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LOST AND FOUND

Eight survivors were now in the ocean, in the dark beside the 5,000-ton freighter slowly slipping past them. Sullivan screamed for a lifeboat to be lowered. From somewhere above a voice shouted that the lifeboat couldn't be lowered. Sullivan then hollered, "Throw some heaving lines or some lifebuoys or belts." There was no reply.

Rescue had to come quickly. At 32 degrees Fahrenheit (-0.1 degrees Celsius), it was almost cold enough to form ice. Ocean water freezes at 29 degrees Fahrenheit (around -1.7 degrees Celsius) because of its salinity. The air temperature was 28 degrees Fahrenheit (-2.2 degrees Celsius). No one would last long.

As soon as he surfaced, Himmelman immediately recognized that to survive, he had to get clear of the *Esmond* and move away from the other men bunched together and shouting for help. Himmelman thought one man was dragging him down and gave him a little shove; from then on all he did was try to keep himself afloat.

Sullivan didn't see the lifebelts that were thrown from the *Esmond's* deck. They were supposed to have working lights on them but didn't. Sullivan and Himmelman could not tell how many men made it off the wreck or identify all who did. Himmelman recognized some. He later remembered hearing the voices of Carleton Dempsey and Claude Martin right alongside him among others. They were about 30 feet (9 metres) from the side of the steamer. It glided by.

Sullivan tried to swim behind the freighter in a desperate but hopeless effort to catch up to it. As the ship passed him, Sullivan noticed there was no whirl or thrash from its propeller. Himmelman wasn't sure if the propeller was turning but, just in case it was, he swam wide of the ship's stern to be clear of the wash.

Sullivan saw and instantly recognized the light flashing at Chebucto Head. He spotted a few scraps of wood — debris from the *Hebridean* — and prayed they might keep him afloat, but the splinters were too small to support him. He grabbed what looked like a short piece of two-by-four and kept it under one arm, paddling and shouting every now and then to let them know he was still there. Himmelman finally snagged a heavy piece of rail from the wreck, hung on with one hand and paddled with the other.

Both men were in good physical condition. Himmelman had always been a very strong swimmer. In the summer, he could swim for hours at a time in the warm ocean waters between Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. That night, though, he quickly realized that he would not last long in the frigid Atlantic and decided to ease up and just hold himself.

Sullivan was a lean man of average height and very strong with a powerful voice. A man of deep faith, between his shouts, he prayed nonstop to the Virgin Mary. In the blackness and freezing ocean, Himmelman could hear his fellow pilot's pleas. They gave comfort and hope to the big man from Lunenburg.

The *Esmond* was still moving forward, bringing the trio in the dory to the stern. Hayes thought the *Esmond* moved slowly but Edward MacLaughlin and Walter Power, the men on the oars, disagreed and felt it moved faster than the pilot's estimate. They didn't need to row around the stern: the steamer passed them. Just about that time, Captain

Davitt ordered his ship astern and the water churned from the propeller. Hayes warned the boatmen to stay clear of its wash. Momentum carried the *Esmond* a little farther before it stopped. Once the dory reached the freighter's port side, it was impossible to row beyond the funnel toward the bow to search for survivors. The boatmen also sensed they were fighting a current too strong for them to advance. Hayes saw the red and white lights at the top of the *Hebridean's* masts disappear and told the boatmen, "She is gone."

They couldn't see anyone in the water. They didn't hear the shouts. Then came grim news from a sailor on the *Esmond's* deck above them. Walter Power recalled the moment, "We heard some fellow cry out on board the ship, 'The boat has gone with seven or eight men in it,' and we pulled to the other side. The pilot said he wanted to go aboard the ship." So, the trio in the dory abandoned their search, unaware their shipmates were fighting for their lives hundreds of yards behind the ship. While they were on the port side, Hayes did not see any lifebelts in the water. None of the men in the water had seen the dory.

After five to ten minutes in the water, Sullivan was numb and nearing the end. "The water was so cold that in a few minutes I had no arms and legs," he described. "They were there, I just couldn't use them." Then Sullivan thought he spotted a lifebuoy, so he started to swim toward it.

Himmelman spotted the same lifebuoy and also tried to swim to it, but he wasn't the only one. He remembers being terrified of the other men in the water and turned away from the lifebuoy, afraid that one of them would take a hold of him and drag him down under the water.

Without lifebelts, the men struggled to keep their heads above water. Two seemed doomed the moment they leapt into the ocean. James Renner and Roy Purcell were fully

dressed in heavy woollen clothing that, when saturated, was like wearing chain mail. Weight, hypothermia and exhaustion quickly sealed their fate, and time was running out for the others. They were now about 1,200 feet (366 metres) behind the stern of the *Esmond*. Sullivan heard men around him shouting and kept shouting himself as long as he had the strength.

It didn't take long for Walter Power and MacLaughlin to row back around to the *Esmond's* starboard. It was easier for them now to row up the starboard, the lee side of the ship, where the water was smoother. Davitt had the ship's engines stopped before the trio reached the pilot's ladder. As they prepared to climb it, they thought they heard good news. Tupper Hayes recalled thinking that the men aboard the *Esmond* said, "Your crew is saved." The three in the dory mistakenly thought that a man on deck coughing was a survivor spitting up sea water. When Hayes and the boatmen stepped onto the freighter's deck, they saw some of its crew launch a lifeboat. Just as it reached the water, one of the *Hebridean's* survivors screamed somewhere astern of the ship on the port side, and rescuers headed off in that direction.

Himmelman saw the *Esmond's* lifeboat being launched and tried to shout to the rescuers but could not speak. He tried again and, "All of a sudden, something like a second strength came in me and my voice came back and got louder and louder."

What he didn't know was that the crew in the lifeboat was battling to keep it afloat. In the rush to launch it, no one remembered to plug the drain hole in the bottom. It went unnoticed until the boat was on the ocean. As water poured in, precious time was lost as the rescuers fished for the plug and inserted it. The boat, now half filled with water, was slowed. Rescuers knew that if they stopped to bail, they

would not be able to save the men so they continued rowing. Himmelman believed that some men died because of it.

In the darkness, Himmelman and Sullivan could not see the others around them and so did not know how many were still alive. They were only able to recognize survivors by their voices, and it became apparent the sea was taking them. Himmelman recalled, “The men seemed to disappear one by one, but I could still hear voices. There must have been three or four men afloat. Many had survived until minutes before rescue. I saw them and heard them shouting all around me after the pilot boat sank. Some of them didn’t last very long but many of them stayed up quite a while. I heard them struggling but every few minutes there was a little less disturbance in the water, and I knew what that meant — one more had gone and then another and then another.”

Sullivan remembered, “There were others shouting right up until about three or four minutes before we were picked up about a quarter of a mile from the scene. Just a suit of underwear isn’t very warm.”

By the time the *Esmond’s* lifeboat reached the survivors, only three men were left: Sullivan, Himmelman and Claude Martin. Rescuers went to Sullivan first and dragged him into the boat. His condition was extreme. He was so cold he lost his sight in the dark. He remembered seeing the oars of a boat, hearing voices and feeling himself being pummelled around. There is no way to know for sure what would have happened had rescuers arrived even half a minute later. When they hauled him into the boat, Sullivan was unconscious and so far gone, they thought he was dead. They took Sullivan in the boat and laid him on his back in the water. They didn’t want to see a corpse, so they threw a tarp over him.

Next, they went to Claude Martin. He was the youngest of the men. He was strong but still it was a miracle that he lasted

as long as he did. He had broken an arm three weeks earlier and it was still in a splint. He was only able to swim a few strokes. As rescuers approached him, his head was barely above water. Himmelman, struggling to save himself, watched his friend's final moments. He said, "Before they got there, he was under the water, and they reached down and attempted to grab his hair but did not get hold of him and he kept going down and drowned." Himmelman judged they should have gone to Martin first. Martin was the last of the *Hebridean's* men to die.

Himmelman was so cold and exhausted he almost surrendered to the sea but convinced himself to keep his head above water. Seeing the boat coming gave him courage. The numbness made it near impossible to control his body but he was determined to hold out. His last memory before passing out was men grabbing hold of him. Himmelman was such a big man that every time they struggled to haul him into the lifeboat, it took in more water, so the mate tied a rope around his body under his arms and lashed him to the boat. Again, the rescuers thought they had recovered a dead body.

At 11:50 p.m., about the time the rescuers pulled Himmelman and Sullivan out of the ocean, Davitt was in the ship's radio room dictating a message for the Department of Transport. It went through Camperdown Station and relayed to Ottawa. It read: "Have just collided with pilot boat. Has sunk. Try to pick up men."

The news travelled like an electric shock to Halifax. Pilot William Power and his family were asleep in their Halifax home when the phone rang. His son Robert remembered what his older sister told him years later, "The phone was downstairs, and the bedrooms were upstairs. So, the old man went down to answer the phone in the middle of the night, of course, and my sister said he was comin' up the stairs and was sayin', 'The boat's gone, and they're all gone with her.'"

The crash had occurred a little more than thirty minutes before William received the call. He knew every person in the pilotage service and who was assigned to the *Hebridean* that week, but with continuous pilot assignments, he didn't know who was aboard at the moment of the collision. Aside from news of the sinking, no other details were available. No one aboard the *Esmond* or onshore yet knew that two men had been rescued because the lifeboat crew was still rowing back to the freighter with the survivors. William had to be notified immediately about the disaster because it fell to him to round up replacement pilots and a boat crew. Although he would have suspected he lost family, William couldn't be certain who. He was not a close relation to any of the Powers involved with the *Hebridean* that night.

In the lifeboat, the men on the oars were struggling. Himmelman was an unconscious dead weight lashed to one end of the boat, making it difficult to control and slowing the return to the *Esmond*. One man, fearing for his own safety, wanted to cut the unconscious pilot loose. The mate would have none of it and, for the second time, saved Himmelman. The two survivors had been in the water for close to twenty minutes, although it seemed infinitely longer to them.

On the row back, the tarp covering Sullivan provided just enough insulation and warmth to revive him for a few moments. Himmelman also came to for a few seconds as the lifeboat reached the side of the *Esmond* and a rope was tied around him to hoist him aboard the ship. Then, he was out again.

Just after midnight, Friday morning, Sullivan and Himmelman were hauled unconscious to the deck. They were in immediate need of medical help although it was hours away. When he was rescued, Himmelman was still wearing his wristwatch. It had stopped at 11:30 p.m., the

moment the squid and the *Hebridean's* rigging dragged him into the sea. He always kept his watch three minutes fast. That would have put him in the water at 11:27 p.m. and set the time of the collision at 11:25 p.m.

It was no coincidence that Himmelman was wearing his watch. When he climbed into his bunk earlier that evening, he was to go on duty at midnight. In thirty-five minutes, Himmelman would have replaced Renner as acting skipper of the pilot boat.

At 12:05 a.m., forty minutes after the crash, the *Esmond* resumed its entry into Halifax as Hayes piloted the ship through the searched channel. It had been a grim night. Nine men, including six pilots, were dead and their ship, the *Hebridean*, was on the ocean floor.

In over two centuries of marine pilot service in Canada, it remains the worst tragedy and greatest loss of life in the service before and since Confederation.