

BUZZARDS LIGHTSHIP IN THE STORM OF FEBRUARY 25-26, 1956 By George Rongner

T

he morning of February 25 dawned dismal and slow. It had, in fact, been dismal long before the grayness of morning fully developed, for fog had settled about us in spite of a brisk thirty knot

wind from the dreaded southwesterly sector. The fog horns had chattered incessantly from 2:30 a.m. and southwesterly seas mauled us as they pounded against the bow. The ship twisted and bobbed, back and forth, up and down, back and forth, up and down. Decks moaned, rigging whistled, hal-yards slapped, and the anchor acted oddly as the chain emitted a shrill metallic scraping behavior. Smallcraft warnings were in effect, having been posted the previous afternoon.

0800, February 25: Breakfast over, the crew went to work with inspired fervor, in spite of miserable weather and a bellowing fog signal. We were to be relieved in two more days, on February twenty-seventh, by the "Relief" lightship for our annual "in-port" period. We were readying the BUZZARDS for the occasion and we wanted a clean, orderly, shipshape vessel. We wanted more than that, even. We wanted ours to be as good as any in the fleet, and every man had worked hard for nine months to achieve that aim. A spirited group, they had become proud of their ship and its appearance. The crew had painted, scraped, sanded, scrubbed, spliced, shined, and performed the multitude of tasks assigned a seafarer. Finishing touches were being applied as decks carefully received their fourth coat of wax, bulkheads and ports



A lightship in a storm.

were cleaned, brightwork had been cleared of paint particles and in its place the brilliant brass sparkled. The men were careful not to smudge brass or paint with fingerprints, heel marks, spillage, or the like. Pipes, frames, compartments, hatches and machinery had been cleaned, painted, checked, and stencilled. Bilges were clean and pumped as dry as possible, gear was stowed in its proper place and tools were in their allotted spots. Fenders, mooring lines, gangway lights, etc. had been checked and readied for use in port.

The entire crew was aboard. The last liberty party had returned on Thursday and no one had gone ashore as we wanted everyone aboard to assist in taking the ship to Boston. It was now Saturday and the crew was looking forward to the half holi-

day routine of a Saturday afternoon. Sunday would be a day of rest for all but watchstanders. Men planned to ready their clothing and personal effects for the nightly liberty granted in port. On Monday we would be relieved on station, get underway and begin our journey. Excitement reigned. Many discussions, mostly of what to do and see in Boston, were commonplace. Even so, not a little conversation was devoted to our "clean, systematic home at sea." It was, to quote one of the men, in "apple-pie order."

"They can't find much fault with us this time," said one member.

"No siree," added his neighbor at the coffee table. "They should see a big difference in the ship since the last time we were there. Boy, what a mess when we first took station out here."

"Yeah, that's right. Skipper, are you going to ask some of the officers to come down and see the ship before the yard workers start tearing things apart?"

"Absolutely. You fellows have done a tremendous job. I especially want credit to be given you men who did the actual work. I certainly appreciate your endeavors and your cooperation. It is my intention to invite several officers to inspect the ship as soon as possible."

"They'll see a good one, then. Boy! Look at the shine on those decks!"

"Yeah, and how about the brass around those portholes."

"You know another good thing? In two more days we get relieved. We'll be in Boston during March, which is one of the windiest months in the year. And when we come back out in April the winter will be over. So actually we have only two more days of winter out here."

"We can stand on our heads and do that!"

"The way this southwester is going, you might be doing just that."

"It IS blowing harder. But what do we care? Two more days and we'll be in port."

The observation was partially correct. The wind had increased to thirty-five knots. Visibility had not improved, for we could see no more than half a mile and the fog horn reminded us of half of our predicament. The agitated motion of the ship kept

us advised of the other half—the southwest winds. Coffee time ended, remnants of Saturday morning routine cleared and the weekly inspection took place. Everything was as close to perfection as possible, in our eyes, and it was most gratifying to realize the many changes that had taken effect. It was a thrill, too, to realize that we knew, in our own hearts, that we had a good-looking ship. Neither boastful nor naive, we were aware of the simple truth. We had made many improvements, and we were extremely proud of our ability to work together as a team, dedicated to a single aim.

The sole disturbing element that morning, other than the elements of nature, was the activity of the anchor chain. It continued to act most peculiar. There was always a severe strain in bad weather, particularly during southwesterers, which could be felt, heard, seen, and sensed whenever the chain tautened suddenly. It was checked frequently during bad weather, but the usual groanings and vibrations were normal signs of an anchor that was holding well. It was routine, previously, but today it was different. It flayed, frapped, tightened, clacked, all with an eerie harsh grating. The anchor pawl, usually snug-gling against a link, rode an inch or more vertically, then settled back. This had not happened before, as far as we

could recollect. It worried us, even though all else seemed normal and secure. From deck, the chain appeared to lead well forward, so we discounted, unfortunately, the possibility of it being caught on a wreck or a crag. As the weather was continually worsening, we lengthened the scope [length] by two shots (one hundred and eighty feet), and now rode with approximately seven shots of chain. However, the cacophony continued, and the pawl continued to ride up and down. As the tremblings failed to lessen noticeably, we checked the windlass gear at least every ten minutes, sometimes watching it for half an hour at a time.

1200, February 25: The wind mounted in intensity, directly from the southwest, and now blew at an estimated forty-five knots. The anchor chain tremors became more accentuated. The ship was riding high in the water for we were light, our fresh water supply being low. We were down to our last one thousand gallons and the fore peak tank, situated near the bow area, was empty. We had not requested replenishment by buoy tender because we soon would be in Boston where water would be available from the dock. Also, we wanted to save the busy buoy tender a trip, it seeming like such a waste of time to ask for something we did not actually need. High in design, the bow now rose considerably higher than usual, making a huge target for wind and sea, both of which buffeted us mercilessly. The wind blew furiously against the elevated bows, first on one side and then on the other as the ship veered to and fro. Swells slashed against the hull in thudding salvos. Our anchor continued to hold, grudgingly, although the chain clattered in sharp disagreement.

Bill Burroughs, the Chief Boatswain's Mate, did not like the situation. "If that anchor pawl fails, we'll be in a bad spot. There's something wrong, but I can't put my finger on it, unless it's because we're riding so high in the water."

Bob Dean, Chief Engineman, suggested, "Don't you think that's probably the trouble? We have such a high bow anyway, and now that the fresh water tanks are almost empty we're much higher



LV 110 (WAL 532) serving on the BUZZARDS Bay lightship station in 1961. Official U.S. Coast Guard photo.

than usual. The wind is pushing us around much more and it's causing a heavy strain on the anchor. If the tanks were full, I don't think you'd notice it as much."

"How about isolating the fore peak tank from the others and filling it with salt water?" I asked. "Is there any reason why that can't be done? How about it, Bob?"

"We can try," answered the Chief. "We'll get the P-60 (portable fire pump) and see what we can do."

Burroughs added, "I'd sure like to try that and see if it doesn't help."

I ordered the tank filled. Burroughs and Dean sent men to bring the pump, fire hose, and everything necessary to the operation.

It was not with complete confidence that the task was started. Foremost in our mind was the questionable ability of the pump to lift water far enough, vertically, to reach the fill pipe. It was a long lift for so small a pump, and we had experienced difficulties before. If it hadn't been for the tremendous slashing of the wintry seas it would have been a simple matter to lower the dory part way, with the pump inside. A short lift then could easily be effected, but that was out of the question today as mighty rollers leaped nearly to the dory itself. If the storm became much worse it would be necessary to rig it in, that is, take it from the davits and lash it on deck.

An alternative would be to use the pump on the second deck. However it was a gasoline engine and we dared not use it below decks except during an extreme emergency. It constantly back-fired when first started and we could picture ourselves fighting a fire as we shuddered violently at the end of an anchor chain.

Accordingly, the pump was carried to the bow portion of the main deck and lashed beneath the bulwarks to prevent it from sliding around. Hoses were connected and tightened as the ship's bow reared skyward, then fell with a deafening thud. Spray coated the deck, the men, and the pump. Now we had something else with which to contend. The pump would have to be wiped dry and some sort of shelter provided.

1335, February 25: Smallcraft warnings were changed to southwest storm warnings. The wind continued at forty-five knots. The gray fog-laden atmosphere gave way to rain as large drops fell in a torrential downpour, soaking men to the skin in a matter of minutes. The hastily erected shelter kept most of the salt spray from the pump as the seas continued their deadly assault. The bow moved frenetically up and down and to and fro like a hammock caught in a sudden squall.

"O.K. Let's try her." A pull on the lanyard turned the motor, pump and magneto. The magneto, in turning, theoretically built up a spark strong enough to ignite the gasoline which started the engine. A mighty tug was taken, the lanyard spun out its full length and disengaged. Nothing happened. A second try produced the same results and subsequent tries did no better.

"Let's wipe her off again. Bring some more dry rags. Hold that canvas so the salt spray will run off. Hold on! Here comes a big one!" The bow plunged into a huge sea, salt water covered the bridge, drenched the men a second time, then gurgled angrily into the waterways. Ressler protected the fire pump by throwing a canvas over it and holding it in place with his body. The water on deck did not quite reach into the pump, and quickly dispersed.

"Damned southwester! Anybody who says this is easy duty ought to come out here when we have a stinking storm like this. He'd soon change his mind. Don't just stand there! Get me some dry rags!" That was in unison, or so it appeared, from several brine-enveloped engineers.

More rags arrived and the pump was dried again, as well as possible with the heavens opened up, spray continually coating the bridge, and the bow rocking, rolling, pitching, and vibrating in the furious storm. Another series of yanks on the lanyard brought only a short sputtering, the motor stubbornly resisting every effort.

Donald Moore, engineman first class, studied the situation as wind whistled through his soggy clothing. His shoes, filled with water, failed to warm his feet

or add to his comfort. He pranced up and down to stimulate circulation and blew warm air on his frigid fingers. His teeth chattered but his next order was unmistakably clear and crisp.

"Sherman, the old man's in the windlass room. So bring me the half inch electric drill with a fitting to accommodate this nut on the end of the crankshaft."

"What are you going to do?" asked Sherman with an irritating drawl.

"Never mind," retorted Moore sharply "Just hurry up and bring that drill."

Sherman scampered away. Meanwhile, in the engineroom, Chief Dean was isolating the forward water tank from the rest of the system. We did not intend to flood the whole works with salt water unless absolutely necessary, perhaps as a final resort, for we needed drinking water. Dean closed the appropriate valves, and all was in readiness.

In the windlass room Chief Burroughs and I surveyed our situation. We were ready to take on water but still no sound of the fire pump. They were having a difficult time on deck. Small wonder! How much more disagreeable could it be? Windy, rough, foggy, raining, the ship continuing to bounce like a fishing cork, under a continuous shower of spray. Conditions with the windlass were not encouraging. The chain still appeared to be tending properly, yet the strange springing sensations continued. The pawl was holding, but not properly, as it, too, continued its odd behavior. From an ordinary slack it suddenly would vibrate into shrill metallic life, and the pawl would bounce slightly upwards. If it failed to hold, the strain soon would be on the windlass brake. We knew that would not hold for long.

"If the spare anchor wasn't carried on deck, we'd be able to drop it. With both anchors out we would ride better. At least I'd feel a whole lot better about the situation."

"That's true, and had we known we were going to have such a storm we would have readied it. However, under these conditions it is too dangerous to even make an attempt to get it over.

We'd punch a hole in the side of the ship and maybe lose all hands. Then, too, it would be far too dangerous to the fellows who would have to do the work. In this weather, one slip could easily maim someone for life."

At that time the spare anchor of many lightships was carried on the starboard rail. Ours was no different. In order to launch the anchor it was necessary to raise it with a block and tackle, keep the anchor from swinging in any direction, rig the davit outboard, let out two shots of anchor chain, then cut a manila strap holding the anchor from the davit. It would barely clear the hull under the best of conditions. With a port roll it easily could penetrate the relatively thin hull and a gash below the waterline could have a most disastrous effect. If undue strain was added, a line quickly would chafe and part. Men could be hurt. The anchor would swing on the davit out of control or would crash to the deck. Worse, it might crash into the hull. In rough weather such as this the

ship might even be doomed by such an accident and what chance would men have, in February, battling twelve foot seas? An hour would elapse before help arrived, at the earliest, if indeed we still had means to notify anyone of our plight. Who could struggle that length of time, in a life jacket, in frigid seas like this? During severe storms we were strangely alone. We had to survive through common sense, proper ship handling and good seamanship, and proper upkeep of machinery, hull, and equipment. Besides all that, we still had to maintain our vigilance as an aid to navigation, a visual and accurate aid to all shipping interests in the area.

Our discussion of the anchor chain situation was interrupted by the coughing of a motor. It died, coughed again, and was silent. Then it sputtered into life and remained running in loud synchronized surges. A chorus of hurrahs filtered through the din. We knew the P-60 pump was running.

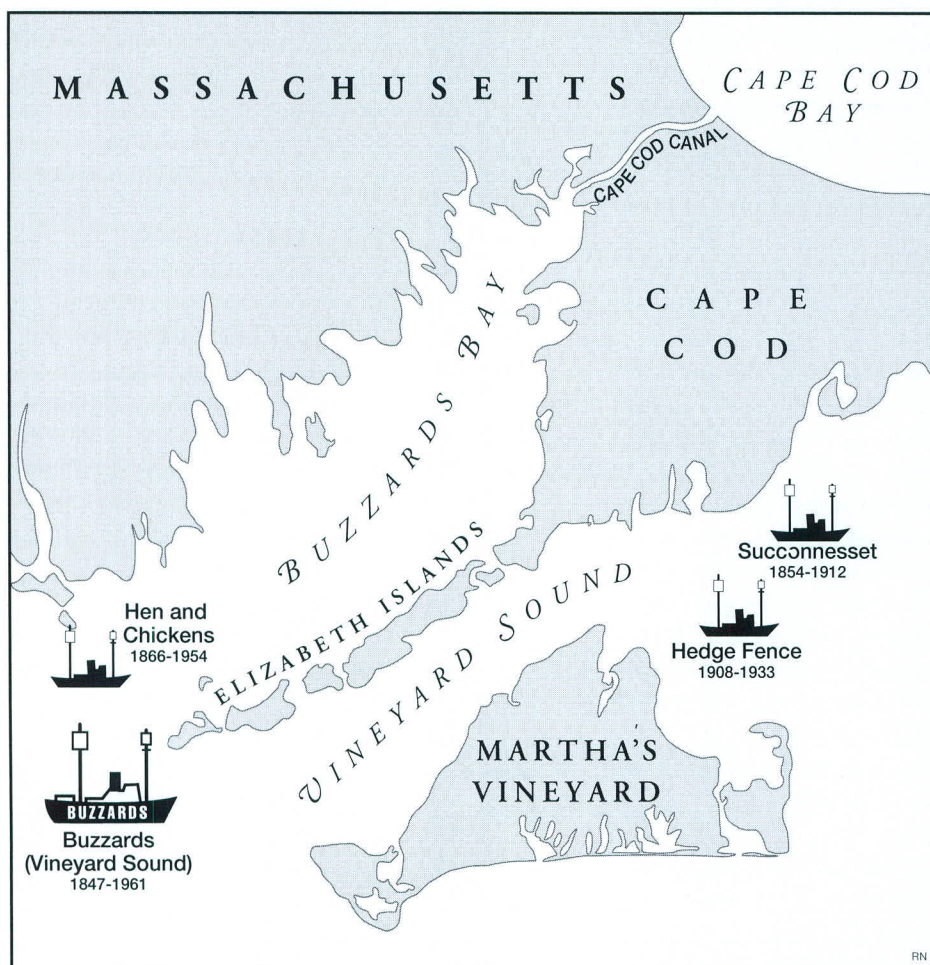
I went on deck. The engineers were

smiling and clapping one another on the back, in spite of being soaked and half frozen. The first gallon of water had been pumped. Smoke poured from the exhaust of the P-60. The sound of the motor made a welcome addition to that of the foghorn, the dreary monotonous wind, the sizzling of spilled surf and the thundering of seas striking against the hull. Then the pump accelerated briskly, the hose flattened, smiles turned to frowns. Suction had been lost. The ship was pitching so heavily the end of the hose had been lifted from the sea. Every swell that lashed against the port bow held us to starboard and dragged the hose above the water's edge. The hose was lowered several feet, the pump restarted. The hose filled and water commenced its flow to the tank. Again suction was lost. The same procedure was followed, with the end of the hose thrust yet deeper into the water, for the ship was rolling heavily. Each wave crest raised the bow and as it sped on its course the hose end was again exposed. After several more attempts it finally was lowered enough so that it remained below the surface. The major problem, as before, was the vertical lift. Each lowering of the hose lengthened the lift. Thus, each subsequent trial was begun with misgivings, the engineers not expecting continued success as the distance now was considerable beyond the usual recommended lift. Good fortune prevailed and the tank began filling. Everyone was gleeful, that is, as gleeful as one could be when wet, cold, and exposed to a stiff southwest storm on a tossing vessel in the middle of winter.

Noticing the drill, I inquired as to its part in the proceedings.

Moore was ill at ease. "We, ah, that is," he faltered, "ah, we had to drill something. No, I'll tell the truth. We used it on the pump, to get the shaft to spin fast enough. Otherwise, I don't think we could have gotten it to run."

I was too relieved at the sight of water coursing into our tank to make an issue of it in spite of his disregard of safety procedures. One man was left to watch the pump so the others could go below and change into dry clothing. The storm continued, unabated, wind velocity



increased slightly and Chief Burroughs advised that the anchor chain still was misbehaving. We decided to wait until the tank was filled before taking further action.

1600, February 25: The wind was southwest at forty-five knots, seas were running from the same direction, now fifteen feet in height, and visibility had increased to one mile in the fog and rain. The P-60 was secured in its rack near the stern, the fore peak tank having been filled nearly to capacity. We estimated that 4300 gallons had been pumped into it, thus adding seventeen tons of weight to the bow which now was perceptibly lower. The difference was immediately noticeable as the ship rode considerably better. Less perpendicular structure was exposed to the angry swells and buffeting winds which continued, nevertheless, to assail us furiously. Strain on the anchor chain was lessened and it resembled near normalcy in its flayings. It fetched and slackened with more of a grumbling than the metallic ringing that previously had caused so much concern and the ship did not shudder quite so drastically when the onslaughts of the seas were rebuffed. The anchor pawl settled into place. It was holding. Since the grumbings originating in the windlass room could be heard throughout the vessel we eased our watch, which was decreased to a thorough check every fifteen minutes. We breathed more easily.

1900, February 25: The wind was still from the southwest at forty-five knots but gusting to fifty, visibility remaining at one mile. The ship was taking a severe pummeling from wind and sea. Discomfort was more acute. There was no agreeable position for the body, whether standing, sitting or horizontal. As the anchor chain began to absorb painful abuse again, I ordered the engineroom to make necessary arrangements to get underway at a moment's notice.

Prior to, and since, this particular storm, many suggestions have been heard of the relative merits of using the ship's engine to assist in removing some of the strain from the anchor chain. There are heated arguments to this endless debate. Some lightship skippers

maintain that they believe they could, if necessary during a gale or hurricane, remove much of the strain by jogging ahead slightly, drifting back, and then jogging ahead again. Others insist that the engines should not be used for this purpose because it is impossible to know at what precise moment it might be beneficial to jog ahead and drift back. At night, particularly, it is exceedingly difficult to tell how much slack is in the chain. It is all well and good to move slowly into the face of a gale, but it is impossible to maintain position in one exact spot on the ocean. Winds are gusty, sequences, height and power of seas unreliable, and tidal currents unpredictable.

Once we tried the use of engine during storm, at anchor, and found it wanting. At first we thought it a good idea as we moved slowly into the teeth of the wind. There was no strain whatever on the chain or the anchor. We drifted before the seas and wind. When we *thought* (we could not be sure) we were nearly to the end of our scope we again moved forward. Good fortune could not last forever under these conditions, and suddenly we felt a tremendous pull on the anchor. The chain vibrated madly. The ship shuddered and moaned fiercely. All too soon we had reached the end of the scope. Then the chain and anchor were forced to bear the additional strain of a vessel moving some little distance *with* wind and seas. Not only did it have the normal weight of the ship with which to contend, it also had the dynamic tension of a moving vessel along with it. We immediately secured the engine and kept it on standby. The ship actually rode easier without the attempted help.

Hence on February 25th, we did not make any attempt to use the main engine to alleviate strain. We felt that by so doing our condition would be materially worsened. Still, we did not like the mannerisms of the chain. The pawl resumed motion, riding up and down. The chain once more quivered with its metallic ringing urgency.

Not wishing to be unprepared we decided to have the main engine standing by. When getting underway from a

dock, some fifty minutes were required to build a necessary supply of compressed air. On station, during an emergency, the time could be shortened ten or fifteen minutes. That was because only one bell, (signal to the engineroom) requiring the use of compressed air, is needed on the open sea. When undocking from a narrow slip, with little room to maneuver, a series of bells is often required.

1945, February 25: The storm roared savagely with frightful screamings. Visibility remained one mile, fog and rain remained constant. The winds were blowing at an estimated seventy-five knots—hurricane force. It happened suddenly. The gusts of fifty-five knots grew to sixty, sixty-five, and then, seventy-five. Then they were gusts no longer. It was a steady screeching wind that tore from the southwest. Seas towered above us as they grew to twenty feet, then twenty-five, then thirty! All in a space of minutes! Each swell crashed over the bulwarks, flooded the decks. Water spilled over the sides of the hull. The wheelhouse and bridge were enveloped in driven spray. The ship dove heavily, dipped briskly, quivered from port to starboard, from stem to stern. The thud of tons of angry water could be heard everywhere as it tried to drive us to eternity.

In the windlass room the vexing sharp snap of the chain was annoying. The motion of the ship was so distorted, seas so rough, it was difficult to gauge the lead (direction) of the chain. As Burroughs and I stood there, desperately racking our brains, the pawl flipped upward and completely disengaged. Burroughs leaped forward and threw the pawl back onto the chain, but the broad part of a link was in the way. The pawl lay useless atop the link.

"This is what I call a really bad storm. We'll have to engage the windlass and take up on it enough to get the pawl back in place," he said. "We'd better do it in a hurry, too. Come on fellows. You know what to do! Hurry it up!"

It took a matter of seconds to accomplish, as air already had been built to the required pressure, but reengaging the pawl did not make us feel optimistic. If it happened once, it was almost sure to

happen again.

We watched the pawl a few moments. The wind continued with agonizing fury. Mountainous waves of water cascaded upon us. The sound of the storm raged on. Half the crew felt nauseated. Supper had been attended by only a few and even those not affected with nausea had headaches.

The anchor chain become strangely silent. It rattled modestly a few times. There were no sudden tugs. Still, we were headed into the wind and could feel the endless seas breaking against the hull.

2000, February 25: An urgent scurrying of footsteps descending to the windlass room interrupted our observations. It was the radioroom watch. "Skipper," he blurted. "The fog hasn't cleared a bit, but I can see the green flasher right off our stern!" The green flasher was a buoy, two miles thirty degrees true from our charted position.

In a group we rapidly ascended the ladder to have a look. There it was! No doubt about it. Less than a mile away the green flashes of light were plainly seen. Not another light was in sight. Fog, rain, and the green light which should not be visible. It could mean only one thing!

"Cap, we're adrift!" shouted Burroughs to make himself heard above the storm.

We both realized it at the same instant. "Bill, send a man to me in the wheelhouse right away. Tell Williams to take two men and release the quadrant immediately. I'll notify the engineroom. Come up to the bridge as soon as you can."

Burroughs was on his way. I dashed to the wheelhouse. It took the combined efforts of two of us to open the port hatch. We fought for breath as the winds flung us from our feet. Safely inside, I rang the engineroom. "We're adrift. We want to get underway as soon as the quadrant is cleared. (The quadrant was shackled when not in use to keep the rudder amidships.) Do you have sufficient air pressure?"

"Yes, sir," replied the engineer on watch.

"Very well. Stand by for a signal. Tell Chief Dean to report to the bridge when

all is ready."

I then called the radioroom. "We're adrift. I'll have a priority message for you in a little while. Meanwhile, secure the horn, radio-beacons and main light. Report to me as soon as you have done so. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," ended the conversation.

Seaman Wheat appeared on the bridge. "Seaman Wheat to stand wheel watch, sir."

"Very well. Stand by the wheel. When we get underway we will steer course 225."

"Aye, aye, sir. Course 225 underway."

The phone buzzed as Burroughs ran to the bridge. "Deck force ready to get underway, Cap," he yelled into the teeth of the gale.

"Very well. Grab that phone, Bill, and see what it is."

"It's the radioroom. He reports all aids to navigation secured. Do you want him to send a dispatch?"

"Not yet. Have him stand by the radio. Tell Williams to bring in the remnants of the anchor chain and notify us how much has been lost."

Chief Dean burst through the hatch. "Engineroom is ready, Cap."

"Very well." I rang one bell for approximately half speed ahead. It was answered similarly. We were able to discern the chug-a-bug, chug-a-bug as the main engine sprang to life.

"Course 225, helmsman."

"Course 225, sir," he repeated.

We hoped that course would keep us nearly head-on to the giant seas that loomed ominously all about us. They rose steeply in our immediate path. They were immense. We gauged them as being close to thirty feet and could not have been far off. If anything, we underestimated their actual size. The wind was steady at hurricane velocity. Burroughs and I peered through the ports, trying to see the waves as they approached. The main engine was turning at 400 RPM. We seemed to be barely moving. We increased speed to 450 RPM to get us back close to our regular station. We then planned to settle back to 400 RPM hoping we might be able to "heave to" on our approximate established position. The wind screamed incredibly. Perpetual

torrents of spray impaired vision as it streamed off the bridge. Steering the ship was a battle, and we sent for a second helmsman. Connie Wilson and Wheat stood side by side, striving to hold the ship on course.

"Come right to 235."

"Come right to 235, sir," the helmsmen acknowledged.

Chief Burroughs left the bridge and returned a few minutes later. "Anchor chain is in the locker, Captain. Williams says we lost about two shots."

"Very well. Please send for the radioman."

"Aye, Aye, Captain."

The helmsmen reported the ship falling to the left. "Steering 218, Captain. We're unable to bring her to 235. She's hard over."

"Very well. Chief Dean, ring the engineroom and ask them if they can give us 475 RPM. I don't want to ring for full speed in these seas."

"Will do. They can set it ahead that much."

The radioman appeared as Dean ordered his engineers to increase speed by 25 RPM. Wheat and Wilson battled the wheel. "Steering 215, Captain. Still falling off."

The following priority radio message notified the outside world of our plight.

to operations x lost main mooring and two shots anchor chain x underway on own power x secured all aids to navigation x wal-511 (our number) hove to vicinity regular station x awaiting moderate weather conditions before attempting to drop spare anchor.

The message was sent to the district office in Boston, the base of Coast Guard operations covering an area from northernmost Maine to Connecticut. The Coast Guard base at Woods Hole was listed as an information addressee.

With the increase in speed, the helm began to answer. "Swinging right, sir, steering 220."

"Very well. Notify me of every 5 degree change on course until you reach 235."

"Notify you of every 5 degree change on course until we reach 235. Aye, aye."

"Steering 225."

“Steering 230.”

“Steering 235.”

At last we were headed on our safest course. Most of the seas were met head on or nearly so as they thundered onto the wheelhouse at every dip of the bow. The wind was unrelenting. The barometer, in a period of forty-five minutes, had dropped a staggering 0.53 of an inch. The seas looked dark and ominous and their course was spotted with great difficulty. Occasionally one approached a bit from the south or from the west, but most came from due southwest. The rigging emitted shrill outcries as wind and spray raged. The motion of the ship was mostly up and down. Cross seas struck furiously, however, causing us to roll menacingly until a head sea took over again. The men on the wheel were drenched with sweat as they attempted to steer the ship on 235 degrees. The ship would fall off a bit, return to 235, fall off, return. Never to the right of 235, she fell continuously to the left. Any further increase in speed was inadvisable at the time. Burroughs and I continued to peer through the ports, our eyes growing accustomed to the spray encrusted darkness. We watched huge combers tower momentarily dead ahead, disappear as the bow raised and dipped, then pass behind us.

Burroughs answered a buzzer. “Cap, it’s the radiroom. Woods Hole wants to talk to you on the radio.”

“Very well, Bill. Take over for a few minutes.”

As I turned my back he roared, “FULL RIGHT RUDDER!! QUICKLY!! HURRY IT UP!!”

Before any answer was forthcoming, a cross sea from the westerly sector struck us heavily along the starboard bow. SLAM! The ship shuddered under the impact and leaned to port. The bow fell off sharply. Burroughs jumped to the wheel to assist the two helmsmen. A second wall of water sped towards us from the same sector, on the heels of its forerunner. It was a dark sinister wave, carrying a cap of white foam driven before it by the wind. Heeled to port as we were, it appeared like a skyscraper, a huge rampart of water bearing down upon us with destruction in view. It

would not be denied. There was no escape. We were in a trough and semi-broached. It would catch us full on the starboard beam. Could we escape complete disaster? What if another followed? What if there was a series? Higher and higher it rose. Why were we still heeled to port? Why wouldn’t the rudder answer the helm? It was amazing how so many thoughts could flit through one’s mind in a horror stricken second preceding disaster! What were the men thinking as they tugged on the wheel? Burroughs knew the tremendous mass was about to strike. He had seen it the moment he sprang to the wheel. Had the two seamen noticed?

C-R-A-S-H !! The terrible sea literally swallowed us. It had struck us broad on the starboard while we still were heeled to port. A thunderous detonation occurred at the moment of assault and for several seconds after. The noise was such it seemed the ship must be disem-boweled. Its feral savagery stunned minds and bodies.

It was the worst sea ever taken by the BUZZARDS during our tenure. By rights, the ship should have disintegrated under that hammer blow of sea and wind. The moment when sea met steel was a deafening shock. Salt water spewed everywhere. It had ridden above the starboard railing and emptied onto the deck, onto the superstructure, into the lifeboats. The ship took a thirty degree list.

The internal violence exploded in our ears. Pandemonium broke loose. The sounds of dishes, tools, equipment breaking, and structures being torn loose were everywhere. Lights dimmed and then miraculously came back on. The terrific clatter continued as the vessel slowly made her way back to an even keel. Slowly, oh so slowly, she recovered, then rapidly. She turned briskly to starboard, then settled back, upright.

Hanging to a safety railing, I had managed to remain on my feet. A quick glance through the porthole revealed no more westerly monsters close at hand. The seas still ran high from the southwest. I looked at the wheel, to ask our heading. *No one was there!* Seconds previously there had been three men,

braced, frantically turning to starboard. Now they had disappeared. The shock was electrifying but dissipated when I noticed a tangle of struggling humanity on the port side of the wheelhouse. The collision with the giant wave had loosened their grip on the wheel and thrown them to the deck. Stunned, they regained their feet, apparently none the worse for their provoking experience. They instantly responded to orders.

“Come right to 235.”

“Come right to 235, sir.”

“Bill, that sea was something. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“Me either, and I hope I never do again. Want me to take a check to see if the ship’s all right?”

“Yes, please do. I’ll call the engine-room and wait for you to get back before I radio Woods Hole.”

The engine room reported no casualties to machinery or hull. The storeroom was a mess, but as far as they could tell the engines had suffered no ill effects. A quick check had been taken and the engineers planned to retrace their steps more minutely. A report would be made as soon as possible.

The chart table in the wheelhouse was completely devoid of charts, parallel rules, dividers, etc. They were in a disheveled heap on deck.

“Steady on 235, sir.”

The wind was beginning to moderate and visibility started to improve. The seas still were tumultuous, from the southwest. A lone cross sea showed up once in a while, but was dwarfed by comparison with the grandfather that had clawed at us earlier. A lone star was seen overhead. From its position in the overcast sky it was probably Sirius, the dog star. Our situation still was serious, too. Not as dangerous as a few moments ago, but serious just the same. Sirius, serious. The pair of homonyms intrigued me as I watched the seas and listened to the wind. I remembered how I studied Shakespeare in high school and didn’t like it because the lines never rhymed. The teacher called it blank verse. I remember learning part of “Il Penseroso.” Never liked that, either, at the time. Why? Maybe because it had been drilled and drilled that it was a

classic without having it explained. Why. Poetry! Sirius, Serious. Ironic, wasn't it? Here you were on a low powered, single screw, difficult to maneuver lightship that had lost its mooring in a fierce storm. Your plight is serious. That word again? How could you think of poetry at a time like this?

"What is your heading?"

"231, sir."

Burroughs returned to report no injuries to any crew members. "It's a mess down there, though. It'll take a week to clean that place up. You wouldn't believe it if I told you about it, Cap. Why don't you go down and have a look for yourself?"

The engineroom reaffirmed their initial report of no casualties to machinery. "We're not taking on any water, as far as we can see. We'll keep checking, though, and keep you informed."

Turning the bridge over to Chief Burroughs, I strode to the radioroom to consult with the base at Woods Hole.

Do you need help? was their initial transmission. Negative. The seas are running very high but we are all right. We took a couple of bad ones and some equipment was torn loose. However we are not leaking. There is no damage to machinery. We are hove to in the vicinity of our regular position. It still is much too rough to attempt to drop the spare anchor. We plan to await more favorable conditions.

The district is planning to send the *Hornbeam* to assist you.

We do not need assistance. It is not up to me to run the show but we are in no immediate danger. We are underway and waiting only for the seas to moderate.

I roger that. I will inform the district of the situation. They probably will insist on sending the *Hornbeam* to stand by you.

Roger. Please impress on them however that we do not need or desire any assistance.

Roger, out.

In the radioroom the sole evidence of anything amiss was a capsized waste basket and a few scraps of sodden litter on the deck. The radioman had been able

to cling to the mainmast, which passed through the compartment. He was unscathed, reporting that the chair and logs had startled him as much as the sea when it crashed on the deck.

Outside the radioroom, a bit aft, dory equipment was all over. Oars, boathooks, and lifejackets had broken their lashings and spilled onto the weather deck. One jacket and an oar were atop the wardroom fidley, three feet above deck level. The dory hung at a grotesque angle from the davits. A cursory inspection showed it to be free from apparent damage.

Ring buoys had been washed overboard. The watertight light of one still showed a glob of white light as it rose on the crest of a wave.

I decided to return to the bridge by way of the second deck. Utter chaos greeted me. Our neatly waxed decks shone no longer, the lustre having been replaced with white streaked stains. We had leaned so far to port, water had poured through a non-watertight door. There was a twelve inch rising at the top of the ladder leading to the second deck, but in spite of that the seas had risen above it and had deposited gallons of water through the door.

In the wardroom, chairs were in disarray against the port bulkhead. Mixed with them were books, magazines, an ashtray, a foul weather jacket. Water had streamed down the rudder post and was sloshing with every motion of the ship. The television, by a miracle, had failed to jump completely from the half-inch molding holding it. Coffee had spilled and its aroma was nauseating as it mingled with strange odors from other portions of the ship.

The office was a jungle of books, publications, calendars and pencils. A cap-sized trash receptacle rolled to and fro. The typewriter, fortunately, was bolted down. The deck contained a goodly portion of sea water, too, for it was directly below the ladder down which the seas had cascaded.

Walking forward, the recreation room at first sight showed no mishap except a group of tumbled chairs, although salt water covered the deck. As I approached the galley I noticed that a foam fire extinguisher was missing. Twenty inches

in diameter and thirty inches in height, it was held in place by a metal strap. Used to smother electrical or inflammable liquid fires with a mechanical foam, it was stowed near the recreation deck fire main where it could be hooked into the hose with a minimum of delay. Now the strap was broken and it had disappeared.

Entering the mess deck, my first sight was that of the errant extinguisher, lashed against a bulkhead. Prior to coming to rest in that position it had bowled over three stools, each of which had been held in place by four three-inch screws! It also had ripped away a jagged section of linoleum decking and a fourth stool was loose. From that, one can judge the force behind the extinguisher as it bounded through a hatch onto the mess deck, sweeping everything before it! The stools now had been gathered in a heap and were temporarily lashed to a radiator. The trays above the three tables were empty, the condiments spilled on deck. Mayonnaise, pickles, mustard, pepper, sugar, chili sauce and horseradish emitted a sickening odor as they mingled with napkins, broken jars, and sea water. They dripped from tables and bulkheads and coated a large portion of the deck. The refrigerator was opened to disclose a topsy-turvy of equal proportions.

The galley was a replica of the mess deck, with a few broken dishes joining the hodgepodge. The galley range, which had been secured, nevertheless reeked with the scent of spilled coffee. The pot rolled on its side, its top somewhere in the middle under foot.

One could scarcely make his way through the ship's library, where scattered books were nearly as numerous as hairs on the head. Glass doors, enclosing shelves of novels, had swung open but had not smashed. The books tumbled out, where they were further distributed in all directions by a submersible pump that had broken loose. Dominoes, playing cards, scrabble figures, a monopoly game and a ship model all intermingled, enhancing the destructive scene.

Schaeffer, Meredith and Williams had been standing in the crew's berthing quarters on the starboard side when the giant sea struck. Meredith and Williams

had been able to grab a stanchion and hold on. Schaeffer, a rugged one hundred and seventy pound, six foot seaman, was spun off balance and clutched at a locker as his full weight hit against it. The locker, held in place by eight screws, gave way under the impact. Schaeffer and locker, his arms still entwined about it, wound up against the port side of the ship and slid to the deck. More alarmed than hurt, he got to his feet and walked away. Schaeffer, who survived that mishap without injury, fractured his thumb while tossing a heaving line two days later.

In addition to the locker, mattresses, blankets and pillows were all over the place. When one of the men opened a locker the contents fell out to a scattered clutter at his feet. Clothing was soaked with hair oil and shaving lotion. A few very wet magazines had been tossed into a wastebasket.

The most dangerous jumble was in the paint locker where, in spite of preventative precautions, cans of paint, thinner, linseed oil and paint remover had been propelled from lipped shelves. A dozen cans had punctured in the process, and their contents now sloshed several inches deep. The fumes were toxic, so I ordered the hatch firmly secured for the present time.

In the midst of clearing some of the shambles the emergency alarm wailed. Nobody took any chances and made haste topside, lifejackets donned. When muster revealed all hands to be present it was then that we discovered a short circuit had caused the alarm to sound.

I returned to the bridge. The engine room reported the same type of mess I had witnessed on my abbreviated tour. Tools were on the deck, in the bilges, wedged behind a work bench. Pipe fittings, nuts, bolts, and electrical components had spilled in all directions. Lockers of various mechanical gear acted in the same manner as the crew's clothing lockers. One opened a door and stood back, not knowing what might leap at him. Drawers in benches had come open, spilling their contents. Decks were dangerously slippery from spilled oil mixed with water. A chain hoist had

torn loose, fallen, and broken. Storage batteries had tipped in their racks. Acid overflowed and ran along the decks.

A radio dispatch from Boston to the buoy tender *Hornbeam* was passed to us for information.

"from operations x confirming telephone conversation x wal-511 broke mooring x is under own power x proceed and render assistance as needed"

I again radioed Woods Hole Base and repeated that, in my opinion, it was not necessary to send anyone to our assistance. We had weathered the worst of the storm which already was showing signs of abating.

I was informed that the *Hornbeam* had been ordered as a precautionary measure, particularly in view of the velocity of the storm. Soon another dispatch informed us that the *Hornbeam* was underway.

"*Hornbeam* departed woods hole"

Wood, Engineman third class, had been assigned the midnight watch. Making his way to his bunk to attempt a few winks of rest, he observed Clem Meredith braced against a bulkhead. Sitting on deck was the only steady position because the ship still was in exceedingly rough seas. Meredith was cautious. Taking no chances, he had donned his bright orange life jacket.

Wood laughed and asked, "Clem, what's that you've got on?"

Clem saw little humor in the query and replied, almost sadistically, "What does it look like?"

"We're not going to sink, you know."

"Maybe not. I'm just not taking any chances."

Williams burst in, shaking his head sadly. A tall slender North Carolinian with strains of Cherokee blood, Williams was renown among the deck force as being a perfectionist with decks. Many a time men had been sent back to scrub and shine them again until they glittered to Williams' standard.

"What a mess," observed Williams. "And to think of all the hours we spent on this rust bucket, working to make it look good. We might just as well have sat around for all the good it did. Look at those decks! They'll swear, in the Dis-

trict, that we haven't done a thing out here the past nine months."

"Oh, no, they'll understand. That was a severe sea we took. We can't help that."

"I just hope the 'Old man' will hand them a good line when we get there."

"He won't have to. Just tell the truth. This storm was an act of God."

"But why did it have to happen just two days before we're due in port? Just two measly days."

"I didn't like it either, Williams. I worked hard, too. But it was just one of those things."

Williams was not easily convinced. As Boatswain's mate, it was his responsibility to see that the ship sparkled from bow to stern. As he viewed the conglomeration of scattered gear, the ruined decks, the wet bedding, he felt like crying. In all his nineteen years of service he had never seen so much hard labor go for naught in a twinkling. Sadly disheartened, he nevertheless had his men doing what little they could under the circumstances.

Now for the first time, we noticed that the weather had cleared. Not a cloud was left in the sky. Visibility was improving all the time although the edge of the sea was a haze of breaking waves and flying spray. In the southwest sky the constellation Orion was a beautiful spectacle. To its left, in the south, the visible stars of Canis Major were stunted by Sirius. Higher in the southern sky, still farther to the left as we faced it, Canis Minor, with Procyon, twinkled clearly.

By then we had time to collect our thoughts and to discuss the evening. We could not help thinking of our families, and hoped that news of our predicament had not leaked out. It was unlikely that commercial interests would be aware of the situation, but there always was the grapevine. Sometimes the grapevine was right; more often it was not. What fantastic stories could be dreamed by wandering minds.

We did not realize it, but at that very moment lots of people were discussing our plight. Newscasters on radio and television (we later learned) were describing us somewhat inaccurately. We

had lost our mooring and were adrift in heavy seas, or we were battling to maintain our regular vigil. The Coast Guard cutter *Hornbeam* had been sent to our "rescue." How sensationally and gripping situations sometimes are described when only the barest of details are available.

The grapevine also was intoxicated with excitement. "The Buzzards lightship is adrift and in danger of being cast upon the rocks of Cuttyhunk at any moment! They couldn't use their engine, and the *Hornbeam* was speeding to her assistance. In all probability they couldn't get there in time because of very rough seas!"

We were pleased to discover later that our families had not heard any of the fantastic rumors until the following day. By then we were out of danger, and they knew that, too.

By maintaining a speed of 475 RPM we were able to maintain a steady course directly into the face of the seas. Winds had moderated to forty-five miles per hour, swells diminished to about eighteen feet. We were traveling away from our charted position at one and a half miles an hour. Realizing it would be almost suicidal to try to come about in such seas, I ordered our course and speed maintained. When, and only when, wind and seas lessened considerably would we return to our position. What good to go back now, when we could not release our spare anchor? The following message was sent to the *Hornbeam*.

steering course 235 from charted position x speed approximately one and one-half knots x plan to maintain course and speed until weather moderates.

When the *Hornbeam* did arrive, what a welcome sight she was! How reassuring to have company in time of danger. We felt inspired in spite of the shambles below decks. The storm was abating slowly. No more sheer walls of towering furious Atlantic seas bore down on us. Seas lessened still further, to fifteen feet. Our courage was further bolstered by a cheery message from the *Hornbeam*.

will escort you astern at a distance of one-half mile x if you need anything just let us know.

All night long the tender was our companion. How friendly her running lights, her bulk, her shoulder to shoulder comradeship.

Night dissolved into the brightness of day. Wind remained in the southwest, at twenty-five miles per hour. We waited half an hour, an hour. No further decrease in wind or sea appeared likely and seas were holding at ten feet in height.

Notifying the *Hornbeam* of our decision, we changed course to 065 degrees and proceeded towards Vineyard Sound. There, between the Elizabeth Islands and Martha's Vineyard, we hoped to make a lee for the deck force to work on the spare anchor. With the change in course we were able to run full speed before the wind and seas.

An hour's run brought the shelter for us and the crew was able to get the spare anchor over the side. It was no cinch, as the ship still rolled, bobbed, and was pushed by swells striking against the stern. The deck pitched much less violently, however, and there was no salt spray coating the bow and bridge everytime a wave lashed us.

The safest procedure, which we followed, was to drop the anchor in comparatively shallow water, then retrieve it in the hawse, steam back to position and then drop it again. It was not accomplished without mishap. Two lengths of chain, a bit more than the depth of the water, were let out. The anchor was hoisted on a davit, the manila strap cut and the anchor dropped. Instead of falling over the side and splashing into the Sound, as it was supposed to, the lip of the five thousand pound mushroom anchor caught on the bulwarks. There it hung. It took two men with crowbars another five or six minutes to free it. Eventually it slid into the ocean, at the cost of a jagged hole on the starboard bow, eight inches horizontally and fourteen inches vertically. The tear was just above the water line and a damage control party was able to plug it sufficiently to keep the seas from pounding through.

1120, February 26: The following message ended the ordeal that had begun the previous day.

to operations x 1120 x *wal-511* on station x resumed normal operating characteristics

The *Hornbeam* had helped station us with her radar, for at that time we were not equipped with one. Upon receiving our thanks and assurances that all was well, she departed, and again we were alone, at anchor in a riled ocean.

Three sequels are of interest. During the morning after the storm the crew were overheard complaining about the water. I couldn't blame them for complaining, after what they had been through. But the water??

"What's wrong with the water?"

"Skipper, taste the water in the skuttlebutt, if you will, and see if you don't think it's salty. It tastes peculiar to the rest of us."

It certainly was salty, all right. Somehow, during the storm, valves had jarred open or perhaps had been leaking. In any event, salt water from the peak tank had infiltrated the entire fresh water system. A check of the suspected leakage verified our suspicions, for the water level was down fully a foot. The top of the tank was below the waterline of the ship, and since water seeks its own level, there was only one other place for it to go—into the other tanks.

It was a strange situation. Everyone imagined himself thirsty. Men who rarely ever stopped at the water fountain now tried it because they knew there was no water fit for drinking. When water was available the urge for it was not nearly so strong.

The crew were not beaten, however, not by a long shot, not as long as the distilled water in the engineroom caboys held out. Sampling it cautiously, making a wry face at its flat tasteless content, Moore said, "Well, it's wet! We can use it for coffee and it won't taste quite so bad." Thus we found ourselves on water hours—distilled water hours.

The second aftermath refers to newspapers and some of the articles they carried about us. One well known Boston edition referred to us as an unpowered ninety-three foot vessel. They were wrong on two counts. The engineers stated that the business of the "unpowered" vessel was a low blow. Also, the

paper had somewhere lost thirty-seven feet of our length. Another paper wrote that we were off station one hour and had to be towed back by the Coast Guard cutter *Hornbeam*. Actually we were off station a total of fifteen hours and twenty minutes. Knowing fact, then reading twisted versions, one wonders why some reporters insist on their flair for the sensational. They cast a bad light on the press in general and their own newspaper in particular. In fairness to them, however, sensationalism is popular with the public. Who can possibly blame reporters, then, for giving the public what they want?

The third sequence of events occurred at 1930 (7:30 P.M.) Sunday night (February 26), less than twenty-four hours after we first lost our mooring. The "Relief" lightship had left Boston, was coming to take over our station, and had sent an unofficial dispatch.

do you wish to be relieved to-night?

Summoning the crew, I asked them if they would care to be relieved that night, that it would mean another sleepless night for practically everyone, and that if they wished to wait until morning that we would do so.

Aching bodies and tired minds instantly were alert, and with one loud spontaneous chorus they shouted, "TONIGHT!! TONIGHT!!"

Grinning, I phoned the radioman. "Notify the 'Relief' that we'll be ready to leave as soon as she can get here."

The ship's log that night contained a final entry that warmed our hearts, lifted us from our despondency over the vicious devastation, and caused enthusiastic morale to surge back into our veins.

2305 (February 26): "Secured all aids to navigation. Underway on various courses and full speed. Enroute Coast Guard Base, Boston."



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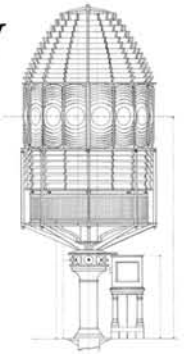
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The author, George Rongner, served in the Coast Guard for over 31 years. Starting as a Seaman Apprentice in 1938 he worked his way up to Warrant Officer (W-4). As a Warrant Officer he served as Commanding Officer of two buoy tenders: the *White Sage* (stationed at Woods Hole, MA) and the *White Alder* (at New Orleans). From 1955 to 1957 he was Commanding Officer of the lightship *WAL 511*, which served on the *BUZZARDS* Bay station. The *WAL 511* (previously numbered *LV 86*) was constructed by the Lighthouse Service in 1907 and was almost 50 years old when she weathered the storm.

Keeper Rongner's story is but one chapter from an outstanding manuscript about life aboard a lightship. It's a manuscript waiting to be published and we would welcome hearing from any 'angels' who might have read this fascinating saga and would like to get involved.



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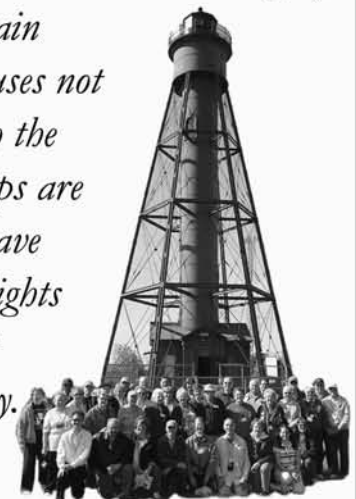
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