

Williamsburgh to the Prinsendam's Rescue.

By Lieutenant (junior grade) Thomas F. McCaffery, U. S. Naval Reserve

The greatest sea rescue of modern times began on what had promised to be a routine mid-watch on 4 October 1980. The bridge watch, composed of helmsman, lookout, and the author (as officer of the deck), had just settled in when the radio auto alarm broke the quiet of the bridge at 0020.* The radio operator called the bridge shortly after with the position of a passenger ship, M/V Prinsendam, apparently on fire. The Prinsendam's position was quickly plotted, and Master Arthur H. Fertig was apprised of the situation. At 0035, the Williamsburgh's course was changed to assist the stricken vessel. The Williamsburgh's estimated time of arrival on scene at full speed was 0630, shortly after first light.



The preparations for this rescue operation began on a low key. Voice and radiotelegraph communications were established with the Prinsendam, SS/Great Land, and U.S. Coast Guard Communications Station Kodiak. The Great Land, an American flag roll-on/roll-off vessel, was released to proceed to Anchorage,

Alaska, because of her unsuitability for a major rescue operation. In conference with the master, the author prepared lists of rescue and fire-fighting equipment, as well as potential berthing areas for survivors. The Williamsburgh proceeded at top speed to the disaster area, with Chief Engineer William Camacho and most of his officers and men on duty in the engine room to obtain maximum speed.

At 0400, Captain Fertig ordered all hands on duty. The crew remained in this status for the next 44 hours. Chief Officer Harry Rogers proceeded to the bridge, while the deck, engine, and steward's departments were awakened and informed of the situation. As the crew began bringing the limited amount of rescue gear on deck, the mercury vapor deck lights were turned on. This not only aided the preparations on deck, but provided positive identification of the Williamsburgh for the U.S. Coast Guard on-scene commander, circling above the Prinsendam in a C-130. Communications were established from the bridge with him on marine band VHF-FM (Channel 16) at this time. Around 0600, radar contact with the Prinsendam was established. The deck lights were extinguished shortly afterward, and the Prinsendam was sighted, silhouetted against the dawn, dead ahead. Shortly after our arrival on scene, a Coast Guard helicopter hovered over one of our two

helipads to collect several of the limited number of fire extinguishers for use on the Prinsendam. This was, for the most part, the deck crew's introduction to helicopter operations. At this same time, Captain Fertig began reducing speed for improved maneuverability. His plan was to proceed slowly up to the lifeboats and swing the ship to a southerly heading providing a lee on the starboard side. The wind was easterly at 25 knots and a 5-foot sea was running.



The distance to the lifeboats was, at this time, too great for visual contact. They had drifted some distance away from the Prinsendam, as apparently no sea anchors were deployed on any of the lifeboats or rafts because of the lack of competent crew members in the boats. To assist in finding the boats, it was requested that a flare be fired from one of the boats. Finally, after some delay, a red flare was fired indicating their position south of the Prinsendam by some two to five miles.

The approach to the lifeboats proceeded at a deliberate pace since a 225,000-deadweight ton tanker is not an easy vessel to handle. By 0700, a lee had been formed and a powered lifeboat was alongside. This was the only boat under power of the six lifeboats launched by the Prinsendam, except for a tender which was suffering engine troubles. It was not until 0722 that the first survivor stepped onto the deck of the Williamsburgh.

The process of bringing each survivor aboard by Jacob's ladder was slow, and it quickly became obvious that because of this slow process, the lack of powered lifeboats, and Williamsburgh's lack of maneuverability, another rescue approach had to be found.



The flexibility and speed of the helicopters, combined with the stability of the Williamsburgh and her strengthened helipads, proved to be the most efficient method of rescue. From 0750 to 1530, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Air Force, and Canadian Armed Forces helicopters arrived with survivors, medical personnel, and supplies. The Williamsburgh's deck crew quickly became adept at directing helicopter pilots onto this unfamiliar landing area and assisting survivors from the helos. Overhead, the C-130 had been

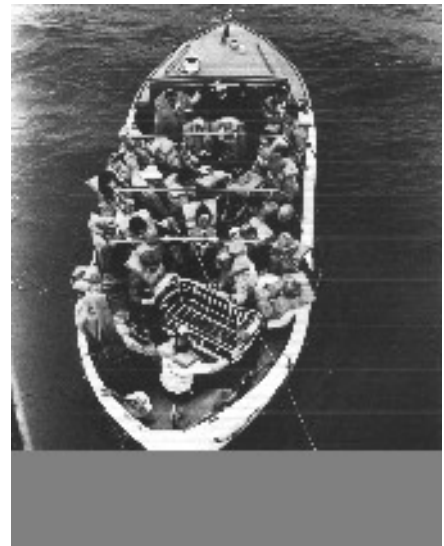
joined by a Canadian Argus patrol plane. Both kept watch over the entire operation, guiding helicopters to boats and providing communications relays.

Survivors began to trickle aboard, most of them elderly and dressed in everything from tuxedos and mink coats to pajamas and bathrobes. The steward's department, headed by Chief Steward Robert W.C. Rutherford, escorted the survivors to the crew's mess for hot coffee, soup, and dry blankets. They then moved to berthing areas in lounges, crew rooms, and passageways. Unfazed by the tenfold increase in demand on his department's services, Chief Steward Rutherford, seemingly without blinking an eye, fed and housed more than 400 people for a day and a half.

Seeing the need for a boat to rescue those in the four life rafts, Second Officer Kerry Horton, Second Assistant Engineer Paul Walker, A.B. Timothy Hagan, and Oiler David Kopp climbed into the first lifeboat which had come alongside and quickly had it operating. Under the command of Second Officer Horton, this boat proceeded to rescue survivors from the rafts which the helicopters could not reach because their rotor wash threatened the crafts' stability. The boat's crew members continued in this effort until they were recalled by Captain Fertig at 1500 as they ran low on fuel in increasingly worse sea conditions. Even then, they were attempting to tow another boat to the Williamsburgh until the towline

parted and could not be re passed.

Medical assistance during the early hours of the rescue was in extremely short supply, there being only the author in charge of the Williamsburgh's small hospital and an elderly Australian physician among the survivors already on board. Even at this time, potentially serious cases were coming on board, including a case of hypothermia treated by the author and another suffering from smoke inhalation. At approximately 1000, an Air Force C-130 arrived overhead with Air Force doctor Captain Donald Hudson and five parajumpers.



After conferring with the on-scene commander, it was decided not to drop these people into the water as planned, but to proceed to shore and return in Air Force rescue helicopters. Upon their return, three hours later, they joined three Canadian Armed Forces medics brought out by Coast Guard helicopters. Dr. Hudson and three of the parajumpers remained on board while the others remained with their aircraft to assist survivors in boarding the helicopter. By 1300, the medical

situation was improving, with military and civilian medical personnel arriving from all over Alaska. More potential emergencies continued to arrive. However, as the day wore on and the weather deteriorated.



Despite the weather, the tempo of the helicopter operations increased until, at one point helicopters were waiting for a clear deck. Thickening fog and a rising sea hindered the search for lifeboats and the rescue of their occupants. Along with more helicopters and supplies, the afternoon brought more ships, led by M/V Portland and followed by S/S Sohio Intrepid and S/S Keystone Canyon. The USCGC Boutwell (WHEC-719) Arrived on the scene in the early afternoon to assume the duties of on-scene commander. The additional merchant vessels, while not as well suited as the Williamsburgh for this rescue, were welcome assets in terms of more eyes keeping track of lifeboats, leas available for helicopters to work in, and for an Air Force helicopter low on fuel, a place to land.

By 1630, the majority of survivors had been either placed on board the Williamsburgh or flown ashore in helicopters returning for fuel. At this time, Captain Fertig requested to be released to proceed

for the Straits of Juan de Fuca, 48 hours away, in order to continue in the general direction of our intended destination. Remaining on the scene were the Boutwell, Sohio Intrepid with an Air Force helicopter on her deck, Keystone Canyon, and Portland. In the air, a Coast Guard C-130 and two helicopters continued searching for the last two boats, each with a handful of survivors and one with two Air Force parajumpers on board. These were finally rescued by the Boutwell in the early hours of 5 October by homing in on the parajumpers' radio in thick fog and rain.

At 1730, in the interests of returning the survivors to shore as soon as possible, the captain was ordered to reverse course and return to Valdez, Alaska, where it would be possible to deliver the survivors at dockside. Survivors began attempting to sleep wherever and however they could. The crew members of the Williamsburgh slept, when they could, on the decks, giving their rooms and beds to the survivors. Through the evening and into the morning, Dr. Hudson and the other medical personnel monitored the progress of the survivors, many of them in need of exotic medications which had not been available to them for almost two days by the time the Williamsburgh arrived in Valdez.

The survivors departed in in a pouring rain and boarded buses and ambulances waiting on the pier in Valdez. Slowly, the elderly survivors left the ship escorted by stronger ones, some clad in crew members' clothing, others still

wearing what they had on when they left the Prinsendam.



At 2230, on 5 October, the last of more than 370 persons rescued by the Williamsburgh from the Prinsendam was ashore. The balance of the 500 passengers and crew had been either flown ashore by helicopter or were on board the Boutwell. During this operation, not a single fatality occurred. This accomplishment is perhaps best phrased in the words of Dr. Donald Hudson, "Considering the age and physical condition of the passengers, most of them would have died if not for the Williamsburgh and her crew."

Lieutenant McCaffery, as the Third Officer of the Williamsburgh, was a watch officer or officer of the deck during the entire rescue operation described here.

*Note, all times are Alaska Daylight Time, zone description +9.