctor Don Hudson and his makeshift medical team of paramedics, and firefighters along with the Alaskan State Troopers who were airlifted out from the Sitka Academy. The Prisdendam’s duty nurse Linda, was joined onboard the Williamsburgh to attend to medical needs of the survivors by retired Seattle school nurse Isabella Brex who in her late 60’s survived the climb up the 40 foot rope ladder aside the Williamsburgh to put her medical expertise to work in assisting the medical needs of the survivors.

The medical staff was so very critical to address imminent medical needs and avert any casualties during the rescue mission. Air Force Dr. Don Hudson treated a woman with an existing brain tumor, survivors that had epileptic seizures, survivors that were dealing with terminal cancer, and one survivor that endured the re-occurrence of a malaria attack. Seven passengers were in advanced stages of hypothermia, three of which it was estimated if they were exposed to the cold for even an hour longer would have met certain death. Dr. Hudson verified a passenger’s observation that if they had been dealing with passengers under 35 years of age he is sure panic would have set in, but due to the ironic fate of elderly passengers “the older folks were more calm, and had things in perspective.” All the individuals in the medical team contributed to the overall success of the rescue mission.

One individual performance that is worthy of mention was U.S. Coast Guard helicopter pilot Lt. Commander Robert A. Knapp (unrelated to Rear Admiral Knapp). Lt. Knapp exhibited one of greatest single examples of USCG credo to “save lives.” Lt. Commander Knapp heroically flew throughout the mission and assisted in the saving of 21 lives, and was later presented the distinguished “Flying Cross” from the President of the United States.

Back at the Pipeline Bar in Valdez, AK, able-bodied seaman Ed Sullivan Jr., and Phil Corl Jr., of the Sohio Intrepid were quietly enjoying a cold beer pondering the fate of the elusive lifeboat #6. We knew the Coast Guards finest were in pursuit but still yet unsure whether the rescue mission would have any casualties. We joined by the survivors and crew of the Prisdendam and Williamsburgh, and off duty Air Force and Coast Guard at the famous Pipeline Bar.

Suddenly in the early morning hours of Sunday Oct. 5th a memorable sight ensued when a young scrubbed clean Coast Guard petty officer popped his head into the room and yelled “the boys on the Boutwell got them!” “All accounted for!” The announcement set forth a celebration not seen in Valdez in many years. Many toasts of hip hip hooray ensued into the wee hours of Sunday morning! Many cheers went out for the determined “Boys of the Boutwell,” that will not be long forgotten!

In reflection what stands out to me was the determined professionalism in the frenzy of a logistic nightmare that was exhibited by the U.S. Coast Guard under the command of Rear Admiral Richard Knapp. I saw firsthand the importance of the long ingrained mundane task of mandatory lifeboat drills and how if the Coast Guard was not present the untrained Indonesian crew of the Prisendam was ill prepared to "save lives."

Fortunately for me it was not the last time that I would meet a crew member the Dutch passenger liner Prisendam. For back in Holland a thankful Senior Captain Aad Hess of the Prisendam was on vacation when the ocean had taken his beloved jewel of the Holland American line fleet.

On Saturday morning October 11, 1980 the Prisendam was determined to have taken on too much water by the Commodore Straits tugboat which was towing the vessel towards Portland, Oregon. The vessel was rolling from 20 degrees to port to 35 degrees to starboard. After the sea-going tug witnessed the vessel endure an 11 second roll on its starboard side it was determined to end the 2-3 knot tow of the smoke scarred and weary Prisendam.

At 3:30 AM on October 11th nearly one week to the hour to when the Prisendam sent out its original distress call the vessel rolled onto its starboard side one last time and sank within 3 minutes into 8,820 feet of water finding eternal rest in Davy Jones locker after 7 years of sea service.

Another Passing Ship in the Sea

April 14, 1987 was a memorable day for me. Ironically, I was crossing the Gulf of Mexico onboard the Sohio Resolute a Keystone oil tanker. It was the sister ship to the Sohio Intrepid on which I was a crew member in the Gulf of Alaska during the Prisendam rescue mission eight years previous. I had received a direct order from the Captain to finish painting the smokestack as one strip stood out that was not painted due to monsoon rains while we were in port in Panama. As I attempted to climb to the top of the smokestack with rolling sea's and experiencing the extreme heat from the engine room due to the vessel being at full steam at sea, I experienced not only red hot steel ladders in climbing aloft but also rolling sea's. Due to these conditions I fell

over 40 feet and nearly lost my life. While unconscious and in shock I had one of those out of body experiences of traveling through a tunnel of bright light. It would be an experience that I would spend an entire year of my life with dedicated physical therapists to work my way out of a wheelchair and regain the use of my legs. Of which I am eternally grateful to the patience of therapists at the Miami Hospital and the Braintree Rehab Hospital in Braintree, MA where I eventually ended up as an inpatient.

After I had fallen and landed on the steel deck that was the steel ceiling to the engine room I was essentially laying in a frying pan unconscious with the extreme heat hastening my body going into shock. I had used up all the oxygen we carried on the ship and the captain of the Keystone tanker Resolute called for the USCG to transport me via helicopter to Miami for emergency medical treatment to stabilize me.

A seasoned mariner Capt. Aad Hess of the Dutch passenger liner Nieuw Amsterdam heard the request over the marine radio. In a true centuries old tradition of a maritime courtesy out at sea, Capt Hess radioed my ship that they had a full hospital onboard with nurses and a Doctor and offered to take my injured body and give emergency medical treatment as they were only a few miles away.

I was transported in a standard wire Stokes stretcher by the Nieuw Amsterdam Motor launch used to bring passengers ashore in foreign ports.

I awoke in the hospital of the Nieuw Amsterdam with 4 nurses cutting my clothes off with scissors and learned later I was under the care of Dr. Purvis of Vancouver, Canada who was the Nieuw Amsterdam medical doctor who was responsible for stabilizing my condition. I slowly gained consciousness and was groggy from the intravenous morphine hooked up to my arm. When I showed signs of awakening the nurses informed Captain Hess, and he leaned over me and said, "son it's OK, you've had an accident and your onboard the Dutch passenger liner Nieuw Amsterdam getting the medical attention you need." At that time all that really registered with me was the mention of Dutch passenger liner, and I looked into Captain Aad Hess's eyes and said, "Does this have anything to do with the Prisendam?" This put Capt. Hess into a bit of shock as he fell back across the room and fell backward against a cabinet and fell to the floor. The nurses asked Capt. are you OK, are you having a heart attack. Then Capt Hess with an alarmed look on his face said, "how does this kid know the name of my ship that sank 8 years ago?" All eyes in the hospital of the Nieuw Amsterdam were on me, the stranger in the room, wired on morphine, and someone that still doesn't know what happened to get me on their ship? A long pause of silence captured the room as I was loaded with unknown fear that maybe I said something wrong. I stuttered that, I was involved 8 years ago to help save all the 519 people in the Gulf of Alaska who were passengers on the Prisendam. Capt. Hess stood up and said, "Well son, you can say in our own small way we are paying you back for your help to make the rescue of the passengers of the Prisendam the largest land/sea rescue in the history of the seas.

Capt. Aad Hess called the entire passengers and available crew together on the ship and announced that they had a very special unexpected guest aboard the Nieuw Amsterdam and explained to all assembled of my participation in the rescue mission of the Holland American Lines Prisdendam 8 years previous, while he as senior Captain of the Prisdendam was off duty at home. I cannot explain in words how thankful I am for Dr. Purvis and his courteous medical staff to stabilize me, and the chance gift of "our passing ships in the sea" and Capt. Aad Hess adhering to the long maritime tradition to helping fellow mariners in distress upon the high sea's.

What will forever stand as a very special moment between a fellow mariner was before the Nieuw Amsterdam docking in the Port of Jamaica and my subsequent transport to Miami Hospital, Capt. Hess confided in me of the personal tears he shed over hearing of his ship Prisdendam sinking in the Gulf of Alaska, but more importantly for him that all 519 passengers and crew saved under stormy conditions. For him that was a logistic miracle that he attributed to the combined forces that responded in the ancient tradition of a maritime courtesy at sea. I saw Capt. Hess shed a tear again when I told him about how it felt to be standing at the Pipeline Bar in Valdez Alaska and see the young scrubbed clean "Coast Guard Petty Officer come in the bar and yell, "the boys on the Boutwell got them all," thanks to the combined efforts of the USCG they found lifeboat #6. When I told Capt. Hess we toasted a successful rescue of all "with a grand toast," he concurred it must of been "grand." As I shared with Capt. Hess my perceived minor role in securing an Air Force helicopter that emergency landed on the deck of our empty oil tanker that was filled with fumes. He assured me that helping the passengers and the Air Force crew was all integral with the overall success of the rescue mission. Reminding me of all the little details that had to be in place on this day right down to the alert Air Force helicopter pilot calling into the USCG command center to report the latitude and longitude of the last lifeboat #6 as he set out dangerously running out of fuel and cleared for an emergency landing on the light and highly volatile oil tanker Sohio Intrepid. Before the air force chopper left the lifeboat they dropped two experience frog men in lifeboat #6 with the remaining passengers. It is an Air Force tradition not to leave a man behind, and in the story of the Prisdendam the USCG and the USAF forces kept tradition and returned to insure the incredible feat to save all lives.

A few years ago I attempted to contact Capt. Aad Hess through the human resource office of Holland American Lines to formally thank him and was informed that Capt. Hess had passed away in retirement a year previous. In lieu of not being able to reach out to Capt. Hess I commend him in this report in an effort to honor his memory and his adherence to the ancient tradition of a professional maritime courtesy during times of crisis on the high seas. For without the efforts of Capt. Hess I may not have had the opportunity to look into my five children's eyes ever again, and experience those wonderful child rearing years watching my kids develop wings for flight into life.

Nor without the Holland Lines Capt. Aad Hess would I likely be able to write this report which reminds me how small our world really is, separated yet linked by our oceans; and the ironic fate that Capt. Hess the Senior off duty Captain of the Prisdendam would

go out of his way to save my life, at the helm of the Prisendam's sister ship Nieuw Amsterdam. How ironic that I learn while I was lying paralyzed through the tears in Capt. Hess eyes how much the off duty Captain of the Prisendam appreciated the Americans that saved all 519 passengers and crew of the Prisendam. The USCG herculean effort allowed Capt. Hess beloved pride of the Dutch fleet the Prisendam to go to the ocean's depths with no stigma of loss of human life.

I did receive something from Capt. Aad Hess that I'd like to share with you and the 17th District. It was the look of pride on the face of the native Dutch sea Captain from Holland. He leaned forward with a smile and told me that the Prisendam was the last cruise ship in the Dutch fleet to be built in the Netherlands! With a tremendous sense of pride he recalled the Prisendam was christened by Princess Margriet of the Netherlands, the sister of Queen Beatrix.

With a beaming pride only a ship's Captain could convey he expressed great thanks to all the Americans who saved the passengers and Dutch crew of his beloved ship, mentioning what a great exhibit of seamanship it took before the Prisendam became the only victim of the fire going to Davy Jones locker just 50 miles west of Sitka, forever silent in 9,000 feet of Alaskan waters.

Passing Ships in the Sea "Safely" – an "Ode to Admiral Knapp"

In making a case to review the role of Rear Admiral Richard Knapp as a representative of the U.S. Coast Guard 17th District it is important to review the history of the Coast Guard and the role of leaders like Admiral Knapp played in the midst of executing difficult crisis management decisions to live up to their motto to "save lives." In giving consideration of the basis for the issuance posthumously of the "Joint Meritorious Unit Award," consider the following:

“Rear Admiral Richard Knapp was the only Senior officer who could have made the call and assume the inherent risk to bring the loaded oil tanker Williamsburgh back to the Aleyska oil terminal representing a combustible safety risk while weighing the decision to get the rescued passengers and crew ashore preventing them from movement that would put them in further harm’s way.”

With the threat of severe 35 mph gale force winds and 14 foot sea’s the emerging weather conditions of darkness & fog magnified the importance of the astute executive decisions made by Senior Officer Admiral Knapp! Although Admiral Knapp’s decisions were certainly risk-laden, yet in retrospect resulted in the success of the mission. Admiral Knapp’s leadership resulted in the USCG accomplishing its duty of “saving lives” which on Oct. 4, 1980 resulted in the saving of all 519 onboard.

It is hopeful that as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Dempsey in prudent reflection will find sufficient cause within this report and the expansive military reports to warrant consideration of a review of Rear Admiral Richard Knapp’s leadership role as a representative of the 17th USCG District Unit. Rear Admiral Knapp is a proud duty officer who would not approve of any recognition and seeing his service as a duty. However this request for consideration is done on behalf of the performance of the entire 17th USCG District Unit while under the command of Rear Admiral Knapp during the Prisdendam rescue mission. This record of service is sufficient to warrant consideration based on the logged heroics of the 17th District who as a unit performed above and beyond the call of duty!

A basis exists in federal statutes for consideration of Admiral Knapp to be considered issuance posthumously for the “Joint Meritorious Unit Award” lies in the fact that since such consideration was made retroactive for the Pentagon’s consideration for meritorious service dating back to Jan. 23, 1979, upon the transfer of authority from the Secretary of Transportation to the Dept. of Homeland Security. This retroactive date is valid for a full 20 months before the sinking of the Prisdendam. Certainly this heroic service meets the criteria to be “awarded to joint units activities where the joint units or activities must report to unified or combined command.” This commendation “is the highest peacetime award that may be awarded to military commanders that distinguishes itself by valorous or extremely meritorious service, not involving combat.”

At a minimum the results from the stellar performance of Rear Admiral Richard Knapp deserves consideration of the USCG “Gold Lifesaving Medal” for his risk laden performance that resulted in what is considered “the largest land/sea rescue in the history of the sea’s.” This historic feat warrants Rear Admiral Knapp for consideration to join an elite rank of commanders that includes Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz, and General George S. Patton to receive the “Gold Lifesaving Medal.”

To consider an award of this stature to be given posthumously you need only to review the career of Rear Admiral Knapp to understand the good fortune to have his prudent leadership during such a perilous ocean tragedy. Rear Admiral retired with little

fanfare from the USCG in 1984 after an illustrious career. In 1966 as a decorated USCG officer from the Vietnam conflict he was awarded the "Legion of Merit" with combat distinguished service. In 1974 Commanding Officer Knapp served as Chief, of Ocean Operations Division for the USCG and for that service was awarded the "Meritorious Service Medal" for that service. That commendation is the highest USCG award however is Junior to the recommended review for "Joint Meritorious Unit Award" for the inspired leadership in the rescue mission.

To put into perspective Rear Admiral Knapp silently quarterbacked what could be best described with a sports analogy as winning 519 Super Bowl's in coordinating the largest land/sea rescue in the history of the sea's as the decisive Commander of the 17th U.S. Coast Guard District.

It is rare that a U.S. Merchant Marine officer would be recommending a Rear Admiral of the USCG for commendation consideration at the Pentagon. However in this report I rest my case with this summary on behalf of firsthand observations of the merchant marine along with the execution of simple interviews with three expert witnesses who served as duty officers under the command of Rear Admiral Knapp throughout this heroic rescue: 1) Commander James K. Woodle, (Rt.) Commanding Officer, of the USCG Marine Safety Officer, in Valdez, Alaska; 2) Commander Richard Schoel, Chief of the USCG Search and Rescue Branch in Juneau, AK; and 3) Commander Jake Jacoby, Commanding Officer of the Marine Safety Office, Juneau, Alaska..

In closing, under the confines of the fiduciary duty vested by our Chairman Emeritus of the MA National WWII Memorial Committee the beloved Congressman John Joseph Moakley it is my duty to inform you of the exceptional execution of patriotic duty by Admiral Richard Knapp as a he led his fellow Americans in the largest land/sea rescue in the history of the sea's!

General Dempsey the example of the courageous wisdom of Admiral Richard Knapp a Senior Officer in a peacetime operation making the logistic decisions that resulted in saving 519 lives must NOT slip through the cracks of history as today's military leaders prepare America for Joint Force 2020.

America was built on it heroes, traditionally it has been healthy as a nation to reflect on the sea-going careers of so many great mariners who have survived "as passing ships in the sea," distinguished officers like Rear Admiral Richard Knapp of the U.S. Coast Guard, and the dedicated service of the USCG 17th

Let history record that the merchant marine witnessed Admiral Knapp's command pass off to the "Boys of the Boutewell" a computer's estimated sea position applying set & drift to find the Prisendam's elusive lifeboat six! The "Boys of the Boutewell" began their duty that day under luminous skies 14 foot sea's and 20 MPH gale force wind. Duty bound the Boutewell silently slipped into fog that was now thick as pea soup, armed only with their training and sheer determination. Silence blanketed the

roaring Alaskan storm.

The hope of Alaska, our nation, and international media throughout the world rested on the weary "Boys of the Boutewell" after over 500 people being saved would they find the "needle in the haystack" the last lifeboat with the last survivors and report the miracle of "no" casualties in the rescue of the Prisedam?

Lo and behold the "Boys of the Boutewell" emerged in the fury of that howling Alaska storm which they were challenged to watch grow with intensity throughout the long exhausting day of "saving lives!" May we never forget the will of the battle weary "Boys of the Boutewell" who found a way to cut through the silence of a dense fog, and return in howling 35 MPH gale force winds over choppy 25 foot seas with a very proud report that rang throughout the entire 17th District's radio transmissions across Alaska to the "old man," the Sr. Duty Officer Admiral Knapp, "Sir, we found lifeboat six", "mission accomplished!" The USCG heroic actions put a successful ending to the largest land/ sea rescue in the history of the sea's! In the pipeline bar in Valdez, our beer mugs clanged with "hip hip hooray!"

May we as a nation look back 3 decades later and reflect on these unsung heroes and find an appropriate way to honor the tradition of Admiral Knapp and the 17th District to give a well-deserved morale boost by reminding citizens of the tradition of an exceptional example of a job well done by the unsung heroes of the USCG! The Coast Guard over the years have been viewed as the junior branch of service in our military. Yet in post 9/11 the USCG service has emerged as the prominent force for our nation's national security. May we as a nation never forget Admiral Knapp and the "Boys of the Boutewell" who along with so many others in a long maritime sea-going tradition proudly answered the call to duty!

As the MA Field Representative I am proud to report that the MA National WWII Memorial Committee, is the last remaining active State WWII Memorial Committee based upon the prescribed duty assigned by our Chairman Emeritus Cong. John Joseph Moakley, to maintain a duty to promote patriotism in our communities which is ongoing and shall never be completed by each generation who stands watch.

It is appropriate as the MA WWII Memorial Committee to cite the words of our MA Executive Committee member, former Commander-in-Chief John F. Kennedy recalling his comments while attending the banquet for the America's Cup sailing events in Newport, Rhode Island the last year of his life when he so eloquently summed it up for all who are drawn to the sea. The former PT boat Commander Kennedy said, "All of us have the same percentage of salt, in our blood, in our sweat, and in our tears." "And when we go back to the sea, to swim or sail upon it, we go back whence we came."

Tempus fugit memento USCG,

Good Sailing Days Ahead,

*Capt. Ed Sullivan (Rt.), MA Field Representative
National World War II Memorial Committee
c/o Patriotic Productions
Box 5021
Beverly Hills, CA 90209
(619) 723-1144
CaptSull@aol.com*

Sources:

*Proceedings of the USCG Marine Safety Council Vol. 41 No.5 May 1985
The Anchorage Times Sunday Oct. 5, 1980
Burning Cold: The Cruise Ship Prisendam and the Greatest Sea Rescue of all Time
The Prisendam Fire – History’s Great Sea Rescue / Popular Mechanics April 1981
Time Magazine – Living: A Morning to Remember Oct. 20, 1980
Conversations with survivors, USCG, & USAF, staff @ the Pipeline Rest. Valdez AK
Photos provided by USCG Proceedings of the USCG Marine Safety Council
Photos provided by Holland American Lines
Photos provided by Capt. Ed Sullivan crewmember Sohio Intrepid
Photos provided by the Anchorage Times*

About the author:

*Capt. Ed Sullivan is a retired merchant marine officer who circumnavigated the world's oceans three times during his merchant marine service that concluded as a Tugboat Captain in Boston Harbor. Capt. Sullivan served on the advisory board to the House Merchant Marine & Fisheries Committee and as a maritime historian with the National Maritime Union was appointed by Congressman John Joseph Moakley to serve as the Massachusetts Field Representative on the National World War II Memorial Committee in Washington D.C. Capt. Sullivan spent a year in a wheelchair due to the Gulf of Mexico accident which Nieuw Amsterdam Capt. Aad Hess was credited with saving his life. While convalescing at Braintree Rehab Hospital in MA he authored the legislation "**A Maritime Technological Initiative**," a management structure for America to have a maritime policy," presented by the MA Legislature to the President and Congress. Capt. Sullivan is an acquisition analyst with Tower Financial Fund in Beverly Hills, and author of Great American biographies for Los Angeles based Patriotic Productions.*