

Assisting the SS American Importer

By Jay Schmidt, ex RM3 USCGC Duane

On February 16, 1966 the *Duane* was on Ocean Station Bravo. Typically at that time of year, she was buffeting a strong North Atlantic winter storm with cold, fierce winds. White caps and foam flew from the tops of the huge icy swells that bounced the *Duane* as she slowly made headway to remain on station. At about 150 miles east of St. John's, Newfoundland, a 400 foot freighter, the *SS American Importer* was heading for Dublin and Liverpool from New York. It was also being pounded by the heavy seas and 40 mph winds.

The cargo in the hold broke loose, caused a small fire, shifted and smashed a three foot gash in her side allowing seawater to enter. Although the pumps were able to keep up, the captain ordered a distress message sent out. The *Duane* received the message and relayed the information to USCG Radio Washington. The *Duane* was ordered to escort the ship to St. John's, Newfoundland. A USCG C-130 plane flew overhead in case pumps needed to be dropped. The *Duane* charged into the 20 foot seas and headed towards the crippled freighter at about 8 knots. During the trip toward the *American Importer*, the *Duane* "swimmers" got into their wet suits and practiced their routines in case they had to jump in and rescue crewmembers of the *American Importer*.

The *Duane* arrived near the stricken ship in about six hours. Radioman Second Class Rick Moison joked that when the *American Importer* crewmen saw the *Duane* coming over the horizon, they were thinking, "How can we help you?" in reference to the *Duane's* ice-covered condition. Fortunately, the *American Importer*, which was in constant Morse code radio contact with the *Duane*, remained afloat. The *Duane* escorted the *American Importer* safely into St. John's, Newfoundland the next day.

The *American Importer* stayed for repairs, and the *Duane's* crew got one night's unexpected liberty ashore after spending the day breaking ice off all exposed surfaces.