

The flotation tanks in the lifeboats kept them afloat, but the crews of the boats had to bail for their lives as fifteen-foot waves nearly swamped the frail craft. The men continuously signalled their position with flares and flashlights as MAITLAND NO. 1 was manoeuvred upwind and then brought down to the boats in an attempt to pass lines to them. Three times the force of the storm swept the ferry past the boats. With great skill, the ferry's commander finally managed to get the two lifeboats under the lee of his ship. Lines were thrown to the men in the boats, and they then cut the ropes which were still leading down to the sunken GERKEN.

Rope ladders were placed over the stern of the MAITLAND NO. 1, the first lifeboat was pulled alongside, and all of the men in it were brought safely onto the ferry. When the second boat was pulled alongside, however, the men in it became excited and five of them jumped for a ladder at the same time. The line became fouled at one end of the lifeboat, and when a large sea tossed the carferry, the lifeboat overturned and five men were thrown into the lake. Howard Gerken was tossed against the side of the ferry. He managed to grab the tail end of a ladder and pull himself up, and the ferry's crew hauled him aboard. The other four men and the overturned lifeboat drifted away in the stormy darkness, with no lights left to signal their position.

MAITLAND NO. 1 remained at the scene while her radio operator signalled frantically for assistance. The passenger steamer SOUTH AMERICAN and the bulk freighter URANUS came to the scene to help search for the missing men, while the 36-foot Coast Guard picket boat and the C.G. 142 put out from Erie. Fishing tugs from Dunkirk, Barcelona and Silver Creek also joined the search. At daybreak, MAITLAND NO. 1 left the area and returned to Ash-tabula with the fifteen survivors of the wreck. She arrived there at 9:30 a.m., August 21st.

The picket boat, under the command of Captain L. G. Seymour, found fireman Herman Wageman about sixteen miles northeast of Erie. He was hauled aboard unconscious, and was taken directly to the Erie Coast Guard station, where the crew worked on reviving him. He had suffered multiple bruises, had swallowed a lot of water, and had suffered greatly from exposure, but he did survive his ordeal, bringing to sixteen the number of men saved.

The URANUS recovered the capsized lifeboat, but saw no sign of survivors. The lifeless body of William Logan, the GERKEN's derrick operator, was recovered by the Union Fish Company's tug TOLEDO on August 25, 1926, eleven miles east by north of Erie. On the 27th, the body of Capt. George McMinn, first mate of the GERKEN, was pulled from the lake about a mile west of Silver Creek. As far as we know, Richard Freeman, a 68-year-old watchman, was never found.

(Two of the men lost with the GERKEN had been shipwrecked earlier in their lives. McMinn had been aboard the forward end of the former passenger ship NORTH WEST when it sank on Lake Ontario on November 28, 1918, bound in tow for salt water. He and several others drifted ashore aboard a raft, but two of the ten men on the steamer's bow section were lost. Richard Freeman had been master of the schooner barge LISGAR, which sank in Lake Huron in 1899 after breaking away from her towing steamer CLINTON. He, his wife, and others clung to the LISGAR's cabin roof, which floated free when the ship foundered, but Mrs. Freeman died of exposure as her husband held her in his arms. The survivors from LISGAR eventually were picked up by the steamer CASE off Thunder Bay Island light.)

The storm that ravaged Lake Erie and claimed HOWARD S. GERKEN caused other ships to run for shelter or ride it out as best they could. The big D & C sidewheeler GREATER BUFFALO, with 849 passengers on board, could not make her stop at Cleveland and ran toward Fairport, where she was held about five miles off shore, seeking some lee; she was five hours late reaching Buffalo. The package freighter NORTH STAR and the bulk freighter JOHN A. DONALDSON both had a hard time of it out on the lake. The NORTH AMERICAN,