

NOVADOC (ii)

- by Ronald F. Beaupre -
with the Editor

We began the story of the ill-starred Paterson steam canaller NOVADOC (ii) in the October issue. Due to space constraints, we had to leave the story at the point, early on the afternoon of November 11, 1940, when the wind shifted and NOVADOC was caught on the lee (east) shore of Lake Michigan. The ship was bound from Chicago, Illinois, for Port Alfred, Quebec, with a cargo of sulphite coke. Her master, Capt. Donald Steip, of Wiarton, realized that NOVADOC would be unable to make it across the lake to shelter under the west shore, and neither, with big waves running, could she make a safe entrance to any of the ports on the east side of the lake. Accordingly, Capt. Steip decided to turn the ship around and let her ride the sea out.

We now take up the account of the events of that Armistice Day, sixty years ago, as told by one of NOVADOC's wheelmen, Lloyd H. Belcher, of Mississauga, Ontario.

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"We sent word down to everyone to stand by as we were going to turn around and we would likely roll heavily. We turned the wheel hard to port and asked for a second ring [on the engineroom telegraph for more power] but the ship just lay in the trough of the seas and rolled. When we saw it wasn't going to turn, we pulled it back again and made the course for just clear of Little Point Sable Light [located ten miles southwest of the piers at Pentwater, Michigan].

"As the waves grew bigger we started to ship water over the stern. At four o'clock, I saw we were really in danger and the waves were washing right over her decks. At six o'clock, my partner came up and took the wheel from me but I remained up with the mates and Captain in case there was anything to be done. About 6:30, we noticed No. 3 hatch tarpaulin beginning to rip so the mate took the wheel and my partner and I went down and, with the watchman and deck hands, we managed to nail a board on over the rip which would be about eight feet long. As soon as we had done that we told all the boys to stand by for further orders. We then went back to the wheelhouse after changing our clothes as the seas were washing over top of us. The Captain then decided to turn the ship around for the second time but had no success as the waves were too big.

"Darkness had set in by this time and we were all alone out there with no other ships near us. We had met the ANNA C. MINCH in the afternoon going towards Chicago but we had no idea a big boat like that would go down to the bottom. [The MINCH was lost with all hands in the storm.]

"After trying to turn around for the second time with no success, we then tried to get back again, but we couldn't so we remained in the trough of the sea...

"When we saw we couldn't do anything else, the Captain asked me if I could get down to where the rest of the crew were to tell them each to put on a lifebelt and come up to the wheelhouse. I made my way down to the deck but couldn't get any further. The waves were washing over top of everything so I went back in the Captain's room and pounded on the steel floor until they heard me, so I broke open a porthole, stuck my head out and yelled down for them all to come up to the pilothouse with the lifebelts. After they all came up we watched for the light and the shore. At last the light was spotted straight ahead of us but the seas were so high we could not do anything.

"The Captain put the engine at half speed astern to see if that wouldn't stop us from going on to the shore, but we kept getting closer and closer. From then on we tried in vain to turn the ship around but it was impossible. The waves were just like mountains and the only time we could see the light was when we were on top of a wave. When we got close to the light, the surf