

SIR WILFRID and HERCULES

- by Capt. Gerry Ouderkirk with The Editor -

The dredge which began its ill-fated career as SIR WILFRID in 1902 in the first part of this tale, was renamed P.W.D. NO. 117 in 1913 when it was taken over by the federal Department of Public Works. While working at Port Stanley, Ontario, on May 29, 1952, in the channel only a few feet off the west pier lighthouse, a brake on the main drive wheel sheared off and crashed through the bottom of the dredge. In minutes, P.W.D. NO. 117 was listing and sinking to the bottom in 25 feet of water, carrying down with it veteran skipper Captain John Howell, age 64, of Port Stanley, and William Sweet, aged about 18, a foreman's helper who had been hired on during the previous season.

Interestingly, Port Stanley had almost experienced another disaster the previous day, when a fire caused by an overheated bearing broke out in the pump room of the gasoline-laden tanker TRANSINLAND. Fast-moving crew managed to contain and extinguish the flames which threatened to ignite the 50,000 gallons of gasoline still aboard the vessel. TRANSINLAND suffered only slight damage. The pump was replaced, the balance of the cargo was unloaded, and the vessel departed before dredge 117 sank the next morning.

Capt. Howell was last seen amidships at the dredge controls, trying to lower the steel spuds. He already had raised the spuds and three anchors to allow the tug HERCULES to pull the dredge toward shallower water. The last man to see the captain alive was Harold Brisseau, of Port Burwell who, with George Peaker and Arthur Townsend, tried to plug the hole in the hull using pike poles to stuff sacking and rags into the gap. The water began coming in so fast after HERCULES began towing the dredge that the sacking would not hold, and they wisely gave up and fled for their lives.

William Sweet was on deck when the accident occurred and he could have saved himself, but he went to the rescue of Aubrey (Aube) Redmond, a fireman who was sleeping below. Redmond was awakened and he managed to get off the dredge and onto the attending HERCULES, but Sweet, unable to swim, was swept off his feet and overboard as the main deck submerged. Aube Redmond jumped off the tug to rescue him, and managed to grab Sweet by the sweater, but Sweet slipped out of his grasp and sank. His body was recovered by a dragging crew about an hour after the disaster. He was the only crewman who was not a local, hailing from Saint John, New Brunswick.

Almost immediately after the sinking, a call was sent to Port Rowan for a diver to search for Capt. Howell's body. The dredge sat in 29 feet of water, with some of the upper structure or living quarters and the upper parts of the dredging equipment still above water. Most of the ten crew who escaped to HERCULES and to the fishing tug L. & S. were locals. Mr. and Mrs. George Allward had been cooks on the dredge for many years. Aubrey Redmond was a local. Leonard and Harold Brisseau, Marvin Smythe, James Williams and Arthur Townsend, the chief engineer, were from neighbouring Port Burwell. George Peaker hailed from Tillsonburg, and Blake Lester was from Straffordville. Peter Soloman, the assistant runner, was from Killarney.

Capt. Ace Bartlett, of Straffordville, was in command of HERCULES. He had been master of the tug for 22 years at the time of the accident. HERCULES had towed P.W.D. NO. 117 out to the dredging ground at the harbour mouth early that morning, and then returned to port to fetch a dump scow so that dredging operations could begin. The dredge machinery had just been started when a coupling on the brake drum of the main drive wheel crashed down through the main deck and out through the bottom of the dredge. Capt. Howell ran to lower the spuds while Capt. Bartlett ordered his crew to attach lines to tow the dredge in to the west breakwater, but the dredge sank so quickly that they had to cut the lines to prevent the tug from being dragged down