



Swept Away And Back Aboard

Story by Mr. David Davies, III

Introduction by Captain R.J. Copin, USCG (Ret.), '54



I first learned of this amazing 1942 Coast Guard rescue at sea involving Academy grads through communication with a truly Coast Guard family in 2007 starting with an article I had in a Coast Guard Retiree Newsletter. The article described the 1946 horrific crash of a Sabena Air Line DC-4 in Newfoundland and the ensuing rescue of survivors by

CG helicopters dismantled in the U.S., transported to Newfoundland, and reassembled there to lift survivors to waiting CG seaplanes and ultimately urgently needed medical help..

Mrs. Alola Morrison of Orrington, Maine, seeing the article, contacted me with interest because her late father, Captain Alvin Giffin, USCGR, had been directly involved in that rescue operation. Mrs. Morrison subsequently provided important images adding substantially to the historical record of that Newfoundland rescue held by the Coast Guard Historian and the Coast Guard Aviation Association.

In addition, Mrs. Morrison described the role her uncle, the late Captain Albert Martinson, CGA '22, had in the rescue of the late Rear Admiral, then Lieutenant, Robert Goehring, CGA '39. She also informed me that her cousin David Davies, CGA '44, served at sea in the Pacific during World War II, later becoming a CG aviator. Finally, I was led to his son, David Davies, III, of Rhode Island, who had researched for his family a description of the Goehring rescue. So, here, with permission of the author, is his account of this interesting tale. Ray Copin

When you're a kid, you listen to family stories with, at best, one ear. At Thanksgiving dinners adults basically reminisced with adults, so it wasn't as if they were actually talking to you anyway. It had to be a pretty good story to distract you from damming up the gravy in the mashed potatoes. There were a few such stories in our family, but, as always happens, when you finally want all the details and have the right questions, the principals are long since dead & buried. One old tale concerned a LT Robert Goehring, U.S. Coast Guard, and the seamanship involved in his rescue after a giant wave swept him off a cutter in the north Atlantic early in World War II. This was one of those stories that interrupted the gravy lava flow experiment I was conducting. I tuned in one ear. Giant waves, helpless sailors, heroic grandfather. But that was it. There were never any details. Talk turned to disappointing cousins or sick aunts, and I was left with just hints of something worth listening to. If there were to be details, it looked like I would have to provide my own. Decades later, I did. This was when the power of the

Internet started to really shine. Over the course of a few months, I was able to track down former sailors who were there, officers who knew others who had first hand knowledge, and documents that pulled everything together.

I started with dinner table tidbits. During the war on the cutter DUANE commanded by my grandfather, Albert Martinson, somewhere in the north Atlantic, a giant wave washed an officer named Goehring overboard. My grandfather had one chance to rescue the man and timed the approach so another wave brought him alongside and within reach of the crewmen, arranged along the main deck with cargo nets run out over the side. The men were able to grab him at the peak of a wave and haul him aboard, very cold and thankful. Ok, that was pretty good, but surely there was more to it.

Swept Away And Back Aboard

Ripley 's "Believe It Or Not" used the story and changed it to a "miracle at sea", i.e. a giant wave washed him overboard and another giant wave put him back on the deck. Ripley's did not bother to provide a date. My mother and uncle had repeatedly warned me that Ripley's got it all wrong. The Gillette Co. reportedly used the story in a "close shaves" advertising campaign. I think I leafed through every *Life* magazine from 1941 to 1950 looking at shaving ads to no avail.

The logical thing to do was to find the ship's log and see the entries for that day. But what day, or year for that matter? Among my grandfather's personal papers were carbon copies of various Coast Guard orders, requests, and requisitions some of which helped pinpoint the date when CDR Martinson left DUANE and assumed command of another ship. The Goehring incident must have been in late 1941 or early 1942.

At this point, I surfed the Internet, where I soon found an association for DUANE shipmates. A request for information, after many suggestions and anecdotes, eventually led me to Al Phaneuf who was a Machinists Mate below decks on the DUANE when Lt. Goehring went overboard. He couldn't remember the exact date, but he certainly remembered the event, as everyone aboard shared his version of what happened. He contributed what he knew, carefully qualifying the sources and their reliability.

One recommended contact was Paul Lutz [CGA '45], who served aboard DUANE after the incident. We were soon talking on the telephone. He served as Chief of Staff to Admiral Goehring, many years after the incident. When Admiral Goehring retired Captain Lutz arranged the farewell party. The various officers involved thought it would be appropriate to re-tell the Admiral's overboard tale, and CAPT Lutz had a session with Goehring to review the essential facts. These often varied with those related by others who witnessed or heard of the rescue. CAPT Lutz was also able to provide me with a date, February 22, 1942. Armed with that, I contacted the U.S. Archives, and within a week or two, a large envelope arrived with relevant pages from DUANE's log. With these, I could piece together a decent story about eight minutes in the North Atlantic.

The wind steadily intensified through the morning of February 22nd. The USCG DUANE, one of the newer 327' secretary class cutters, zigzagged due west and due south in force 6 and 7 winds all morning. Bad weather did not prevent u-boat attacks. Guns and depth charges were manned and ready. Visibility was good, six to seven miles, but wave height was growing. The DUANE was making about 18 knots through seas with a surface temperature of 41°F. But then, conditions got worse. They were located at about 52°-17' N 46°-48'W, a point between Greenland and Newfoundland, where your exact location doesn't really matter. It's pretty miserable regardless. After 2PM, the winds increased to force 10 on the Beaufort Scale, or 50-63 miles per hour. These winds result in seas 25 to 30 feet high, and it's hard to see very much or very far because the wind turns wave tops into clouds of fine spray. By way of comparison, when the ANDREA GAIL of *The Perfect Storm* last reported in, she was locked in a storm of this magnitude, and moviegoers can speculate how a man overboard might have fared in those conditions. The high winds and sea swells were out of the east-northeast, which meant that with the ship now on a course of 214°, heading southwest, the force of the storm was aimed at the DUANE's stem. That is where Lieutenant (j.g.) Robert W. Goehring, ships gunnery officer, headed to inspect the depth charge tracks, concerned that the heavy seas might have dislodged something. The young officer was within the rear gun splinter shield on the quarterdeck, when an exceptionally large wave broke over the stem and swept

Goehring away. Al Phaneuf and his shipmates Ed Grant and Jim Entwistle compared notes and wrote me that –

"The sea was very rough with large waves. Occasionally one would slap the side of the ship and cover the quarterdeck. Located in that area was a five inch gun which was surrounded by a heavy duty splinter shield. The shield, about four feet in height, had only a narrow opening for gun crew access. When the large wave slapped the side of the ship, it filled that shield with water making it resemble an above ground backyard swimming pool. LT Goehring . . . was doing an inspection when one of those waves hit the ship, came over the side at the same time that the bow rose on another wave, further depressing the stem. Later, LT Goehring described his experience by saying 'One minute I was on a wet pitching deck, the next I was under water swimming as hard as I could for the surface.' Thinking he was still on the ship he was shocked on breaking above water and seeing the ship about a hundred feet from him and heading away. He yelled but wasn't heard because of the strong wind."

As the ship's log relates, fortunately for the Lieutenant, a lookout, Raymond Gajewski, was nearby staring aft at that moment, saw Goehring disappearing behind heaving seas, and sounded the Man Overboard alarm. This was at 2:10 PM.

Goehring's situation was perilous, to say the least. Even if the ship could get back to him, hypothermia is almost immediate in water temperatures of 41°F. Rescuing a strong responsive swimmer in mountainous seas is one thing; doing the same for a numb floating object quite another. The first involuntary reaction of people unexpectedly thrown into cold water is to gasp. When you gasp underwater, you breathe in very cold water instead of relatively warm air, chilling the body further. On the plus side, Goehring was warmly dressed and had on a life jacket, plus heavy rubber galoshes called "arctics". Attempting to swim or even tread water lowers the body's core temperature faster, so the safest thing to do is to wrap one's arms around your body, keep your legs together, and wait. This is easier said than done, of course, in breaking 30-foot seas with the wind howling at 50 miles per hour every time you rise out of a trough. In the best conditions, an average person in 40° water will quickly lose strength and judgment and unconsciousness will set in after 30 minutes. In one to two hours, that person will be dead. In conditions that make retaining body heat problematic, like struggling to keep one's head above water, those survival minutes dramatically drop. In a full-blown storm

at sea, it would be a major achievement or amazing luck just to find a man lost overboard. To find him still alive and conscious in 40° water required speed. The lookout's alertness and quick action were the first critical factors that gave Goehring a chance.

The general alarm resulted in immediate orders of stop all engines and hard right rudder. I do not know if CDR. Martinson was on the bridge when the alarm was sounded, but he was giving orders seconds later. When he told the story to his son and daughter he said that he was certain he had only one chance to save the man in the water, given the conditions. One of his chief worries was that the ship itself would kill Mr. Goehring, as seas could batter him against or drag him under the hull. A large number of seamen were quickly organized on the main deck to be ready to grab the man given any opportunity. Cargo nets were thrown over the side to provide something to hold onto (although one of the first effects of hypothermia is the loss of muscle control and strength). The ship quickly came about directly into the 50 mph winds and huge waves and bore down on the small target being swept towards them. Witnesses recall the quartermaster crying out "Mr. Goehring dead ahead!" Goehring remembered thinking that his ship was going to run him down as it came straight at him. On the bridge, the captain, navigator, and officer of the deck aimed at timing the approach of the vessel with the peak of a wave.

The ship grazed past Goehring who, as the bow passed, was in a trough well below the water line. As the next large-tot-wave lifted him up, he scraped up the hull to the arms of the rescue party just aft of the "air castle", a covered walkway under the bridge. Seaman First Class Roy Hamby and Seaman Second Class Donald Layman each seized a leg and tried to pull him on board. They had a problem, however, in each had a leg on either side of a safety-line stanchion with Mr. Goehring suspended upside down over the heaving seas. It took a minute or so to straighten this out and finally get him safely aboard. The log notes "1418 Secured from man overboard alarm." Eight minutes had elapsed from the man overboard alarm to his rescue.

The ship's log notes that LT Goehring was treated for exposure, but didn't speak of the bleeding wounds on his body as a result of scraping against the shellfish attached

to the bottom of the ship. Those wounds gave bloody testimony to the extent of his ride in those harrowing moments as the ship came alongside him.

My grandfather was involved in many live saving operations in these years, particularly on convoy escort when as many men as possible were pulled from the sea while merchantmen around were still under torpedo attack. Sometimes this involved saving boats and rafts full of sailors under extremely risky conditions. We knew from my mother that it tore him up remembering the cries of men who couldn't reach or hold onto the nets dragged in the water, as the convoy was under orders to keep moving. Some operations that involved bold command decisions were unknown to us until well after Captain Martinson's death, when happenstance brought men who served with him into contact with members of the family. Like most veterans, grandpa did not talk about the war, and certainly not to his grandchildren. If you want war stories, you'll have to dig them up yourselves. But when Lt. Goehring's rescue came up, it was clear that this incident fell into a different category. He could talk about this with a kind of quiet satisfaction.

As noted previously, Robert Goehring went on to complete a distinguished career in the service, but his experience gave him some perspective. Paul Lutz, then an academy cadet sometime after the rescue had occurred, was assisting the priest as an alter server at the Coast Guard Academy's regular Sunday Mass. Well before services began, Lutz noted an officer seated alone in the large room being used to accommodate the large number of Catholic cadets. After services concluded, that same officer remained seated long after everyone else had left, lost in his own thoughts or prayers. Lutz later met and served under this officer, who of course was Robert Goehring.

Now, not a February goes by, that, on the coldest, windiest day, I don't think of getting tossed into the ocean off Greenland. It always makes me feel warmer. And what will I do with all these hard-own story details? I'll bide my time. Someday, around some dinner table or campfire, some little kid or worldly-wise adolescent, temporarily separated from video games or DVD's, will ask some innocent question about their great

great grandfather or about World War II. I'll be ready. They'll never know what hit them; they'll just be swept away.

Associated Images:

ALBERT MARTINSON



Caption: Albert Martinson, '22
David Davies, III Collection

ROBERT GOEHRING



Caption: Robert Goehring, '39
Coast Guard Historian Collection

