

The Andrew & Allison Tragedy

by Tim Coleman

Marine history holds a fascination for people by going back in time, often looking for something lost for many years and trying to seek it out over miles and miles of ocean bottom. With this interest, we also must come face to face with the fact that some of these wrecks took the lives of the people on board. Such was the case of the fishing vessel *Andrew & Allison* (A&A). She left Point Judith on January 4, 1987, never to return, taking four people to their graves, missing, lost at sea, bodies never recovered for closure for their families and friends.

This western rig (wheelhouse in the bow) stern dragger was 67 feet long with a 20-foot beam. She was steel construction, built in LaBatre, LA in 1980 for a company headquartered in Cranston, RI. Her official number was 624965 and her homeport Providence, RI. Here's the timetable of her last days at sea based on documents from a very thorough Coast Guard inquiry.

At the time of her sinking, the wind was blowing 25 to 35 knots from the southwest, seas were 10 to 15 feet, the air temperature was 36 degrees and the sea temperature a chilly 42 degrees, life-threatening when you have to abandon ship in the middle of the night.

A&A left Point Judith about 8 p.m. on January 4, heading for "fishing grounds south of Block Island." During the next three days, the vessel landed about 50,000 pounds of squid and fish, 30,000 pounds stowed in the starboard hold, 20,000 on the port side, the arrangement giving the vessel a slight starboard list.

On the morning of January 7, the second tow brought up about 6,000 pounds of butterfish in the net alongside the boat. After roughly 10% of the net was lifted out of the water, the boat heeled over to starboard and began taking water over the starboard rail onto the deck. The fish then were released quickly from the net and the A&A righted herself. The maximum capacity for the boat was 80,000 pounds, though at times she had returned to port with 100,000 pounds of fish in her holds.

By 10 a.m. on January 7, fishing operations stopped and the dragger began her trip home. She was

making about 6 knots on a course that put her parallel to the sea. At times, after she got underway on the course, seas were sweeping periodically "over the vessel's stern."

During the trip home, the crew made checks of the engine bilges, the last one about 6 p.m. on the evening of the 7th. Roughly half an hour later, with the A&A about 19 to 20 miles southeast of Block Island's southeast corner, with the captain at the wheel and the rest of the crew below, the boat rolled over to starboard so far that water began pouring in the wheelhouse windows and flowing down into the crew's quarters. The captain tried to get off a mayday, but seawater shorted out the radio.

The one man who survived ran up to the wheelhouse, passing the captain, on the way below to join the other three crew members trying to get into their survival suits. Instead, this fellow saw the open window in the wheelhouse and dove out into the cold, black sea. He later told Coast Guard people that he didn't think he would make it by staying below if the boat continued to roll over.

After surfacing, he climbed up on the port side shell, but within a few minutes, the A&A rolled completely over. He was joined on the surface by a second crewman.

The man was talking incoherently, the possible result of hypothermia and swallowing a lot of seawater. Perhaps by the hand of God or the luck of the draw, the life raft popped up to the top near the two men, alongside the boat that was still bobbing upside down on the surface.

Unfortunately, the raft had inflated upside down with the protective canopy under water. Nevertheless, the two men attempted to climb aboard, their only hope for survival. The second crewman also attempted to climb into his survival suit, which he had brought to the surface with him still in its package. It was, however, to no avail; he was shaking violently. The suit drifted off, and to make matters worse, the life raft continued to inflate, righting itself and throwing both men again into the water. The fellow who had dived out the window climbed back in, but the sec-

ond man never was seen again and neither were the other three who never made it out of the capsized dragger.

About 10:30 p.m., the A&A was still afloat, but only ten feet of her bow remained above water with the life raft tied to what remained of the hull. Not long after, probably fearing that he would be sucked down, the only survivor of this tragedy untied the raft and drifted away into the long night.

The next morning the A&A was reported overdue and the Coast Guard launched a search that located the man in his raft about 3 p.m. on the 8th. He was picked up by a Coast Guard helicopter and transported to a Falmouth, MA hospital for treatment and observation. He was released after 72 hours but then had to undergo the grief and pain of losing his shipmates.

One of the conclusions drawn from the sinking was that, had the survival suits been stored in the wheelhouse, more of the men might have survived. Another probable cause for the loss of lives was that there had been no training conducted with the life raft prior to sailing. The survivor later said that he had no knowledge that the piece of equipment that saved his life was "canopied or self-righting."

While the Coast Guard inquiry had a rough idea where the dragger went down, no one knew for sure. Taking the position and the wind at the time over to some commercial fishing contacts, I asked if they knew what had become of her. One said a fellow dragger captain had recently hung up his bottom trawl on a new hang in an area where he had towed his gear without prior problems. The new hang was within reasonable distance of the reported floundering and there was also paint on the drag gear of the same color as the *Andrew & Allison's*, putting her possible sinking roughly two miles or so east of the reported position.

Whether or not this is the correct location of her sinking will have to wait for divers to look and see, but then again, maybe in this case, it's best not to disturb the painful memories of a night when four fishermen lost their lives, yet another page in a very large book of northeast vessels that never came home.



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