

El Desastre de la *Merida* (The *Merida* Disaster)

“On May 12, 1911... the steamer Merida, a passenger liner of the Ward Line leaving a revolution-torn Mexico, collided with the S.S. Admiral Farragut... the scene aboard the Merida was one of chaos... Two hours after the collision, all passengers and crew of the Merida were saved, including the ship mascots, five cats that only understood Spanish. Two of the special cats were named Tom and Jerry.”

Excerpt from the article, “In 1911, the passenger liner Merida sank off the coast of Virginia and all of its passengers were rescued,” by Robert Hitchings, *The Virginian-Pilot* (May 11, 2016).
https://www.pilotonline.com/history/columns/article_190a288b-52b8-5068-bd30-903052a35fd1.html

A thick fog enveloped the *Merida* as she steamed north along the Virginia coast. Most of the passengers had already retired to their cabins for the night. In the ship’s galley, five cats that only understood Spanish dozed.

Suddenly, an abrupt lurch accompanied by a deafening crash triggered a quintet of synchronized vertical leaps. Upon touchdown, the cats scrambled and slid on clattering claws into the passageway.

“¡Dios mío! ¿Qué es eso?” Tomás thought as he gathered himself.

“¡Miau!” cried Geraldo.

The other three cats—Luciano, Plácido, and José—just cowered. The *Merida* rolled to starboard.

“¡Qué mierda!” thought Tomás.

A frantic mass of crew and passengers stampeded toward the deck, forcing the cats to duck and dodge a flurry of feet.

“¡Siseo!” hissed Geraldo.

Only Herbert Benson, the ship’s wireless operator, noticed the cats. Benson scooped up Tomás as he ran by. “Come on, Tom, I’ll save your furry butt!” exclaimed Benson, but the words meant nothing to the cat.

“No hablo inglés, hombre,” thought Tomás.

During the confusion, Luciano, Plácido, José, and Geraldo became separated. Meanwhile, Tomás sat impatiently on Herbert Benson’s desk as the man tapped out a distress signal. Benson kept repeating, “S.O.S.! S.O.S.!”

The cat contemplated the American’s words. *“Eso es, eso es, eso es no bueno.”*

Soon the shrieking and shouting subsided and Captain Archibald Robertson’s firm, calm voice could be heard. The Spanish-speaking passengers and cats listened as a Cuban sailor translated the captain’s reassurances.

“¡Mantener la calma! ¡Todo estará bien!”

By now, Luciano, Plácido, José, and Geraldo had sought refuge from the bedlam by each slipping into tarp-covered lifeboats. They remained hidden while the covers were removed, passengers scrambled aboard, and the boats were lowered to the ocean’s surface.

Discovering the domesticated stowaways was somewhat heartening to the passengers, who comforted themselves and the cats by speaking softly to the latter. “*Eres un gato bonito. Está bien, gatito.*”

Back on the *Merida*, wireless operator Herbert Benson—with Tomás in tow—joined Captain Archibald Robertson and the ship’s mates topside. Although Tomás could not understand their words, he knew the men were urging their captain to board the last remaining lifeboat. The ship was sinking *rápidamente*.

A reluctant Captain Robertson finally climbed into the lifeboat with the others. Sensing a nearby scruffy presence, Tomás peered under the bow seat. It was Geraldo, gazing back as if to say, “*¿Qué pasa amigo?*”

Ten minutes later, the captain and crew watched the *Merida* begin its final descent toward Davy Jones’s locker. Having heard enough incoherent babble for one night, the two feline friends appreciated the somber mood on the lifeboat.

Tomás nodded off to the gentle rocking of the waves and wondered to himself, “*¿Por qué los gringos tienen nombres extraños como Archibald y Herbert?*”*

“*¡Miau!*” cried Geraldo. He was famished.

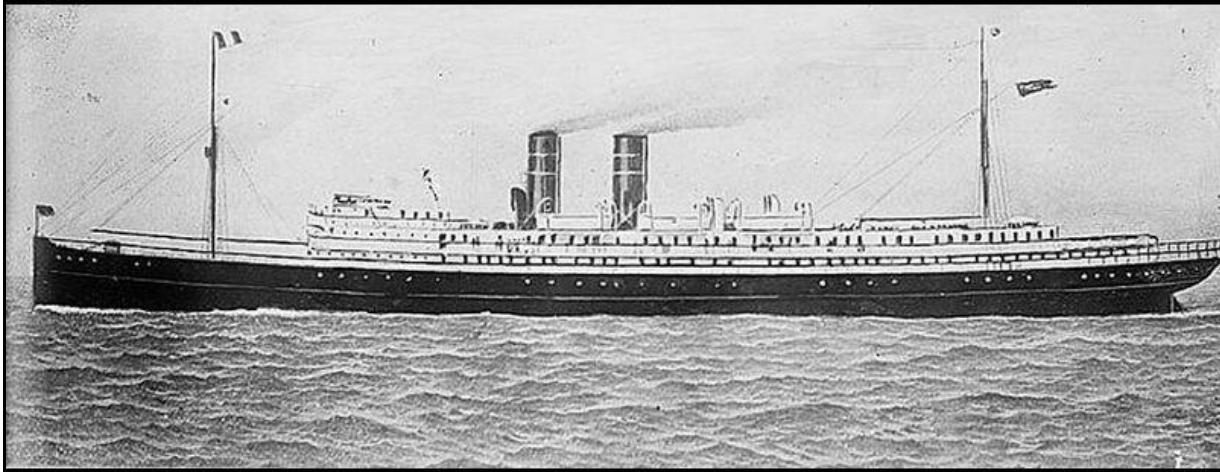
**Translation: Why do gringos have weird names like Archibald and Herbert?*

NOTE: Original article on following pages.

In 1911, the passenger liner Merida sank off the coast of Virginia and all of its passengers were rescued

By ROBERT HITCHINGS | GUEST COLUMNIST

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SS Merida

The SS Merida sank off the coast of Virginia on May 12, 1911. (www.wikipedia.org)

On May 12, 1911, gliding through a calm sea, disdainful of all objects, the steamer Merida, a passenger liner of the Ward Line leaving a revolution-torn Mexico, collided with the S.S. Admiral Farragut.

Within a few hours, she slipped beneath the sea. However, due to a heroic rescue, all 326 passengers and crew were saved.

History has forgotten the Merida, but this sea tragedy happened in our own backyard, 105 years ago, here off the coast of Virginia.

The sounds of foghorns could be heard in the distance. It was shortly after 11 p.m. and the Merida's Capt. Archibald Robertson decided to stay on the bridge because the ship was running into swirling clouds of fog and the siren was screaming every minute.

Cutting down the speed of the Merida to seven knots, the ship slowly forged through a foggy ocean.

Capt. Robertson and his officers stood on the bridge and immediately ahead they saw the lights of a steamer coming toward them through the foggy mist.

Sirens sounded and the quartermasters of both ships threw their wheels over, but within minutes the crash came. The collision tore a large gaping hole in the Merida's starboard side.

The Merida soon took a sharp list at an angle of about 40 degrees. Water entered her engine room.

From stem to stern, the Merida trembled and rolled and her passengers and crew were tossed from their bunks. Many staggered from their state rooms wearing only their night clothes. Within seconds the lights of the ship went out. Panic-stricken passengers and firemen (stokers) from the bottom of the ship rushed toward the deck in terror.

Immediately, the wireless operator Herbert O. Benson, after being knocked down by the impact, made it to his office to send out an SOS ("Save Our Ship").

Hatteras picked up the signal that the Merida had a collision and was sinking. He soon lost electricity, so Benson ran to the top deck and Capt. Robertson ordered him to get aboard the Farragut to send other SOS calls.

On board the Farragut, Benson found that the aerial was broken. All communications were lost. However, with the help of C. B. Leech, the radio operator of the Farragut, they worked together for nearly five hours to repair the aerial.

Another SOS message was sent out. The signal, though faint, was heard by wireless operator Beckerman of the steamship Hamilton of the Old Dominion Line. The Hamilton quickly responded, "We are on our way."

Meanwhile, the scene aboard the Merida was one of chaos.

As one passenger, a German mining engineer, told a Virginian-Pilot reporter afterward, "When I got on deck it was pitch dark, and people were pouring out of the main saloon. It seems to me that there were nothing but women all around, and they were all screaming at the top of their voices. Then the men began to come, and they were yelling too. Then we all heard a loud crash below (engine room), and two dozen fireman – Cubans and Mexicans – came running forward on deck. A fight occurred, and several passengers were pushed down. Capt. Robertson, officers, stewards and waiters gradually got everyone calm and quiet. Soon candles and lanterns were lit in the dark hallways to help guide the passengers to their life boats."

Purser M. J. Trazvuck and other crew members cleared away all the life boats, helping all passengers into each boat.

The Farragut rescued all passengers from the Merida's lifeboats. Two hours after the collision, all passengers and crew of the Merida were saved, including the ship mascots, five cats that only understood Spanish. Two of the special cats were named Tom and Jerry.

All passengers were transported from the Farragut to the Hamilton once it arrived on the scene. Capt. Robertson and his four officers remained aboard the ill-fated Merida until 5:30 a.m. when they got into the last life boat to board the Hamilton.

The Merida sank at 5:55 a.m. and Capt. Robertson said, as his vessel slipped beneath the water, "She was a good ship."

The Hamilton brought the passengers to Norfolk. More than 100 first class passengers were distributed among the leading hotels – Lynnhaven, Monticello and Lorraine – at the expense of the Ward Line.

The next day, local haberdashers, tailors, shoe stores and garment shops did a big business clothing the passengers, and within a few days, all the survivors left Norfolk.

Today the Merida's wreckage lies about 55 miles from Cape Charles, in 210 feet of water, buried in about 20 feet of sand.

The wreck site has lured many treasure hunters over the decades. The ship has been damaged considerably from the blunt force approach of many salvage operations over the years.

Today many still believe the treasure carried by the Merida, estimated at several million dollars, lies buried with the ship. However, like many rumored treasure ships, nothing of great monetary value has been recovered from the site.

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