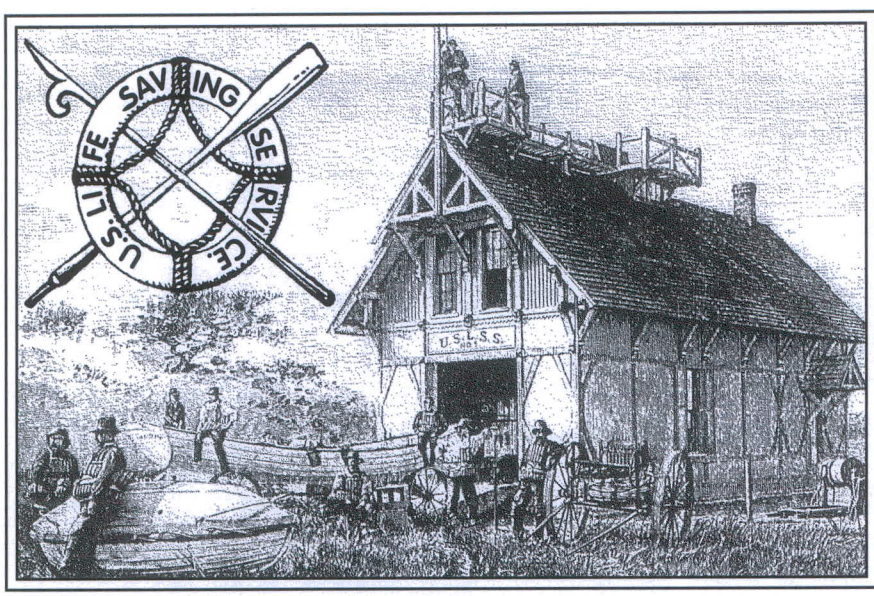
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# OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

# A Night of Struggle

By Dennis L. Noble

The life of a surf-man at a U.S. Life-Saving Service Station can be summed up in an old phrase: hours and hours of monotony, followed by minutes of sheer terror. A great deal of the lifesaver's monotonous hours were spent in repetitious drills (practice) with their equipment. While mind-numbing, the drills instilled in the surf-men two important things: a sense of confidence in performing the work and the ability to react automatically no matter what the situation. These abilities were graphically illustrated in a wreck occurring along the New Jersey coast in 1880.

The schooner *George Taulane*, bound from Virginia to New York with a cargo of cordwood and crew of seven, sailed into a snow storm off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, on February 3, 1880. The winds increased to gale force and the skipper of *Taulane* double reefed his sails, but the gale proved to be only a harbinger of things to come. At two o'clock in the morning, the cargo shifted and the deck cargo broke loose. The crew, dodging wood and fighting a heaving deck, attempted to secure the cordwood.

Then, the cry "Fire!" came from the forecastle. The flames, fanned by the high winds, raced through the cargo. Somehow the small crew managed to contain the inferno. Meanwhile, with the sailors busy fighting fire and securing the cargo, the *Taulane* drifted inexorably toward the beach. The skipper dropped both anchors in the attempt to stop the schooner but they would not hold. The crew climbed into the rigging in hopes it would save them when the ship struck shore.

On shore, the crew of the U.S. Life-Saving Service station at Swan Point spied the plight of the *Taulane*. The keeper, James Numan, estimated the drift rate of the schooner and believed it would soon be in the area of the Green Island station. Instead of dragging the heavy beach cart along the shore, Keeper Numan and his crew grabbed heaving lines and started toward Green Island to help the crew of that station. Meanwhile, the beach patrolman of Green Island also spotted the *Taulane* and alerted his station's keeper. Keeper William P. Chadwick mustered his crew and just as quickly, the surf-men were pulling the beach cart to meet the schooner.



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Both lifesaving crews faced severe challenges that night. The tide was four feet higher than normal and surf pounded up to the dunes. The sea, rushing with great force, cut large sluices into the beach. The beach in places had the consistency of quicksand. Added to all this, the pieces of cord wood that had washed off the *Taulane* became deadly missiles as they were hurled ashore by the high surf.

At first the lifesavers made little progress pulling and pushing the beach cart. Keeper Chadwick obtained a team of horses and the animals pulled the cart for about a mile. The struggling rescuers reached a deep sluiceway and the horses balked at crossing it. The Green Island lifesavers grabbed the pulling ropes and entered into cold water up to their waists, heaving on the ropes and watching for debris. They had to cross another sluiceway before finally coming abreast of the *Taulane*. At this point they joined up with the crew of Swan Island and six civilian volunteers. Just getting to the location was quite an ordeal, but in the words of the official report, the nineteen men on the beach that February night were about to enter into "a singular and memorable struggle."

The shore-side rescuers laid out the gear from the beach cart and then fired the Lyle gun. The projectile and line flew over the flying jib too far for the sailors aboard the *Taulane* to reach it. The schooner, in the grip of the surf and southerly current, continued drifting four hundred yards offshore with its hull almost underwater.

The lifesavers and civilians loaded all the line-throwing equipment into the beach cart and followed the ship. They set up their equipment to fire again but the line fell short. The wet line caused the projectile to lose distance. Reloaded with black powder, the Lyle gun fired again as the ship drifted south. This time the line parted. All the gear went back into the cart and the chase resumed.

The wheels of the cart faced the danger of "sanding down" or sinking deep into the beach sand. To prevent this, the cart had to be constantly on the move. At times the men "would....fling themselves upon the wheels and hold them with all their strength to prevent the cart from being capsized" in the pounding surf. Keeper Chadwick received a blow to the arm from the sinking ship's debris that left him "lame four months later."

The strange drama continued to unfold upon that wild, cold, wet New Jersey beach. The nineteen rescuers would catch up to the *Taulane*, unload the gear, fire and for some reason the projectile would not reach its mark. Then the men would reload and give chase. This process continued at least a dozen more times. At one point, a hapless sailor from the *Taulane* fell to his death from the rigging.

This spurred the lifesavers onward. After four hours of exhausting and frustrating labor, the crews were still chasing the ship. Another sailor dropped from the rigging.

Staggering and stumbling onward, the lifesavers met yet another trial. A surge upset the cart, plunging the contents into four or five feet of cold seawater. The men groped in the frigid seawater, recovering the gear. One of the keepers located the Lyle gun, wiped the water from it, and put the 165-pound gun onto his shoulder and started down the beach.

A surf-man received orders to return to the station and get dry shotline. While he was on his mission, the gun was fired again to no avail.

The surf-man returned with the dry line just as the *Taulane* struck a north setting tide, which stopped the southward drifting schooner and swung her bows offshore. Finally "the time had come at last..."

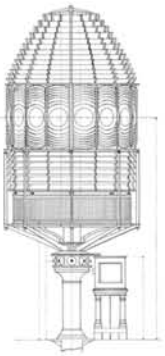
Numb from exhaustion and exposure, the life-savers once again laid out the line-throwing equipment. Now those long hours of monotonous drill paid off as the men automatically, and with confidence they could still do the work, set up for yet another shot. Quickly bending the dry shotline to the projectile, a keeper aimed the Lyle gun and pulled the firing lanyard. This time the projectile reached the *Taulane* and within reaching distance of the remaining sailors aboard the foundering ship. The rescue lines were quickly rigged and soon the breeches buoy reached the schooner. After the first two sailors reached safety, the *Taulane* grounded, increasing her rolling. The ship heaved so heavily that at one time the man in the breeches buoy swung "fully fifty feet in the air." Even with this carnival ride, the last of the sailors aboard the *Taulane* safely reached the beach only thirty minutes after the life-saving apparatus was rigged between the shore and ship.

The U.S. Life-Saving Service, in their report on the rescue, noted that the rescuers pursued the *Taulane* at least three miles and the entire rescue took "not less than six hours." For their work, all nineteen rescuers—the entire crew of the Green Island and Swan Point stations and six civilian volunteers—received the highest award for saving lives from the sea: the Gold Life Saving Medal.



**The keeper yanked the firing lanyard, firing the Lyle line throwing gun. U.S. Coast Guard photo.**

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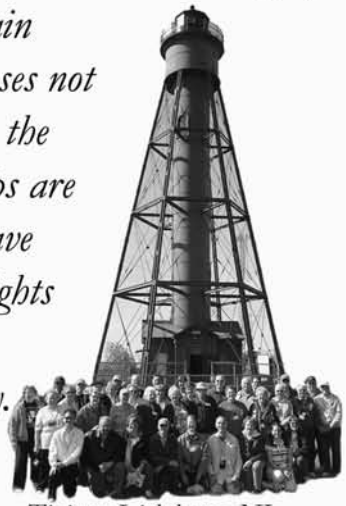
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