

OPERATION TUGBOAT

U.S.C.G.C. DUANE W 33

Ron Peters RD3
Jack Wright SO2

Afterword by Paul Preston Davis SN

This is the true story of the USCGC Duane's experience on her Air-Sea rescue standby in Bermuda, in January of 1955, as told by the men who lived it.

The story begins on a cold, snowy day in Boston, Mass. It was Jan. 13, 1955 and a good day to be leaving behind the cold weather and to be heading for a vacation in sunny Bermuda. At 1300, we threw off all lines and headed for open sea. In the berthing compartments the crew was in a happy mood thinking of the big times that were to be had in Bermuda. The sea was comparatively calm, and for the next two days the Duane steamed along at 15 knots; at last, at 0900 on the morning of the 15th sighting in the distance the land of sunshine. Disaster struck. We were ordered by COMEASTAREA to proceed to the assistance of the SS MYRTO, a freighter which was low on fuel and needed assistance, and here was Bermuda only seven miles in the distance! The DUANE proceeded to the MYRTO which was 175 miles southeast of our position thus causing quite a letdown for the crew, most of whom had donned undress blues in preparation for entering port, but this was our job and it had to be done. At this point, the commanding officer, LCDR S. G. Carkeek informed the crew of his plans. LCDR Carkeek had taken command of our vessel due to the hospitalization of our Captain, V.F. Tydlacka, in Boston.

En route to the MYRTO the seas were comparatively rough. Quartermaster of the watch was logging a number six sea but luckily for us, the seas were off our stern which made the ship ride much easier. Still, quite a few of the new seamen were seasick. At 2125 ship's time we arrived alongside the MYRTO. Through communication with the ship we gained that she was low on fuel and that the SS WHITE RIVER, a tanker belonging to the same company, was proceeding toward the MYRTO to try to refuel her. At the same time she also inquired as to our horsepower and to the type of towing equipment we had on board. The CGC BIBB, which was standing by the MYRTO, accepted our offered relief and departed for her home port of Boston. COMEASTAREA ordered the DUANE to standby the MYRTO until the WHITE RIVER arrived on the scene. While awaiting the tanker another message was received in our radio shack. This message told of another distressed vessel, the SS GALLOWAY, which had a bent propeller shaft coupler and was also low on fuel. The GALLOWAY was approximately 100 miles southeast of the MYRTO and still further away from Bermuda. This, of course, posed a more complex problem for COMEASTAREA. Should the DUANE proceed to the aid of the second vessel and trust that the WHITE RIVER could handle the MYRTO, or wait for the tanker to arrive and hope that the GALLOWAY could manage by itself for at least another day. Finally it was decided we should attempt to assist the tanker if she should need help in her refueling attempt. All through the night a constant radar watch was maintained in the MYRTO and the crew kept its eye peeled for the tanker which was plowing through the increasingly heavy seas toward our position. At 1000 on the morning of the 16th, the WHITE RIVER was picked up on our scope. Our CO, seeing the weather conditions were growing steadily worse and that the MYRTO was rolling and pitching heavily, decided we would not be able to leave for the GALLOWAY until something definite was decided as to whether the tanker dared to get close enough to try to refuel in the heavy seas. It turned out the tanker elected to take the MYRTO in tow rather than risk a collision.

At 1600 on the same afternoon, the DUANE set course southeast, and with all possible speed, proceeded to her newest assignment. We were informed that a commercial tug, the EDMOND J. MORAN, had been hired by agents to assist the GALLOWAY, and it had already left New York for our position. As the tug was not due for at least three days and the GALLOWAY had some fuel on board, it was decided we would escort her to a rendezvous point with the MORAN. For two and one-half days, we plodded through the sea at a bare five knots trying to eke as much mileage as possible out of the scant fuel supply remaining on board the GALLOWAY. En route to the rendezvous point, we received word from the WHITE RIVER that the MYRTO was safely in tow after having parted two towing hawsers. But our troubles had just begun. Another distress, the SS BIBOLINI, an Italian freighter, radios that she ran low on fuel and requests a Coast Guard Cutter, or a tug out of Bermuda, to come and take her in tow. COMEASTAREA takes control of this vessel. At 2000 on the 16th, the tug CABLE was dispatched from Key West, Florida, to come to the aid of the BIBOLINI. All the while the barometer was dropping and the seas picking up. By this time most of the boys were pretty happy because we thought for sure, now we'd make Bermuda. How wrong we were. Noon on the 17th found us about 200 miles from Bermuda, still poking along seemingly with not a care in the world except for the GALLOWAY which was off our port beam at about three miles. The master of the GALLOWAY radioed that he had a badly bruised hand and, thinking it may be broken, wanted to know if we had a doctor aboard. As we do not carry a doctor except in the case of a far northern patrol, we referred the case to our corpsman. Not having seen the injury, he could not very well tell the master of the GALLOWAY what was wrong with it, so he radioed back to tell the man to apply a splint so as to immobilize the hand. This was done and no further mention of the hand has been made. Along about three o'clock on the same afternoon, Ensign Manny Rosenfield, the OOD on the bridge, received word that the MORAN tug expected to reach us at daybreak on the 19th. Thinking this would be welcome news for the master and crew of the GALLOWAY, Mr. Rosenfield asked his CIC team, on watch at the time, to give him a course and speed so that we could close in on the GALLOWAY and talk to her over our bullhorn. In about 15 seconds the CIC gang came through and we proceeded to close the other ship. As we drew alongside about 300 yards the CO came up to the bridge and asked the GALLOWAY, "How much fuel do you have aboard?" The answer was about 100 barrels of oil or enough for about 48 hours. The Officers and men of the DUANE were glad to hear this because they knew the GALLOWAY would be able to get along at her meager speed until the tug MORAN arrived on the scene; this meant that no time would have to be lost in towing the GALLOWAY until the tug relieved us. But, as written before, this was by no means the end for us; in fact, the end was nowhere in sight.

At 1630 on the 18th, we received a radio message from our Headquarters in Washington stating the SS MAPLE HILL was low on fuel and desired a tow into Bermuda. The COAST GUARD AIR DETACHMENT in Bermuda radioed back there just weren't any tugs available at that time to go to her aid. She was too far away from our position so we could not be of much help to her; besides, we had to stay with the GALLOWAY until the MORAN arrived. About five minutes later another message came into radio central stating that the SS ARLESIANA, which was approximately 30 miles away from our rendezvous with the MORAN tug, had run out of fuel. A message from COMEASTAREA was not long in the following. In this message we were told to proceed to and tow the ARLESIANA into Bermuda. We waited until the MORAN arrived at the rendezvous and had a line on the GALLOWAY before we left for the ARLESIANA. Now the real job had begun. Our deck force ran out our brand new, 3800 dollar, 12 inch hawser in preparation for the towing of the ARLESIANA. Anyone who has ever been on a ship knows what kind of a job running a 12 inch hawser out on deck and flaking it down on the fantail is, but our deck force came through with flying colors. By the time we reached the ARLESIANA the hawser was lying on deck, along with 700

feet of messenger and the other assorted lines which would be put into use during the operation. At 0900 on the 19th, we were along side the ARLESIANA and were making preparations to take her in tow. At this time, we were notified by the MORAN that she had a line on the GALLOWAY. At 1030 we had the ARLESIANA in tow thanks to the able leadership of George Sousa, our first class Boatswain's Mate. Although we had weather reports from Bermuda stating that gale warnings were being posted in our area, the line played out nicely and we went along towing the ship at approximately five knots. In the next hour the seas and wind had built up so our tow was pitching heavily and by midnight we were logging a number six sea and a wind force of nine. The barometer dropped 27 points in one hour and we knew that we were in for it.

Meanwhile, we received word the CGC BARATARIA, manning ocean weather station ECHO, had departed her patrol and was headed to the MAPLE HILL at 18 knots. She was to stand by her and await the arrival of the FOUNDATION JOSEPHINE, a tug out of Halifax Nova Scotia, which was on her way to the MAPLE HILL to tow her into Bermuda. The boys on the ship began to wonder where all the ships were going to be put in St. George Harbor. Talk began circulating around that we would never get to Bermuda and the CO had said that since the crew had their civilian clothes aboard and would have no opportunity to wear them, the next Sunday we would be allowed to wear civvies on deck. This of course was pure scuttlebutt.

At midnight the wind hit us, driving ahead of it a tremendous rain squall. The whole ship rocked with the violence of the storm; the rain utterly pounded down, and the wind screamed like a banshee building the already angry seas up still higher until we were taking water over the bow with every pitch. It was hard to maintain footing. The interior of the ship was in a shambles as gear flew all over the place, water seeping under the hatches made any kind of walking on the wet decks suicide. At 0300 the worst happened. The Boatswain's Mate of the Watch, Al Ross, while making his rounds of the deck reported the ARLESIANA had drifted up our port side and was passing us going downwind stern first. The CO was notified immediately and went down to the towing bitt to check the hawser. As he got there he noticed that the hawser was starting to part. He ordered the fantail cleared of all men, including the hawser watch. No more than five minutes later a large swell picked the DUANE up, at the same time catching the ARLESIANA full on the bow. The hawser stretched out like a tight rope and then parted with a loud crack setting the ARLESIANA adrift at the mercy of the howling sea. The radar men were told to maintain a continuous plot of the ARLESIANA as she did not know that the line had parted. Meanwhile the WHITE RIVER radioed that she had the MYRTO in tow but that she could not make any headway due to the terrific storm. A short while later we received a call on 2670 kcs, the Coast Guard working frequency, from the tug MORAN reporting that the motors on her towing capstans had burned out, the cable was slipping and she had no way to take up the slack in it. Her cable might run all the way out before long, and she would have to let the GALLOWAY go. If this should happen, the GALLOWAY would not be able to retrieve the cable because she had no power and could not get up steam to operate the winches. She would be a dead ship. She asked if it would be at all possible for the Duane to stand by her until the tug, which was unable to come about in the heavy seas for fear of capsizing, could return to her aid. At 2035 we were informed that the tug, FOUNDATION JOSEPHINE, had suffered heavy damage in the severe storm and was forced to return to Halifax. So the Dutch tug GELE DEE was dispatched from the Azure Islands to go to the MAPLE HILL's aid. At 2050 the GALLOWAY broke loose from the MORAN. She had no lights and was virtually a dead ship. The tug could then do nothing but continue her present heading and let her charge drift aimlessly at the mercy of the sea. This left the DUANE with two ships to watch over. We sent out to all ships in the vicinity, the position of the GALLOWAY, the fact that she had no lights, and that she was drifting North in the sea currents. In the meantime, the sea played havoc with us. The waves were breaking over the main deck at such impact our number three boat, the Captain's gig, was torn loose

from its cables and set diagonally across the cradle. The men of the deck force were roused from their racks in the middle of the night to fix the problem and found it was no easy job as the ship was pitching and rolling heavily. The task was finally completed after an hour and a half of hard, precarious work.

Meanwhile, COMEASTAREA contacted us and asked to find what parts the MORAN would need to repair the towing motor. We asked the tug and she answered that she would need enough parts to rebuild the whole motor plus another two inch steel wire pennant. COMEASTAREA asked about the motor so that parts could be obtained and flown to Bermuda. As it turned out, the MORAN did manage to rig a makeshift device so that she was able to regain her tow later.

The DUANE was now standing by, unable to do a thing in the heavy seas, watching the two vessels drift helplessly apart, 14 miles from each other. A continuous radar plot was maintained on both ships so that we would not stray outside of radar range. The six GIG watch-standers did their job well in keeping the bridge informed of the whereabouts of the ships at all times. Then came more bad news, we received word that the WHITE RIVER was making no headway into the sea and her cable had just parted setting still another ship, the MYRTO, adrift in the holocaust. Dawn found the MYRTO drifting precariously south at four knots. She wired us and asked if we could possibly come along alongside and take her crew on board our vessel. The officers had elected to stay aboard alone until a rescue ship arrived. Our CO radio back that this would be impossible because we had to stay with the ARLESIANA and the GALLOWAY. He also advised to keep their crew on board to handle the hawser if the WHITE RIVER had attempted to regain her tow.

On the 21st at 1037, storm warnings were lowered in Bermuda. This had not affected our area as yet. We were still logging number eight seas and the wind was blowing from the WNW at gale velocities. Constant visual watch, when possible, was maintained on our two charges as they were both pitching and rolling heavily. We wanted to make sure they did not collide, founder, or break up. As it was, both ships were empty of all cargo and were pretty high out of the water so they rode out the storm well.

At this time the CGC COOS BAY, a cutter out of Portland, Maine, en route to ocean station ECHO to relieve the BARATARIA of the station duties, was detoured by COMEASTAREA and ordered to proceed to the assistance of the WHITE RIVER which was standing by the MYRTO. The COOS BAY reported her to-speed was seven knots due to the weather conditions in her area. At 1300 of the same day we learned the tug CABLE was close to the BIBOLINI and the news relieved us; one less ship to have to worry over. The BARATARIA was then ordered back to ocean station ECHO to await her relief. In a short while we noticed the seas were moderating a bit and we began to hope that on the following morning we would be able to regain our tow.

The morning of the 22nd dawned bright and cheery, the seas having moderated sufficiently for us to attempt to tow the ARLESIANA. At 1000, the quartermaster of the watch was told to pipe all hands to the quarterdeck to help handle the 12 inch hawser. As the ARLESIANA had most of our hawser aboard, our job was to send a line over to her and retrieve it. We made four attempts at dropping a line on her deck with our line throwing guns but all four attempts fell short. The men on the other ship then decided they would try to get a line to us via their line throwing gun which was shaped like a small cannon, and capable of shooting a line a lot further than our M1 rifles. They made a hit the first time and we commenced pulling the messenger in. The men on the ARLESIANA cut the line loose, causing the whole thing to fall into the water, taking with it our 12 inch hawser flaked out on the other ship's deck. As all the lines and the hawser fell into the water, the messenger parted, dropping the hawser into the ocean. Luckily for us the men of the other ship had the fore site to attach the hawser to their five inch wire rope so we did not lose it. This was the situation that faced us in the afternoon: get a line over to the other ship and have her connect a shackle onto her cable

so we would be able to pull our hawser, currently hundreds of feet below the surface of the water, and the wire rope aboard our ship. Again we attempted to drop a line on her deck and again our efforts were fruitless. The crew on the other ship was forced to fire its cannon again. We got the line and made it fast. We attached our messenger to it and the crew of the ARLESIANA started pulling it in by hand as they had no power on their winches. Our eight inch hawser was attached to the messenger and it was taken aboard the other ship with comparative ease. The men on the DUANE saw a feat of seamanship that was unlikely to be surpassed for some time. A member of the freighter's crew went over the bow on a Jacob's ladder. While virtually hanging by his teeth, he attached our eight inch hawser to the cable which was hanging over the bow of his ship. Our crew then started to heave around the hawser and was doing fine until the hawser was almost all aboard. Then it happened. The eight inch parted, dropping all the cable and hawser into the sea. We informed the ARLESIANA of this and told them that we could make another attempt in an hour. At 1500 the DUANE made her third approach of the day on the ARLESIANA, and the men went through the same procedure as before, the same seamen on the other ship going down the Jacobs ladder and attaching a new shackle to the cable. Here we had more trouble. The hawser developed a snag and would not slide down the cable to where we would be able to pull it up. After much tugging and straining by the crew and a lot of work by the Officers on the bridge in pulling the ship ahead and backing her down, the snag was finally untangled and the shackle slid down the cable to the hawser. We heaved around and got the most part of the eight inch hawser on deck.

The CO went aft to the quarterdeck to supervise the job of bringing the twelve inch aboard. While he was there, the eight inch took a sudden strain and whipped back and fourth hitting the CO flush on the right side of his body, he was knocked unconscious. He was not the only casualty however; a seaman apprentice named Alexander Rogers was hit full in the face by the snapping hawser, and suffered lacerations and contusions of the right eye, nose, and mouth. Reeling away from the blow he struck his head on the depth charge racks, receiving still another wound on the back of his head. He was taken to sickbay delirious with pain and in a state of shock. Ens. Clyde Lusk, the first Lt., was also hit across the stomach with the hawser but luckily was only bruised. The CO, still unconscious, was placed on the starboard side of the main deck in a stoke's litter. It took a good five minutes for him to come-to. When he did regain consciousness he got up out of the stretcher against the advice of the corpsman and said that he was alright. Later that evening however he was noticed on the bridge walking with a pronounced limp.

By 1900 all was secure and the telephone talker reported that the fantail was securing for towing. We had 250 feet of our twelve inch hawser out which was attached by a first class shackle to the ARLESIANA's 700 foot wire rope. The OOD ordered forty turns on each shaft to prepare the ship for the towing job. He increased to fifty turns, then sixty. Still the twelve inch was lying on the deck with no strain on it. It was pitch dark and we could not see the other ship at all to determine how far she was from us. Mr. Lusk still on the quarterdeck asked the bridge for a radar range to the ARLESIANA. The radar range was 1500 yards. Obviously something had parted somewhere and, sure enough, when we pulled the hawser back up on deck we saw the worst. The shackle had been bent as if by some giant hand, and had allowed the cable to slip out. We decided to wait until morning to resume operations.

At 2030 the Duane radioed to COMEASTAREA that our third attempt to tow the ARLESIANA had failed. We were informed that agents of the ARLESIANA'S company had made arrangements for the tug DAUNTLESS to come out of New York to pick up the ship. At the same time we were informed that the tug RESCUE had left Miami Florida, to aid the MYRTO. We relayed to COMEASTAREA that we would not make any more attempts to tow the ARLESIANA, but even though this message was sent in we were destined to try again.

At 0822 on the 23rd, the WHITE RIVER reported to the COOS BAY that weather conditions were now favorable enough to attempt refueling the MYRTO. Headquarters wired back that if the WHITE RIVER could refuel the MYRTO, and no emergency existed, she, the COOS BAY, could proceed to her assigned duty, the relieving of ocean station ECHO. All morning our deck force worked like beavers to get all the kinks out of the 12 inch hawser and at noon the job was finally completed. All that was left to be done was to repair the thimble which had taken a bad beating when the shackle sprung. It had to be taken to the DC shack, heated, and bent back into shape. Most of the crew had the afternoon to themselves, their first time off in a week. Our two first class boatswain's mates took upon themselves the task of splicing a new wyw into the hawser. This was no easy task and it took both men the most part of the afternoon to finish the job. The weather was beautiful for a change, visibility was about 15 miles, the sun was hot, and the sea was flat. It was a good day to resume towing operations. The crew said that they wouldn't mind working on a Sunday if it would mean getting to Bermuda any earlier, but as repairs were needed on most of our lines, we could not make another attempt to tow the ARLESIANA at that time.

During the day, Al Rogers was seen on deck getting a little sun, and said that he felt pretty good. The right side of his face was swollen badly and his eye was a dark purple. He had suffered no ill effects from the blow he received and Mr. Lusk said that he just ached a little in a few spots. The CO was OK now too. All in all, these men were very lucky, for the accident could have developed into something much more serious. A watch was maintained on the ARLESIANA all day as she drifted about, two miles off our bow. For us it was a day of much needed rest.

On the 24th, at 0830, we made another attempt to take the stricken vessel in tow. However, there were just the men on the fantail needed to do the job. No confusion, no one hurt. The first shot line fell across the ARLESIANA's foc'sle with ease and the messenger was led out with our hawser attached. In no time at all the hawser was connected to the wire rope. The DUANE took a slight strain on the tow line. At last, we had the ARLESIANA in tow. All day long we made our way across the broad Atlantic, both ships riding gently in the light swell. We radioed the DAUNTLESS that we had the ARLESIANA in tow and had set course for Bermuda, making five knots good. We were expected to rendezvous with the tug sometime the morning of the 26th. The fact that the ship was now in tow was a big morale builder for the crew. Once again we looked forward to our "Vacation in Bermuda." BUT WHO KNOWS WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

Afterword by Paul Preston Davis SN

As we left Ron and Jack on January 24, 1955, all hands were expecting a tug rendezvous on the 26th. However, as happens all too frequently good deeds have a way of being punished and Ron and Jack's writing effort was not to be the exception. Following their reprimands all hands were advised at quarters that no one was authorized to use the ships office, mimeograph machine, typewriter, etc. without permission from Watkins the warrant pay clerk. Having already received a copy of Operation Tugboat and being duly impressed, I decided to keep my own record of the remaining days along with a few pictures. My record is modest and begins on Tuesday, January 25, 1955. Today we (the deck force) proceeded to repair the damaged hawser with a long splice on the 12" and a new eye splice awarded the 8". The weather was excellent, however, a storm was forecast for evening. Well, the storm arrived and we received notice that the GALLOWAY had again broken loose from her tug. The tug would have to go to Bermuda pick up a new hawser, have its winch repaired and return again to the GALLOWAY. They were about 60 miles from Bermuda and we roughly 160 miles. In the meantime the DUANE was advised to standby until the tug returned.

Wednesday the 26th, received word that tug for GALLOWAY had arrived in Bermuda 0600. We lost considerable time last night because of rising winds and constant course changes to maintain our tow so she wouldn't come abeam. GALLOWAY'S tug ETA tomorrow 0100. This evening received distress signal from a Military Air Transport plane that they were preparing to ditch. Heading for ocean station ECHO they had started to drop cargo. There was a possibility she would go down near us so preparations were made to cut loose our tow. However at 1900 we were advised the plane had gone down close to the COOSE BAY near ECHO. All hands had survived the crash/landing. We were then advised that after our tow had been passed to proceed to ECHO, pick up the airmen and proceed to Bermuda.

Thursday the 27th, at 0600 the deck force was piped to handle the towing hawser and at 0735 we finally waved good-bye to the ARLESIANA. We lowered our flag and the Italian ship lowered theirs. Our crewman was a little slow and ended up writing "How to dip colors." Also, one of our Chiefs had injured his hand with a screw driver and was writing "How to use a screw driver." The hawsers are laying on the quarter deck and we are maintaining speed.

Friday the 28th, received word that Captain Tydlacka is in Bermuda waiting. Held the usual daily gunnery drill, quarterly firing fast approaching. Arrived at ECHO 2230 with rough seas, will transfer airmen from COOS BAY at daybreak.

Saturday the 29th, sent gig to pick up airmen, seas rough to moderate. Airmen considered seas too rough and asked to hold off. The boats crew consisting of one Ensign, two 2nd Class Boatswain Mates and one Engineer returned to the DUANE. By 1300 the ocean had begun to moderate. It was decided that the COOS BAY would conduct the transfer with their boat. All eight airmen were safely brought aboard and we were headed for Bermuda.

Sunday the 30th, hold on...another emergency...the schooner HSH headed for Atigua has been reported overdue and an air force plane has reported possible wreckage and two blobs appearing to move. The Duane is on its way to search the area. Our newest friend looks something like this...60 feet, black hull, natural deck topping, green deckhouse with seven persons aboard. Meanwhile, one of the airmen ventured to the mess deck to mingle with the deckhands. He reported the reason for ditching was a broken fuel line, had great praise for the pilot and the COOS BAY rescue team and was immensely impressed with the nighttime ocean runway lighting laid down by the COOS BAY (remember those night ditching exercises). There were no major injuries and the plane stayed afloat for a couple hours.

Monday the 31st, reached our area of search 0900. We are in an area south east of Bermuda not too far from Barbados. Started our search pattern consisting of the expanding square. Norwegian ship passed and by blinker advised of the HSH. Around 1800 we sighted an object and upon hauling aboard found it to be a buoyancy tank filled with kapok. Similar tanks had been used in yachts, schooners, etc., however, after contacting headquarters we were advised that the manufacturer reported it wasn't theirs. Another false alarm, a plane sighted two planks of wood but upon circling lower lost the sighting.

Tuesday February 1, a rare beautiful day, calm sea, sunshine, however, sadly the HSH is presumed lost. The search has been abandoned and we are to head for Bermuda. Before leaving, we will conduct quarterly firing. Today another airman found some of us on the mess deck and shared a little more information. Thoroughly bored, they are quite anxious to depart ship. They first noticed the loss of fuel when it was spotted coming from one of the four engines as a fine misty cloud, difficult to detect. The engine was shut down preventing a greater loss of fuel but they had already lost 350 gallons. At this juncture they had passed their point of return, were low on fuel, desperately channeling the fuel to the engines while trying to maintain their gyro. Knowing their only hope and life line was ocean station ECHO, that's where they set course. We can only imagine how beautiful the cutter COOS BAY must have looked.

Wednesday the 2nd, we arrive in Bermuda to another beautiful day. The seas are calm, we have dropped anchor, the Duane is being refueled, airmen are departing, all are being duly welcomed and liberty is being granted.

The End