

# Memories of Rescuing the Crew of the S.S. *Antinoe*

by John Hahn

Fireman on the S.S. *President Roosevelt*

(received by James J. Wright via e-mail from his daughter Jacquelyn Hahn; September 3, 1997)  
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January 25, 1926. The SS *President Roosevelt* of the United States Lines was eastbound to Europe and was mid-Atlantic heading towards Europe in a very bad storm. The *President Roosevelt* was a passenger and cargo vessel of 8345 net tons. The seas were hitting her from the stern and she was really in her element running with them. It almost seemed as if she were built for this condition. Her powerful turbines were running at full speed and kept her almost abreast with the waves. The pitch of the ship was so slow it was not even uncomfortable indoors or out on deck.

I was out on deck near the stern and the sight was really awesome and frightening. The waves were around 50 feet high and the wind from the stern was around 60 miles an hour. The wake of the ship seemed to add to the white wall of water that was slowly catching up to the ship. Just as they closed in with a roar like Niagara Falls the stern of the ship would rise slowly up and the water would pass harmlessly underneath. I was signed on as a fireman and although I had made several trips to sea before, some of them stormy, I never experienced anything like this before. There was no rain but the wind whipped up the spray off the top of the waves and soaked the highest points of the ship.

Shortly after I went on my night shift at 8:00 p.m. in the fire room we got a standby signal and then the ship took some terrible rolls and started pitching violently. We got a half speed ahead signal but we were taking a lot of pounding. Our natural curiosity as to why we had changed our course into the seas so abruptly was soon satisfied.

We received word from the bridge that we were going to the assistance of a vessel in distress, a British freighter named the *Antinoe*. All night we pitched and rolled. It was not that easy rocking motion now. The bow would come out of the water and then slam down. The sailors' quarters were up in the bow of the ship and it was like riding a high speed elevator. I wonder how they slept, but some did. I marveled at some of them sleeping there.

When the bow rose the springs in the bunks sagged way down. Then when it came down they were perfectly level as if no one was in the bunk. Shortly after noon we saw the *Antinoe*. She was listing around 30 degrees and wallowing broad sides to the seas. We learned that her steering gear was damaged beyond repair but when we first came upon her, her propeller was still turning over slowly.

The mountainous seas had either washed overboard or smashed up all of her lifeboats. Shortly after we arrived, her propeller stopped turning but she still had some steam for her pumps and generator.

Towards evening that day the water rose in the fire room and put the fires entirely out and left them with only a flashlight to signal with. When we arrived we tried to shoot a line to them with our Lyle gun. A Lyle gun is like an old-fashioned cannon and no one had any experience firing it. The line is attached to the projectile and coiled in a butter tub. Each time it was fired if it hadn't broken at the outset (which a lot of them did) it had to be very carefully coiled up in the tub container.

No one had any practice shooting before and with our ship rolling broad sides with the waves it was quite hopeless trying, but we kept trying. There was not too much quarter inch line on board the ship so we had to rewind the line very carefully into the butter tub container. Just imagine our inexperienced men trying to land a line on another vessel a quarter of a mile away getting just the right amount of powder and the right angle with the boat rolling in a storm.

After quite a few tries they decided to try a manned lifeboat. The deck crew volunteered to man the lifeboat. Rope ladders were attached to the railings so they only had to be thrown over the side. Other lines were attached every 20 feet and coiled so they could easily be thrown overboard. The lifeboat crew put on their life jackets and got into the lifeboat.

The lifeboat and equipment were of a new design, but I do not believe they were ever tested on rough water. They were called self bailing and consisted of flat compartments, tanks two and a half feet high, eight feet wide and roughly 35 feet long, with sides built up above the tanks another two and one half feet. The front and back end sloped from the bottom and were rounded. There were scuppers that would open only to keep water out and would seal to keep any water from coming back in except that which would come in over the gunnels.

Another new feature on these boats was the automatic release for the lowering gear. When the boat landed on the water the pressure would be created in the sealed tanks. The pressure was utilized to release the blocks that lowered the lifeboats.

When the ship was in finally in position to lower the boats, oil was pumped over to smooth over the surface of the waves. The boat was lowered. The ship made it swing out and then banged against the ship when it rolled back. Although the men held out their oars to try to stop the lifeboat from cracking against the ship, it still smacked pretty hard. The further down the lifeboat went, the greater the swing and the harder it would hit. There seemed to be a brief pause in the roll and the men lowering the boat worked as fast as they could to lower the boat. Water hit on the one end and loosened the davits from one side and the boat lifted up in the other end and threw the men out into the oily water.

Just as if it seemed the boat were going to be lowered successfully, the peak of the wave hit one of it and released that end from the davits. At the same time the ship rolled and picked up the boat by one end and spilled the men out into the black oily water. When the ship rolled back the boat landed all the way in the water and the other end automatically released. All the men were in the water with the lifeboat banging around and with no way to get back in. Lines, rope ladders, were hastily thrown

over the side. The crude oil on the surface of the water made the ropes slippery and hard to hold. The fact that the weather was freezing and numbing to their hands made it almost impossible to hold onto the lines that were jerking up with the roll of the ship.

One man was holding on to the line attached to the lifeboat that was drifting off past the stern of the ship. I was near the stern of the ship and saw one man drifting towards me. I quickly threw over a line that was coiled nearby. He caught the line and looked up. He was covered with black oil. Several people gave me a hand and we were starting to haul him back aboard. He was clear of the water when the rope slipped from his hands and he fell back. We then threw the line back but he couldn't quite reach it before he drifted off to the stern. It was terrible to see him drift off. After he was a few hundred feet from the ship we could only see him when he was at the crest of a giant wave and watch for him to reappear in the direction in which he disappeared.

Someone would call, "There he is!" and it would be on the crest of a wave several points off from where we were looking for him. The way the ship was wallowing and the way the wind was carrying the ship made it impossible to estimate just where to look for him. The six crew men were hauled aboard and we circled back for him to try and locate him and the other man who was holding on to the lifeboat. It was about 4:00 p.m. when we launched the lifeboat and shortly after we circled back it became dark. The searchlights were played all over the area. The men were not to be found.

We finally spotted the lifeboat which had capsized, but no one was near it. All night we had circled and everyone not on watch, along with most of the passengers, kept scanning the waters. By morning we had lost all hope of finding our men. However, we had another job to do, to rescue the crew of the *Antinoe*.

In circling for our lost men we had separated from that ship. Every once in a while it would snow and in the morning for a while it snowed continuously for about two hours. The waves washing over the bow made it too hazardous for anyone to be stationed on the bow. But the bridge and the forward passenger decks were filled with scanners, and a man in the crow's nest.

When we finally located the *Antinoe* in the afternoon, she was listing even worse than before and had settled even lower in the water. We tried to tow a lifeboat on a long line and circle close enough to get a boat to the *Antinoe*. We also tried each time we got close to shoot a line over. The engineers were working on the lathe making projectiles for the Lyle gun to shoot lines over. They tried a modified type with a spring between the projectile and the line to keep the line from breaking when it was shot. It worked, but we missed. Once the projectile missed the furthest side of the ship by just yards. We thought the crew would get it but the wind blew it just out of their reach. The strong wind carried it just clear of the ship.

The way the men had scrambled for it we thought for a minute they had it and a cheer went up, but our joy was short lived because it missed.

We made a circle around with the lifeboat in tow, but when we got into the wind our line was jerked forward and when the stern came up in a pitch then suddenly released, when it came down the ship

yawed and fowled up with the propeller and was cut off.

We tried to drift a lifeboat over to the men. We got directly to the windward of them, lowered the lifeboat, then pulled ahead fast. The boat drifted directly to the ship. The *Antinoe* was listing so bad for a moment that the boat landed on the side of the ship. The next wave washed her past the back into the water and it drifted around the stern.

While it was going around the stern the crew tried to throw a grappling hook . They missed, for the boat soon drifted away. We tried towing another lifeboat with a long line. This time men were standing by to pull in the slack to keep it from going by the propeller. The men worked like Trojans to keep the slack out. It was a dangerous job. The line would slip out and jerk tight and then slack off. The water would be up so we could touch it and a second later the propellers would be clear of the water. In spite of their efforts the line was again fowled up with the propellers and was cut off.

We were out of line and couldn't try it again. We were also out of quarter inch line for the Lyle gun. The gun must have been fired at least 50 times in the course of these tries. So far, four lifeboats were lost, several thousand feet of  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch line and one inch line were used and several thousand feet of quarter inch rope was used for the Lyle gun. Volunteers were again called for to man another life boat.

I immediately volunteered, as did three other firemen, a carpenter's mate, chief mate, Mr. Mueller, and Mr. Upton, the fourth mate. We volunteered around 3:00 p.m. and there was a long period of waiting for a clear spell of weather. There was snow and hard squalls that would blot out visibility almost entirely. Several times we were ready to get into the lifeboats only to be called back as another squall would appear. The *Antinoe* had long been without heat, power for light or radio. They signaled by flashlight that they would stay afloat only until morning and it was already after dark.

During our wait we were instructed as to just what each man was to do when we went over. The automatic release was not to be relied upon this time. When the water hit at the bottom of the boat a man stationed forward and aft would pull the manual releases. There were also eight lines hanging down from across the two davits. These lines had knots every foot apart so that in an emergency we could get a grip on them. A new outstanding innovation of the rescue mission - although it is quite common today - is the use of cargo nets on the side of the ship as multiple ladders. I may be mistaken, but I believe that our Mr. Sloan, the second mate, was the first person to use this method.

The cargo nets were hung from the railing and they extended down well into the water. They were most reassuring in case anything should happen to our lifeboat when we went over.

The five hours wait before going over seemed like an eternity. We just stood with our life jackets on. However, the passengers were quite reassuring. A minister who was on board prayed for us and a priest gave us Last Rites of the Church.

We certainly didn't want for cigarettes. Every time we were offered a cigarette it would be followed by "Keep the package." I had a pack in every pocket, and when I had no more pockets I made a quick run down and put them in my locker. I had another six packages before I went over. The funny part was that I did not smoke at that time. But how could I refuse a gift so sincerely given?

It was very odd the way a little white lie can build up to something big. When I was given the first cigarettes I thought of my shipmates. Most of them smoked. So I accepted the cigarettes. But I said that I did not care for a smoke just then. I thought that we would be on the boat in a matter of minutes. I felt awfully guilty as the time wore on and five hours elapsed and fourteen packs of cigarettes were given to me, but I never lit one up!

I am sure Captain George Fried had wished to have us go over in daylight, but the snow and hale came up so frequently that we just had to wait. At 8:00 p.m. we were given the signal to prepare for launching. We climbed on board and got into our places and they started to lower the boat. There were six men on the boat, the mate in the bow, four oarsmen and the man in the stern with the steering oar. The ship was sideways to the wind so that we would be sheltered, but she was rolling badly. When she rolled towards us, the boat would swing far from the ship and when she would roll the other way we would bang against it. We used our oars to fend her off, but the lower we got, the greater the swing was and the harder we would hit. The men above lowered as fast as they could, but for every foot that we went down, the men at each end had to lower seven times that much rope. So although it seemed slow to us, they were working as fast as they could and we did come down evenly. When we neared the water, two men took a firm hold on the manual release cable. We would not be picked up at one end this time. The peak of a wave hit the bottom of the boat. On the tin lifeboat it sounded like we were on the water, so the men pulled the releases and we dropped about ten feet but we were free of the ship's davits. Now we had to get away from the side of the ship.

The *President Roosevelt* was high out of the water and the wind was pushing her towards us. Before we could pull on the oar we were hitting against the side of the ship. We tried to push away but it seemed impossible. We broke several oars before we drifted to the stern of the ship. It looked for a minute as if we were going to be hooked by propeller, but the wind blew around under the stern and we were away!

We were, it seemed like, two hundred yards directly upwind of the *Antinoe* and about a half a mile away. The wind was carrying us towards the *Antinoe* but the couple of hundred feet was a big obstacle. In the rough seas with the combers on the waves we did not dare to get them sideways far enough so it would capsize us. The mate was calling the strokes. When our oar would hit the weather it was awfully dark except when the searchlight hit us. Then it was blinding. The oars were about twelve feet long and four and a half inches in diameter. Sometimes the handle of the oar would be in my lap and I would touch the water. Other times I would stand up to make it touch the water. It looked like the seas would carry us by the *Antinoe* before we would get lined up with her. We swung into the wind and tacked over towards direct windward of the *Antinoe*. We only saw her when our ship's light picked her up. We finally got the rhythm of the waves and were able to put

more weight on the oars. However, when the big waves caught us, the boat almost stood on end. With one hand we would have to grab hold of the seats. The spare oars and other gears were rolling and sliding around. With only six men aboard the lifeboat (it had a capacity of 60) we were riding awfully light. Soon the large hulk of the *Antinoe* loomed along side of us. The *Antinoe* had a bow sprit and we just cleared it as it came down right to the water. Had we been under it, our boat would have been pulled under and probably broken in half. Some sailors on the *Antinoe*'s bow threw us a line and we pulled in close. The twelve men that were near the bow quickly jumped into our boat. We cast loose and intended to go towards amidships. The starboard forward deck area was awash and as we were going by it, went down with the wave. The intruding water pulled us partly over the rail. Then it came up under us. The outflow from the deck pushed us out again before the rail caught us underneath. This came very close to capsizing us. The lifeboat threw us all to one side but slid off the rail just in time to keep us from going over.

We backed away and tried to row from amidships but we backed away just a little too far. The wind caught us and row as we might, with the *Antinoe* crew helping us, we were not able to buck the wind and the seas to get back to the *Antinoe*. The *President Roosevelt* in the meantime had circled and now lay to our lea. The mate gave the order to return and we started back to our ship. The *President Roosevelt* was very expertly maneuvered so we could just slip past the bow and get alongside. Unlike the *Antinoe*, the *President Roosevelt* was high out of the water and once in her lea there was no difficulty staying close. In fact it was hard fending off with our oars so we could not hit so hard. We got near amidships where the cargo nets were strung out, some of the *Antinoe* crewmen started to climb up. Others were weak from their long ordeal and we fastened lines around them so they would not fall. After the last of the *Antinoe* men were aboard and were secured, Mr. Miller gave the order "Abandon the lifeboat and scramble up the nets." With the thought of the first manned lifeboat in our minds, we did not lose any time. I grabbed the net while the net was still rolling towards us but got a dunking as the ship continued to roll. Then I had to scramble up the net fast to avoid getting hit with the lifeboat. When we got to the rail there were many hands to help us over. After the last of us had gotten aboard a loud cheer went up but I could not help but think of the men we did not bring back. I was ready to try again but another group had volunteered to man another boat. The squall that had hit us was the last one and now the moon came out between the clouds and the wind was moderating, but it was still strong.

Although the waves did not diminish noticeably, the colmers did. The third manned boat was soon lowered. This time it made a perfect landing on the water. The releases were pulled at the mate's order just at the right time. The moon was now a godsend. We were able to see the white lifeboat every time it was near the crest of the weave. All of the men on the *Antinoe* had made the hazardous trip across the partially submerged forward deck to the bow. Once the boat pulled along side, they all scrambled in. The *President Roosevelt* again circled around and again expertly maneuvered to get the boat along side. A couple of the men were too weak and there were many willing hands to haul them up. The full crew of the *Antinoe* were saved and we lost two of our men doing it. We lost six lifeboats and thousands of feet of lines. It took four days time to make the rescue from January 26 to 30 in 1926.

There were six vessels in distress in the area. One of them was the *Laristol*. The *Bremen* of the north German Lloyd company was standing by. But the *Laristol* went down with all hands before the crew could be saved. 1926 was in the early days of radio and during those four days, unknown to us, the rescue was being dramatized on the radio. Every time we jockeyed in for position, shot a line, towed a boat or launched a manned lifeboat, word was flashed ashore. The suspense of our search for our two shipmates was heard by millions. Our success was also shared by millions. When we reached England all the harbor whistles were blowing. Those of us that went over in lifeboats were given a gold medal by the British government. The Liverpool Shipwreck and Humane Society also gave us a medal. But the real thrill came when we arrived in New York. All the whistles in the harbor were blowing. The fire boats were spraying huge fountains of water. We rode down Broadway in a shower of ticker tape in cars with banners saying "Welcome the Heroes of the Sea". Jimmy Walker was the Mayor of New York then and he put Grover Whalen in charge of the reception. That week was one that none of us will never forget. We stayed at the Hotel Roosevelt and each night for the week that we were in port there was either a banquet or a personal appearance at a theater or night club. We received a gold medal from the City of New York and a medal from the lifesaving Benevolent Association and from the Allied Theatrical Association and from Lloyds of London. We all had a marvelous time. Every waking minute there was something that we could enjoy. But all too soon the stay in port was over and we again put to sea.

The End