

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED TO THE EDMUND FITZGERALD?

By Margaret Kohut

"The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down
Of the big lake they call Gitche Gumee
Superior, it's said, never gives up her dead
When the gales of November come early."

Canadian singer-songwriter Gordon Lightfoot wrote possibly the most accurate and heart-wrenching memorial to the twenty-nine men lost on 10 November 1975, when the freighter *Edmund Fitzgerald* disappeared into the gale-wracked waters of Lake Superior. The ship went down without sending a distress signal in 530 feet of water, only 17 miles from safety in Whitefish Bay, Michigan. The puzzling loss of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* is one of the most infamous marine disasters in the history of shipping on the Great Lakes.

The big freighter departed from Superior, Wisconsin on the afternoon of 9 November 1975. She was fully loaded with taconite, an iron ore, bound for a steel mill in Cleveland, Ohio. The *Fitzgerald* initially crossed Superior at 13 knots (15 mph/24 km/h) until she encountered a massive, unexpected winter storm with winds in excess of 50 knots and waves nearly 16 feet high.

"The wind in the wires made a tattletale sound
As the waves broke over the railing
Every man knew, as the Captain did too
T'was the Witch of November come stealing."

In the late afternoon of 10 November, Captain Ernest M. McSorley, age 63, a veteran of lake crossings, reported some minor damage from the gale e.g. some topside damage and loss of radar, but reported no serious problems. To find shelter from the gale, Capt McSorley ordered the *Fitzgerald* to proceed to the safety of Whitefish Bay.

The last communication with the *Edmund Fitzgerald* came at about 7:10 p.m. when another freighter, the *Anderson*, notified Capt McSorley that she had been hit by three towering

waves that were headed in the *Fitzgerald's* direction. Capt McSorley replied, "We are holding our own." Only moments later, the *Edmund Fitzgerald* abruptly and mysteriously sank into the frigid waters of Lake Superior.

"Does anyone know where the love of God goes
As the waves turn the minutes to hours?"

When the *Anderson* reported loss of contact with the *Fitzgerald*, a search was initiated but hampered by the still-powerful gale winds. The US Coast Guard made an aerial search but could launch no search and rescue vessels due to the storm. With no sign of the downed ship, it was a day later that a Coast Guard boat sighted debris, including life rafts, but no survivors.

"They may have split up or they may have capsized,
They may have broke deep and took water
But all that remained were the faces and the names
Of the wives and the sons and the daughters."

In May 1976, a US Navy submersible located and photographed the wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. The freighter was lying in two large pieces; the bow section lay upright in the mud of Lake Superior, and the stern section lay 170 feet away, facedown. The ship's mid-section lay in scattered heaps on the lake bottom.

The controversial cause of the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* persists today. Initial reports suggested that the ship had snapped in half on Superior's surface due to the tremendous gale winds. This belief was disputed, however, by others who pointed out that when ships break apart on the surface, the bow and stern are usually found miles apart on the lake bottom; the largest parts of the *Fitzgerald* were found only yards apart, thus leading to the conclusion that the ship had actually broken apart when it hit the lake bottom.

An official Coast Guard report concluded that the wreck was caused by faulty hatch closures that did not prevent waves from entering the *Fitzgerald's* cargo hold. Perhaps even unobserved by the crew, flooding occurred throughout the day of 10 November and the ship

suddenly plummeted to the bottom of Lake Superior before Capt McSorely could even issue a distress call.

Other theories still abound; inoperative radars and faulty maps caused the *Fitzgerald* to run aground on a bank of uncharted shoals before the crew could do an about-face. Hence, the big ship suffered bottom damage so severe, she was immediately flooded and sank abruptly.

The National Transportation Safety Board discovered the most convincing evidence only two years ago; underwater cameras extensively investigated the *Fitzgerald* and the NTSB's report is apparently the "final word" on what caused the wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

The ship was loaded with taconite iron ore that is extremely porous; this absorbent cargo must have taken on enough water and weight that, during the huge waves and winds of the gale, caused the *Fitzgerald* to capsize and sink. The NTSB's investigation contradicted the conclusion that the hatch doors were insufficient; to the contrary, remote underwater cameras indicated that the cargo hatch doors were in perfect condition. Those that disagree with the NTSB's findings believe that it would have been impossible for the crew and Captain of the big ship not to notice that the ship was becoming waterlogged enough to cause it to capsize. The NTSB countered that this would not be an uncommon occurrence during bad weather when it was difficult for a crew to notice the very gradual settling of a big freighter.

The *Edmund Fitzgerald's* ship's bell was recovered from the bottom of Lake Superior on 4 July, 1995; it now hangs in the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point. No remains of the crew have ever been found.

"In a musty old hall in Detroit they prayed
 In the maritime sailors' cathedral
 The church bell chimed till it rang 29 times
 For each man on the *Edmund Fitzgerald*."

In Memoriam

Captain Ernest M. McSorely, 63

First Mate John McCarthy, 62

Second Mate James Pratt, 44

Third Mate Michael Armagost, 37

Wheelsman John Simmons, 60
Wheelsman Eugene O'Brien, 50
Wheelsman John Poviach, 59
Watchman Ransom Cundy, 53
Watchman William Spengler, 59
Watchman Karl Peckol, 55
Chief Engineer George Holl, 60
First Assistant Edward Bindon, 47
Second Assistant Thomas Edwards, 50
Second Assistant Russell Haskell, 40
Third Assistant Oliver Champeau, 41
Oiler Blaine Wilhelm, 52
Oiler Ralph Walton, 58
Oiler Thomas Bentsen, 23
Wiper Gordon MacLellan, 30
Special Maintenance Man Joseph Mazes, 59
AB Maintenance Thomas Borgeson, 41
Deck Maintenance Mark Thomas, 21
Deck Maintenance Paul Riipa, 22
Deck Maintenance Bruce Hudson, 22
Steward Robert Rafferty, 62
Second Cook Allen Kalmon, 43
Porter Frederick Beetcher, 56
Porter Nolan Church, 55
Cadet David Weiss, 22

The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald words and music by Gordon Lightfoot, [Line-by-Line](#) and posted by SirFlyalot and NewsGroup; europa.com. and attheoak.com/edmund.html.