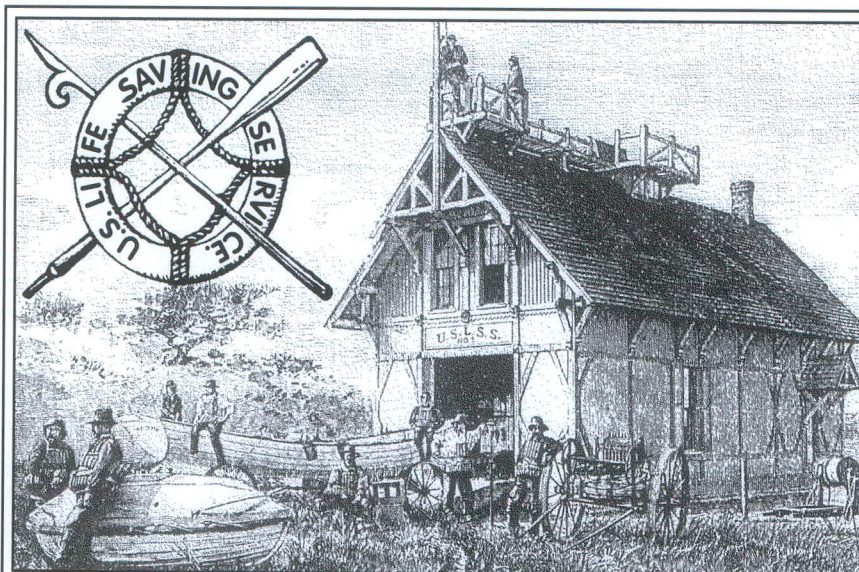




OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

THREE NIGHTS OF HEROISM

By Dennis L. Noble

When most people think of the rescues of the old U.S. Life-Saving Service they mentally picture the pounding surf along the beaches of Cape Hatteras, or other eastern seaboard locales. Yet, the service conducted some extraordinary rescues on the "inland seas" of the Great Lakes. Beginning on October 31, 1883, a series of events took place at Cleveland, Ohio, to prove this statement.

On October 31, the three-masted schooner *Sophia Minch* attempted to enter Cleveland harbor in a stiff northwesterly gale. As fate would have it, the ship's rudder was disabled by the rough seas. The skipper of the *Minch* ordered both anchors let go and the ship came to anchor off the east pier. Distress flags quickly flew from the schooner. A tug, the *Peter Smith*, with two surfmen from the Cleveland station, went to help handle lines.

The captain of the *Minch* refused the help of the *Smith*, saying it did not have ample power. Another tug, the *Fanny Tuthill*, set forth, and Keeper Charles C. Goodwin and the rest of his crew leaped aboard the *Smith*, as it set out to further assist the *Tuthill*. The lifesaving crew, man-

aged "with the greatest difficulty and risk" to clamber aboard the *Minch*. The schooner's anchors were cut loose and the two tugs began to pull the vessel toward the harbor, but then both tow lines parted and the ship drifted eastward heading in the direction of a rocky shore. The tugs could do nothing and ran for shelter. To add to the drama, a seaman discovered water coming into the hold of the *Minch*.

Keeper Goodwin and the skipper of the *Minch* decided the best course of action was to scuttle the ship and let it sink to the sandy bottom rather than take a chance on hitting rocks in such a heavy sea. This was accomplished by "boring auger holes in the deck forward."

The ship settled to the sandy bottom, with her midships awash. All of the men aboard, except two, made for the foremast rigging. The other two, cut off from the others, made for the mizzen mast toward the stern. Surfman Distel, left on the tug, put the *Smith's* skipper ashore and quickly set out to find volunteers to help with the beach apparatus. Despite it being 2:00 or 3:00 a.m., the surfman found enough people, including an assistant lighthouse keeper who is identified only as Reed.

The beach apparatus gear, under Distel's supervision, was quickly laid out. Distel loaded, aimed and fired the Lyle gun. The shot line flew to the foremast and was secured. Keeper Goodwin made the first trip over to the ship to superintend the remainder of the work. Finally all the men from the foremast, but Surfman Frederick T. Hatch, reached shore. There

remained the two men left in the aft portion of the ship.

Distel volunteered to ride the breeches buoy over to the ship and consult with Hatch on a course of action. After discussing their options, "Hatch agreed to attempt to reach the mizzen-rigging and see what could be done." According to the official report it "was an extremely hazardous undertaking, as the main boom and gaff were swaying from one side to the other in a most frightful manner, and . . . [Hatch] was literally taking his life in his hands to make the attempt." Hatch told Distel that if he did not return in a reasonable amount of time, Distel should consider it was impossible for him to return and make his way to shore via the breeches buoy and inform Keeper Goodwin of the situation.

Hatch managed to make it to the mizzen rigging, but could not bring the two men forward. Following the plan, Distel, after waiting for a period of time, signaled for the breeches buoy to pull him ashore. He reported to Keeper Goodwin, who quickly ordered the gear broken down. Goodwin then loaded, aimed for the mizzen rigging and fired the Lyle gun. Hatch gathered in the shot line and very quickly the remaining two men aboard the *Minch* were safely landed ashore.

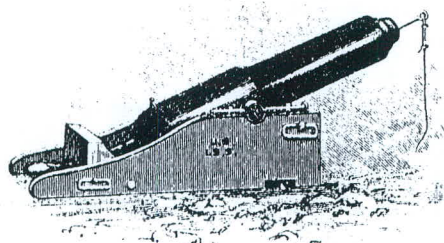
The official report of the incident notes the "whole affair reflected great credit on both the members of the life-saving crew and upon the little band of volunteers, who came so bravely forward to assist Distel in landing his comrades and those

belonging to the vessel." Within a few hours of stowing their gear at the Cleveland Station, the U.S. Life-Saving Service crew would again be tested.

The large three masted schooner *John B. Merrill* hove to off Cleveland's harbor. The ship carried a crew of ten, including the Captain's wife who served as cook. The steam tug *James Amadeus* took the *Merrill* in tow at around five in the evening of the stormy day. The tow line parted under the strain, but the *Amadeus* quickly managed to get another line to the drifting ship, but the force of the seas caused this line to snap. Nearing the breakers on the rocky shore, the skipper of the *Merrill* let go both anchors in an effort to stop his ship, but to no avail.

Meanwhile, Keeper Goodwin, watching the unfolding events, knew his crew would be needed. This time he ordered his crew to set out with the beach apparatus. The *Merrill* went ashore about a half mile to the east of the station.

The skipper of the stranded ship ordered all hatches opened, thus allowing the schooner to settle quickly to the bottom. This wise action kept the *Merrill* from beating herself to pieces and it steadied the ship for a rescue attempt.



The Lyle Gun.

By now the lifesaving crew had arrived on scene. Helping the crew again were the same volunteers who assisted at the wreck of the *Minch*, including Assistant Lighthouse Keeper Reed. The *Merrill* lay about four hundred feet off shore with her stern to the beach. Once the lines from the beach apparatus were across to the ship, Surfman Hatch volunteered to go over and insure everything went smoothly. With Hatch on the *Merrill*, the landing of the crew went smoothly. It took about forty-five minutes to bring everyone safely ashore.

Ten days later, on November 11, in the words of the U.S. Life-Saving Service, "occurred one of the most thrilling episodes in the annals of the life-saving service at Cleveland, Ohio." At nine o'clock at night, Keeper Goodwin's crew observed a vessel under reduced sail attempt to make harbor, and dropped the "hook" off the end of the east pier. Keeper Goodwin, knowing the vessel would need assistance, ordered his crew into the surf boat. The seas were so high, "that at times the light-house on the end of the east pier was completely buried in a smother of foam."

As the lifesaving crew worked their boat toward the vessel, the skipper of the tug *Forest City* hailed Keeper Goodwin and told him if he and his crew could board the ship, run a line from the ship to the tug, and then slip the anchor cable, he would try to tow the ship into the harbor. The lifesavers managed to make it to the vessel, the schooner-rigged barge *John T. Johnson*, and quickly ran into more trouble. The seas were breaking over the vessel and the spray freezing almost on contact with the *Johnson*. Once on the vessel, Keeper Goodwin hailed a customs inspector and Assistant Lighthouse Keeper Reed, who once again was close by on the pier, and told them to get the tug underway, as planned. The tug's master, however, rethought the plan and refused to go out. In fact, no tug would leave the safety of the harbor that night.

Keeper Goodwin realized he must return to the station and bring the beach apparatus into action. He also realized this was easier said than done: the men were exhausted from their long pull [ed. row] to the *Johnson* and the seas had not calmed down at all. The keeper kept one of his crew aboard the vessel and the rest clambered into the boat for the hard pull to the harbor. A hundred feet from the *Johnson*, a wave swamped the surfboat. As the crew bailed, the seas set the boat far to the east of the harbor. The keeper decided to beach his craft and tried to maneuver the boat, around pilings, as it was pushed rapidly through the water by the seas. A sudden wave struck the boat and the crew found themselves "thrown struggling into the ice-cold water." The lifesavers clung to the boat, but "were washed off again and again." Some of the men were "badly bruised." What eventually saved the lifesavers were ropes thrown to them from the

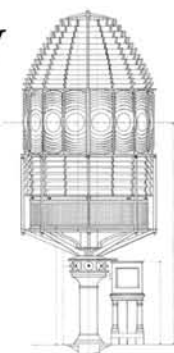
crowd standing on a pier. Many of the men were in such bad shape the "could not speak, being barely conscious when rescued." According to the official report, "(it) was one of the narrowest escapes on record in the Life-Saving Service."

The lifesavers knew the people on the *Johnson*, six men and a woman cook, plus their own shipmate, needed their assistance. The battered, cold, wet crew returned to the station, where they quickly donned dry clothing and, by midnight, were hauling the beach apparatus to the scene. The *Johnson* fetched up close to where the *Sophia Minch* landed. The crew of the *Johnson* could be dimly seen clinging in the mizzen rigging. Keeper Goodwin quickly aimed the Lyle gun and fired. The surfman left aboard the vessel grabbed the shot line and quickly pulled out the heavier lines and rigged the lines for the rescue apparatus. The cook came ashore first, at five minutes past midnight, quickly followed by the remainder of the crew and the surfman. The entire rescue by beach apparatus took thirty minutes from the time Keeper Goodwin fired the lyle line throwing gun.

Keeper Charles C. Goodwin and his crew of eight surfmen saved a total of twenty-nine people from three vessels during the short period of time from October 31 until November 11, 1883. All the rescues took place during storm conditions in the dark. For their work, the entire crew of the U.S. Life-Saving Service Station, Cleveland, Ohio, won the Gold Life Saving Medal. This marks two rare occurrences in the awarding of the highest medal for the saving of life at sea: very seldom did an entire crew win the medal. Keeper Goodwin's crew is only the fourth crew from 1876 to 1883 to earn this honor. (One of the crews was actually an English lifeboat crew that rescued the American ship *Ellen Southard*, at the mouth of the River Mersey, England, in 1875.) From 1876 to 1908, only ten times did the Gold Life Saving Medal go to an entire crew of the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Surfman Frederick T. Hatch, who later became a lighthouse keeper, again earned the Gold Life Saving Medal — a gold bar to the medal — becoming the first person to hold this honor. In all, from 1876 to 1908, only two other people received the Gold Life Saving Medal more than once.



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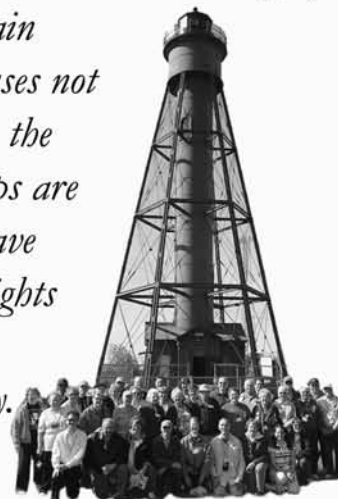
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