

A Lion, A Lamb and a Prince: The Wreck of the *Student Prince II*

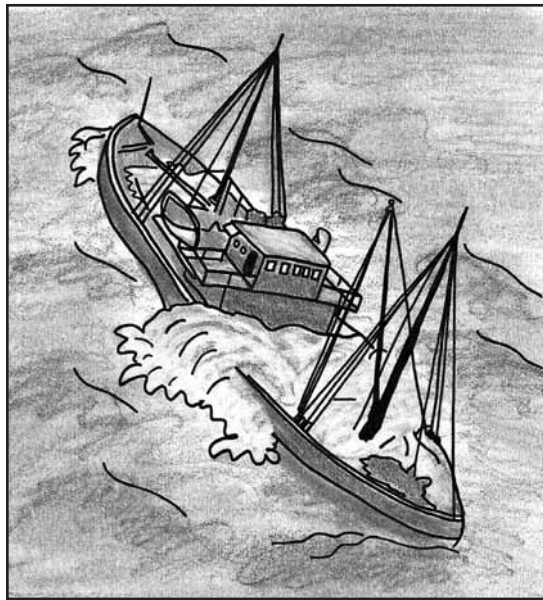
by Adam M. Grohman

On Sunday March 16th, 1941, the Weather Bureau in Washington, D.C. ordered that a storm warning be issued along the Atlantic Coast from Eastport, Maine to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. The meteorologists were concerned over the weather pattern that had created a "severe disturbance" over the mid-west of the nation and that over the course of the following days, would move eastward toward the Atlantic coastline with winds reaching gale force fury. As the weather turned disastrous and the temperatures continued to plunge into the depths over the course of the following days, the 387-ton Nova Scotia-based freighter *Student Prince II* slowly steamed northward along the New Jersey coastline. Bound for Halifax, the cargo heavy vessel sluggishly plowed through the growing surf and increasing winds on its voyage.

Celebrating St. Patrick's Day in New York City remained a priority for countless thousands despite the chilled temperatures, high winds, and snow-flake filled skies that loomed overhead. As the bag-pipes bellowed their melodies to the red-ears of the parade attendees along the major boulevards of the metropolis, the savagery of the weather had already taken its toll on over sixty poor souls across the mid-west.¹ Many unlucky souls had been cut down in the maelstrom after their automobiles had been stuck in snow banks and they had attempted to walk for assistance in the blizzard-like conditions. Thirty-four fishermen on Lake Superior who had been ice fishing found themselves facing death when their iced platforms had broken free from shore and were sent into the deeper wave-swept waters of the lake. Though Coast Guardsmen had been alerted to the throng of ice-fishermen in peril, they were unable to launch any of their rescue crafts due to the constant twenty-five foot surf that crashed along the shoreline. Twenty-four hours later, the fishermen, many who had been able to join the bulk of the others on one large ice floe and had burrowed into piles of snow, were spotted through the din of the snow-swept horizon, floating toward shore. Over the course of the following hours, the fishermen, aboard their floating flow of refuge, were deposited chilled but alive, along the banks of the lake.

Aboard the *Student Prince II*, seventy-six year old skipper John S. Smith kept the bow into the surging surf. Aboard the one hundred and fifty-foot long freighter was a cargo of five hundred and thirty-five tons of coal. The *Student Prince II* had left several days earlier from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and was bound for Halifax. Captain Smith and his crew of eight men did not need to listen to the various weather reports broadcast on the marine radio. They were well aware of the conditions as they felt the freighter's wooden decks and hull crack and creak with each breaking wave. The freighter remained together throughout the harrowing voyage and with her engine thumping methodically despite the tempestuous conditions she churned her single propeller through the icy waters of the Atlantic Ocean. At the helm, Captain Smith, who had spent sixty years at sea, peered through the ice-laden pilot house windows as the last remnants of daylight were diminished by the growing dearth of the blackness of night. The *Student Prince II* steamed, slowly and arduously, into the night.

The weather, despite the hopes and prayers of all aboard the *Student Prince II*, did not abate as they continued on their northbound voyage. Winds

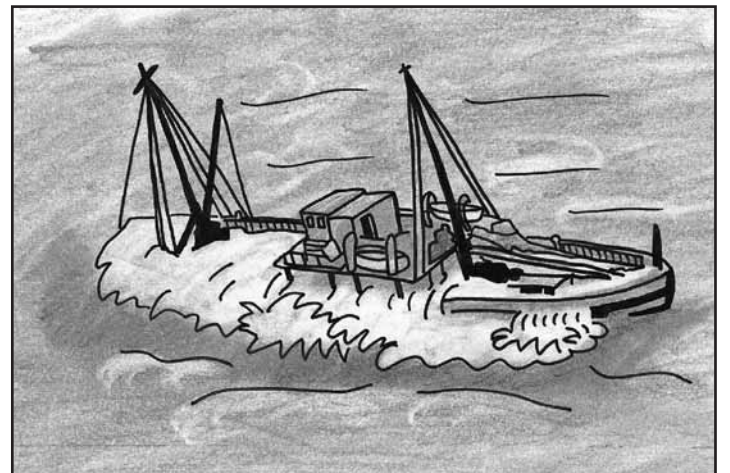


The "*Student Prince II*" with her decks awash. Drawing by the author.

howled to gale-force strength, mountainous waves swept over the pilot house, and the men worked hours on end manning the bilge pumps and inspecting every inch of the vessel for signs of stress and damage. But the hours of diligent seamanship and duty were ultimately undermined by faulty equipment. Only hours into March 18th, 1941, the *Student Prince II* slammed hard aground. Captain Smith immediately ordered all hands to inspect the freighter for damage. Smith rechecked his navigation and calculations and determined that the compass must not have been functioning properly. He slammed his fist against the helm in anger and cursed into the swirling wind. He was well aware, as the pounding surf slammed the decks of his vessel, that if he was unable to free his vessel from its present predicament, that the aged wooden-hulled freighter would be broken apart by the fury of the sea. For the next several hours Smith, along with his mates, tried in vain to free the freighter from the sandy bottom. Their efforts however were not met with success. The freighter, though she had weathered many a storm in the Atlantic began to show signs that the end was near. Smith ordered a distress call made to the Coast Guard. The *Student Prince II*, her timbers having been stressed to the point of fracture, was beginning to break apart. Alerted to the distressed vessel and crew, Coastguardsmen from the Fire Island Station under the command of Chief Boatswain's Mate John W. Midgett, responded to the scene and coordinated their rescue of the sandbar stranded sailors utilizing two lifeboats.² Smith and the rest of the *Student Prince II*'s crew were, after four long hours, plucked from the water-covered decks of the distressed freighter and landed ashore. As the lifeboats landed upon the hard-packed sandy shoreline of Fire Island, Smith looked back at the remaining outline of the freighter. With her decks completely awash and the fore and aft sections showing the tell-tale signs of a broken back, Smith cursed the equipment that had led him to the loss of his first vessel in over six decades of maritime duty. The *Student Prince II*, her cargo of coal

intended for England, slowly settled into the abyss. Vessels, he knew, could always be replaced, but men like the able seamen of his crew were not as easily substituted.

Though the gale had finally passed, another storm continued to brew in the Atlantic Ocean. With the Second World War already engaging the bulk of Europe, the residual ripples of those warring nations continued to rumble throughout the Atlantic Ocean. It was a storm that had already sent countless tons of merchant shipping into the depths and it would be a storm that would eventually turn into one of the longest campaigns of the global conflict. Though the United States was not yet officially engaged in the Battle of the Atlantic in March of 1941, the United States Navy and United States Coast Guard were already embattled in a de-facto war in the North Atlantic. Over the course of the coming months, President Roosevelt would oversee the extension of the Pan-American Security Zone and approve increased American support of the use of the convoy system and armed escorts for Britain-bound cargo vessels. Once the Nation plunged into the war after the surprise Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, the Battle of the Atlantic began to increase and the Atlantic coastline, as the wolf-packs of German submarines began to steam close to the United States to pursue their prey of merchant vessels of the Allied war effort, became the scene of myriad



The "*Student Prince II*", as viewed from the port with her decks awash. Drawing by the author based on a photograph featured in the March 31, 1941 issue of *Life Magazine*.

maritime disasters and tragedies.

Despite the gathering storm clouds on the horizon of the future, the skipper and crew of the *Student Prince II*, on March 18th, 1941, had escaped one of the last great gales of the season. Captain Smith and one of his crewmen awaited in New York City for orders from the freighter's owners, while the remaining seven men of the *Student Prince II* boarded a flight bound for Boston on March 19th, 1941. The men - Robert Zinck, Dawson Beck, Gerald Mossman, Calvin Himmelman, Ambrose D'Entremont, and George Killam - adorned in heavy winter coats and carrying the bulk of their worldly possessions stuffed in their sea-bags and trunks that had been hastily stowed aboard the Coast Guard lifeboats, were thankful to be heading home having narrowly escaped death at the hands of the year's last winter storm. The *Student Prince II*, unlike her skipper and crew, did

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In Our Waters

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not survive the storm and was eventually declared a total loss. As the storm finally passed from the northeast, Captain Smith, sullen and dejected at the loss of the wooden freighter, returned home awaiting his next command. Two days after the *Student Prince II* had gone ashore off Fire Island in the deadly winter storm of March 17-18th 1941, Spring of 1941 had official arrived, but a lion of a storm, this time man-made appeared on the horizon and was bound, in due time, for arrival in our waters.

¹ A ninety-year old woman who was attending the St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York City, was knocked clear off her feet by the forty-mile an hour winds and suffered a broken hip and a fractured skull. No deaths were reported due to the storm in New York City on March 17, 1941.

² John W. Midgett, BMC of the Fire Island Coast Guard Station, was quickly identified by many within the press as a possible member of a long-line of heroic lifesavers of the U.S. Coast Guard and her predecessor serv-



Safely ashore at Bayshore - Robert Zinck, Dawson Beck, Gerald Mossman, Calvin Himmelman, Ambrose D'Entremont, and George Killam (left to right) - six of the nine man crew of the "Student Prince II" pose for a press photographer. (Author's Collection)

About the Author

Adam M. Grohman is a researcher, author, and chief diver of the Underwater Historical Research Society based on Long Island, New York. His most recent publication is *Presidential Plunge - Theodore Roosevelt, the Plunger Submarine, and the United States Navy* which chronicles Roosevelt's descent aboard the *Plunger* submarine in the waters of the Long Island Sound and his lifelong support of the United States Navy. He is also the author of seven research publications including *Claimed by the Sea - Long Island Shipwrecks, Runner Aground - The Story of the William T. Bell, Non Liquet - The Bayville Submarine Mystery*, and two novellas. For more information about this vessel, the various research projects of the UHRS, and to order any of his books, please visit www.uhrs.org.

ices. "John W. Midgett, who hails from Stumpy Point on the Main, about twenty-five miles back of Gull Shoals on the Banks, explained, 'I can't rightly claim relationship with the other Midgetts of the service, although I know that I am related to other Midgetts on the Banks whom I haven't ever met. You see, we are more a tribe than a family, a tribe linked up by the service.'" Midgett was referring of course to the legacy of the Midgett clan who from the earliest days of the nation had braved raging surf and hellish conditions to rescue countless souls in peril along the coasts of the United States, especially on the Outer Banks of North Carolina - the Graveyard of the Atlantic. The history of the Midgetts of the United States Coast will be covered in depth in an upcoming edition of the Sentinels and Saviors Series also featured in *Long Island Boating World Magazine*.

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