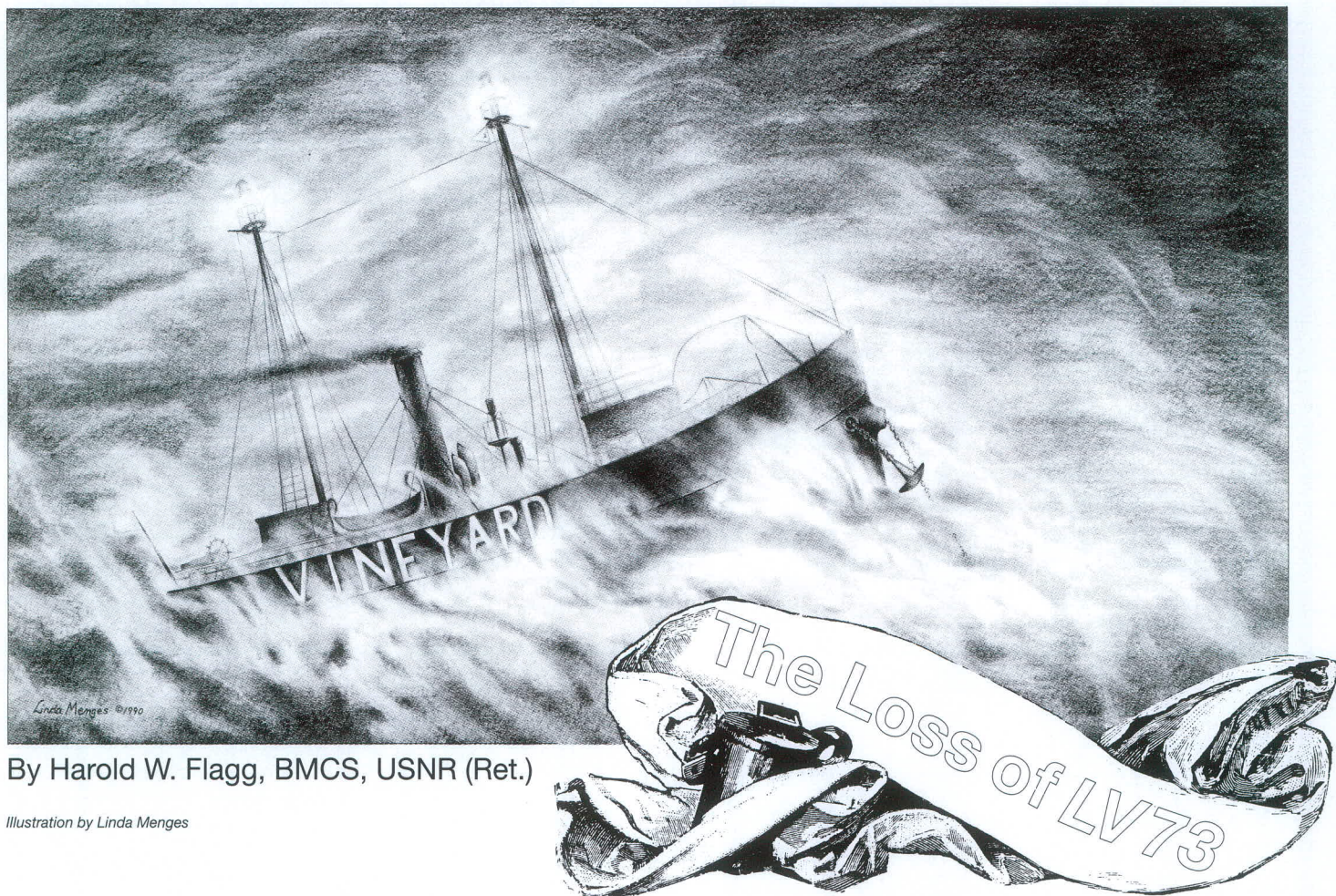


Vineyard Lightship, revisited . . .



By Harold W. Flagg, BMCS, USNR (Ret.)

Illustration by Linda Menges

In the summer 1990 issue of the Log we published the story of the sinking of lightship LV 73 (on the Vineyard station), by A.E. Hauser. Hauser was in command of a small Coast Guard cutter when a 1944 hurricane passed the Cape Cod area. He told of radio communication with the ill-fated lightship and his supposition that the ship had reported that their spare anchor, affixed to the starboard bow, had broken loose and holed the hull, sinking the ship. The following story takes a different tack, refuting Hauser's story. As fate would have it the author was on shore leave and due to report back the day that LV 73 went down, but the approaching storm delayed his return to the ship . . . and sharing the fate of his fellow shipmates.

There are many conflicting stories of how the *Vineyard* lightship sank during the hurricane of September 14/15, 1944; perhaps with this article some of the misinformation can be corrected. Using some known and available facts, along with a little background history, the *Vineyard* Lightship tragedy may be better understood.

The *Vineyard* (LV73) was built by the Spedden Shipbuilding Co., of Baltimore, MD, in 1901; this was several years before the large sailing bark *Peking*. Shipbuilders were still holding to some of the old techniques, and were incorporating wood and sail, as they seemed to be cautiously feeling out the more modern ways of the twentieth century. As built, the LV73 had a coal-fired steam engine, but was also rigged for sail. The

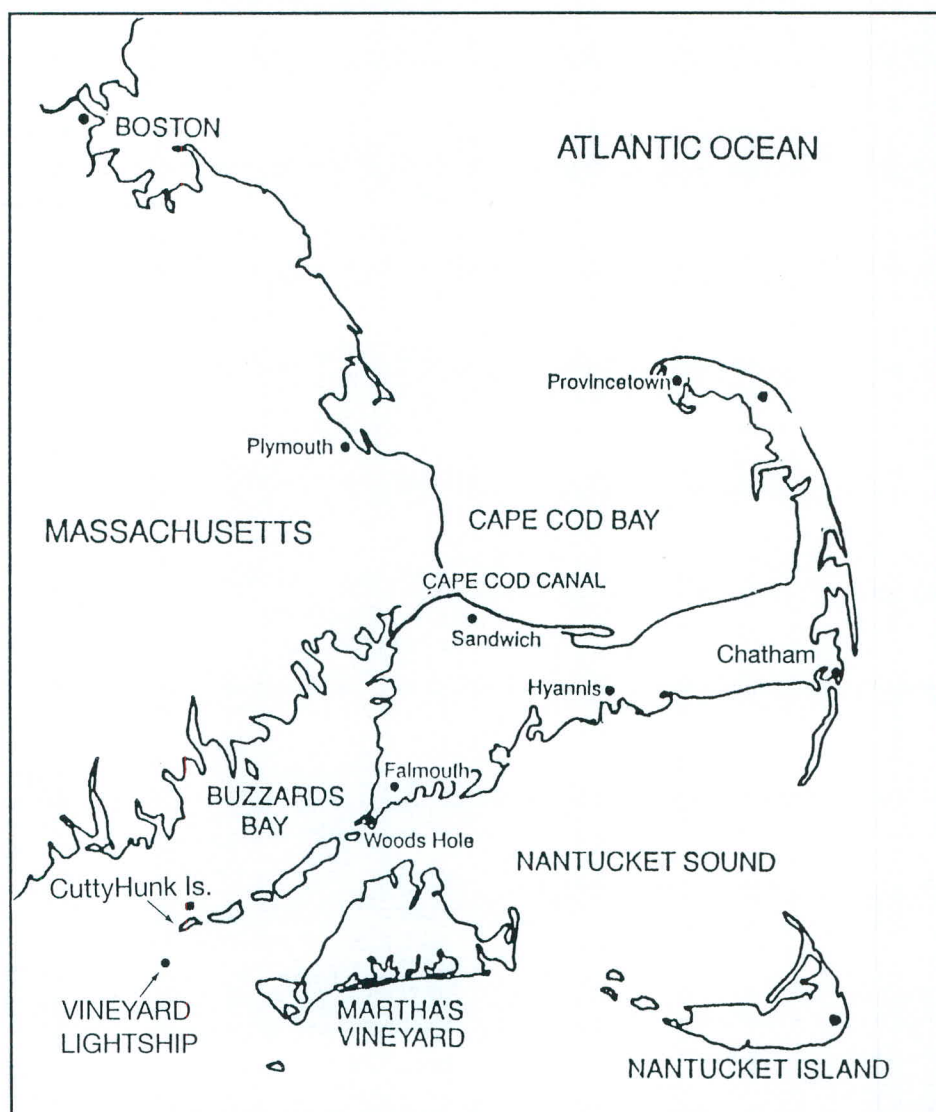
hull, masts, and deck houses of this ship were all of iron, as were the bulkheads that surrounded the engine room, all else was of wood. It was the wood that made this ship most comfortable; wooden decks and bulkheads, well-varnished mahogany doors that rolled on brass tracks. The crew slept in two-man rooms with fore and aft bunks, one above the other, also of well-varnished wood. There was one large vertical radiator that was the only source of heat in the fo'c's'l, and in really cold weather heavy clothing was needed even when one was in his bunk. It was this construction, along with the age of the ship and its complete lack of watertight integrity, that made it vulnerable to a storm of the magnitude it was to encounter that fateful night.



"One morning in May, 1944 we lowered the ship's boat and rowed off a ways and I took this photo." Photo by Harold Flagg, May 1944 just 4 months before the ship sank.

The duty of this lightship was to warn mariners away from a very dangerous reef known as Sow and Pigs located at the Western end of Cuttyhunk Island, Massachusetts. The LV73 had been guarding this treacherous area of Vineyard Sound since 1924, and to this day, close to these rocks a few remains may still be found. Having gone down with all hands on board, and leaving no one to say for sure just what did take place during those final hours, she left much room for speculation.

There were four ships lost to the hurricane that passed up the east coast of the United States between September 12 and 15, 1944. One of the first ships to succumb was the USN Destroyer, *Warrington* (DD383); this vessel went down about 200 miles east of Vero Beach, FL. The loss of life on the DD383 was extremely heavy, with about 247 of the 300 man crew lost. This tragedy took place about two days before the loss of the *Vineyard*, but time was running out for this 43-year old veteran. As the storm progressed northward, two small Coast Guard Cutters, which were standing by a merchant ship had been torpedoed, were the next victims. These two ships, the *Bedloe* and the *Jackson*, each with a crew of about 35



men, went down with a substantial loss, but there were survivors.

There were twelve men on board the LV73 the night she sank, of these, five or six were looking forward to going on their regular leave that same morning, but fate had dealt them a cruel blow. Each man would do thirty days out and then be off for fifteen, at the time there were five men ashore. The five men that were off were carrying leave papers stating that they were to report back on board on or before noon 9/15/44; as it turned out, the 73 went down about three a.m. that morning. The time was confirmed by the men who were manning the radar station on Cuttyhunk; there were other individuals who had sighted flares at about that same time.

It has been said that Warrant Officer Edgar Sevigny, the ship's CO, was due to go ashore with that next leave party, but this was not the case; his group had only been back for two weeks and would have to wait another two before going again. It was when he returned with his group on August 29 that an ironic twist took place, which would dramatically effect the lives of at least 10 men. As the Captains liberty boat came along side on August 29 for the transfer of personnel, it was determined that the seas were too rough to make the swap and the boat returned to New Bedford, much to the disappointment of those waiting to get off. It was two days before the boat returned and a transfer could be made. These two days made the difference in which of these parties would be ashore on the night of the hurricane, and who would live and who would die.

The day following the storm, Saturday, Sept. 16, 1944, the five men who returned only to find the ship missing, but not yet considered lost, were taken out to Cuttyhunk Island to look for any recognizable wreckage that might have come from the LV73.

Late in the afternoon on the return trip to New Bedford the boat was approached by an 85 ft. Coast Guard Cutter, and it was when they transferred the body of Seaman Jack Hammett that it became clear that there had been a disaster and hope of finding the ship

began to wane. Jack was a top-notch seaman and he appeared to have made himself ready to go over the side. This man was clad only in his dungarees and a life jacket, he was not encumbered by shoes or other clothing. It looked very much like Jack had come close to surviving, there was a very small cut on his forehead, but otherwise he looked quite normal.

The next day, Sunday, the same routine was carried out, even to being approached by the 85 ft. Cutter in the same manner and at about the same time. This time the body of the ship's cook 2/C Richard Talbot, we called him Stubby, was passed over for the trip to New Bedford. Unlike Jack, Stubby was badly bruised about the head, he also was dressed to go over the side. This man had to have been the best cook in the Coast Guard, he had been trained as a hotel chef, and it clearly showed.

Now what did cause this ship to founder? This was a ship that was built to withstand severe weather. Perhaps the question should be, what didn't cause this ship to founder? We know it was an old ship, built with a lot of wood and no watertight integrity, but had survived many other storms.

There have been three good reasons given as to why the LV73 went down, and there may be more, but the three that persist will be addressed here.

(1) Cargo, or coal doors as they were at times called, may have been stove in. The coal doors were located on each side of the midship area of the ship and only a few feet above the waterline. The doors were in three sections: one long upper section, which when open would be secured inboard and up against the overhead; the two lower sections were then swung in and secured against the side of the ship. When these doors were closed, a large, heavy strongback was secured to insure this section would be seaworthy. There were never any definite proof that these doors had been damaged.

(2) The next two stories which have been circulated each seem to be derived from a photograph taken by a diver in 1963. The picture is of the bow of the ship in a badly deteriorated condition, clearly showing most of the bow missing; it also shows the spare anchor firmly embedded in the side of the ship. This is the picture that appeared in the Summer 1990 issue of the LOG.



Above – part of the crew aboard the VINEYARD in 1944. The two top left, Hammett & Starrett, and the cook, Talbot, in the life ring, were lost when the ship sank. The author, Harold Flagg, is at bottom left. Photo courtesy of the author.



Harold Flagg at the wheel of the VINEYARD (LV 73) shortly after a shipyard period in 1943. Harold Flagg photo.

(a) The first of these myths was that of the missing bow. Because the photo shows most of the bow missing it has been assumed that the main anchor had carried away its hawse pipe, and in turn the rest of the bow. This for sure would have caused massive flooding and the loss of the ship. This did not occur, and will be explained later.

(b) The second, and more convincing of these two stories, is that the spare anchor had come loose and had firmly embedded itself in the side of the ship; this is a hard theory to dispute. Again, this did not happen. It was depicted that this spare anchor had in some way come loose, and in a wild and flailing way had pounded the hole in the side, causing flooding and the loss of the ship. As previously stated, this didn't happen.

The photograph in question was taken in 1963, a full 19 years after this vessel foundered, leaving a lot of time for many things to take place. This spare anchor had been secured to the ship with two pieces of 1/2" wire rope that time had rusted away, letting the anchor fall from its position on the starboard

bulwark, causing it to slam into the side of the ship, as shown in the picture.

At this point, I reflect back to September 1944, when the U.S. Navy first found the *Vineyard* Lightship. About eight days after the ship sank Navy divers were sent down to assess the damage and to confirm that the ship was the LV73. These divers worked from the diving vessel YDT-1. The findings were recorded in the document: *RECORD OF PROCEEDINGS of a BOARD of INVESTIGATION*, held at the office of the captain of the Port in New Bedford. This document is *Board No. 2025, Courts and Boards Section, 9-30-44*. It is plainly noted that the main hawse pipe was in good condition. It also plainly states that the spare anchor was properly secure, and its hawse pipe was in good condition.

On page (6) of this document, under the heading, *FINDING OF FACTS* item No. 4 states, That the harbor anchor was secure.

In summation: The document #2025 states under the heading of *OPINION*, Item #1. That the foundering of *Vineyard* Lightship (LV73) was caused by a leak in the hull through *some undetermined point*. It was in this section that item #7 states, That *Vineyard* Lightship (LV73) be stricken from the record of public property.

This article has been written with respect for those men of the *Vineyard* who seemed to have had an easy type of duty in wartime, and had been sent to this duty, not of their choice, but as a number who could just as well have been sent to die in the worst of battles. It is an obligation of those who remain to see that history does not become clouded by time. These were all good men and super shipmates.

This writer had been attached to the LV73 for the twenty-three months preceding the sinking, and was one of the lucky five who were ashore that night.

As far as it is known at this time, there are only two of the five still alive, and we will never forget.



Harold Flagg, far right, with two friends as they inspect the ship's bell lanyard that divers retrieved from the sunken LV 73. Author photo March 1965.

Bulkhead — A vertical partition of a vessel extending athwartship or fore and aft.

Bulwark — The vessel's topside above the deck.

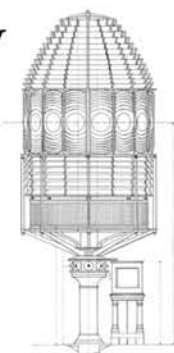
Fo'c's'le — (forecastle) The foremost part of the spar deck or of a ship.

Hawse Pipe — The iron casting in the bow of a ship through which the anchor chain runs.

Strongback — A steel or wood beam placed across a hatch to support the sections of the hatch covers.



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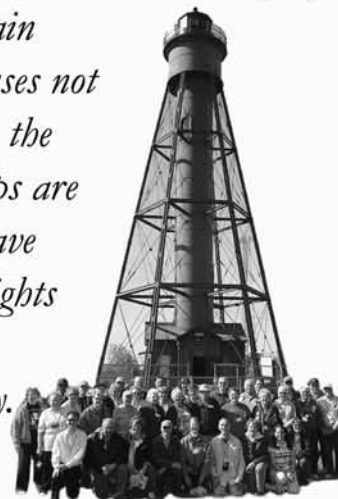
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