The SS Edmund Fitzgerald

A Legend in American History

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6/16/2010
The SS Edmund Fitzgerald is perhaps one of the most famous ships in American history, but it is even more popular in Michigan’s history. This ship was designed and built to be the largest ship to reside in Michigan’s Great Lakes. It has often been compared with the Titanic for they share many similarities, and unfortunately, shared the same fate. The ship’s untimely demise is shrouded in mystery and as a result the ship’s legacy has become a story of Michigan legend.

The Edmund Fitzgerald set out from Superior, Wisconsin heading for Detroit, Michigan on November 9, 1975. The ship was carrying 26,000 tons of iron ore pellets. The Edmund Fitzgerald met up with another ship called the Arthur M. Anderson, who was heading for Gary Indiana. They decided to travel together for a time. “By late afternoon on November 10, hurricane-like rains, 75-mile-per-hour winds and 30-foot waves pounded the two boats,” (Rosentreter).

Both ships decided to change course. Instead of following the shorter but more treacherous southern shore of Lake Superior, they decided to go north toward the Canadian shoreline, sailing between the Keweenaw Peninsula and Isle Royale. The northern route promised to protect them from the intense waves until they could cut south toward the safety of Whitefish Bay (Dempsey).

Captain Gerald McSorley of the Edmund Fitzgerald radioed Captain Jesse Copper of the Arthur M. Anderson that his ship was listing, but the pumps were working. The storm had ripped away the Edmund Fitzgerald’s two radar antennas. This forced McSorley to turn the “radio direction finder” to the beacon from the Whitefish Point Light Station, when suddenly it went dead (Rosentreter). This left the ship with no way of telling direction.
The Whitefish Point Light Station is a lighthouse, the oldest on Lake Superior, which lies on an eighty mile stretch of shoreline which is known as “Shipwreck Coast.” During the storm that claimed the Edmund Fitzgerald, the lighthouse’s light and its radio failed. Thanks to this, the ship’s crew was left without a guide in a terrific storm (Edmund Fitzgerald Shipwreck Memorial). With the ships equipment not working, it was to be a horrible hand dealt to the Edmund Fitzgerald.

The two ships had been communicating with each other over the radio during the storm. At 7:10 p.m. on November 10, the Arthur M. Anderson radioed the Edmund Fitzgerald and asked the question: “how are you making out with your problems?” The reply was: “we are holding our own.” That was the last contact they would have. Within minutes of that last conversation, the Edmund Fitzgerald sank. No distress calls were ever sent from the ship (Rosentreter).

Copper last saw the Edmund Fitzgerald near a hard, rocky, shallow area called Six Fathom Shoal. The Edmund Fitzgerald then disappeared from the Arthur M. Anderson's radar screen. The ship immediately called the Coast Guard who launched a search. The storm was still going strong so the coast Guard set out a plea for ships in Whitefish Bay to assist with the search. The Anderson left the safety of the bay to help. The crew of the William Clay Ford also pulled up anchor to offer their assistance. The Canadian ship Hilda Marjanne also tried to help, but the storm forced her back to safety within half an hour (Dempsey).

Even with these ships assisting the Coast Guard, the search only found debris from the Edmund Fitzgerald. Air and water rescue teams from the Coast Guard discovered “flotsam” and a lifeboat from the ship. Four days after the ship disappeared on November 10, an airplane using
special sonar equipment located the remains of the ship at the bottom of Lake Superior. It had settled 530 feet beneath the lake's surface, split in half with the bow upright and the stern upside down (Rosentreter).

The Coast Guard claimed that the Edmund Fitzgerald sank due to “massive flooding of the cargo hold.” They said this happened due to “ineffective hatch closures.” The waves crashed unto the deck of the ship, entering the open hatches and then going into the cargo hold. This caused the bow to pitch down and the ship to drive into a wall of water. The ship was unable to recover and it sank and broke in two (Rosentreter).

Not everyone agreed with the Coast Guard’s assessment. Some said that the ship had scrapped the bottom of Six Fathom Shoal, where it left a hole that immediately began to fill with water. Others claimed that the ship was struck with several large waves which drove the bow of the ship down. With the stern of the ship out of the water, the ship broke in two (Rosentreter). Whether these claims have any basis in fact is unclear, however. The official cause of the ship’s demise was determined by the Coast Guard.

While the official investigation into the sinking may have ended, people’s curiosity did not end. On September 24, 1980, Jacques Cousteau's vessel Calypso sent a submarine to look over the remains. Then again in August 1989 explorers and marine archaeologists used a robot capable of going underwater to explore the wreckage. Due to the public’s growing fascination with the Edmund Fitzgerald, more than four dozen television, newspaper and magazine reporters covered the robot's dive (Dempsey).

There are many reasons why the Edmund Fitzgerald has become an icon out of the six thousand ships that have gone down in the Great Lakes. Thomas Farnquist, executive director of
the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point said: “one (reason) has to do with the time in history when it occurred. With modern navigation techniques and technology, with our sophisticated weather predicting, there's a feeling that the wreck shouldn't have occurred” (Dempsey). The story really haunts people because of the lost chapter. No one really knows what happened aboard the ship in her final moments, and this has caused a lot of speculation.

The ship’s crew of 29 men was lost at sea, 17 miles from Whitefish Point, Michigan. This area is known as the “Graveyard of Ships.” Hundreds of ships lie in the bottom of this bay, including the Edmund Fitzgerald (Edmund Fitzgerald Shipwreck Memorial). Lake Superior is often called "Old Treacherous” due to its violent November storms (Madsen). Others call it the “Witch of November” (Schumacher). The major storms in November are especially deadly as the shipping is usually still heavy in that month and thus affects more ships and people, not to mention the cargo.

The story of the Edmund Fitzgerald starts much earlier than this one fateful storm. Northwestern Mutual Life, a Wisconsin insurance company, announced plans to build “the largest ship ever to sail the Great Lakes,” in 1956. The ship was built near Detroit Michigan, and it was named to honor the insurance company’s president and CEO, Edmund Fitzgerald (Madsen).

The Edmund Fitzgerald was a ship of many firsts. It was the first cargo ship whose construction was ordered by an American life insurance company. Its 25 foot draft and speed of 16 mph made her the most impressive ship to sail the Great Lakes (Schumacher). The Edmund Fitzgerald was 729 feet long, which is as long as two city blocks (Madsen). It was also the first ship to be built through the use of modular components. The ship’s namesake, Edmund
Fitzgerald’s grandfather had been a Great Lakes Captain and many others of his family had also been deeply involved with the shipping industry (Schumacher).

Those that are superstitious believed the ship was ill fated from the beginning because when she was christened, it took three tries to break a bottle across her keel. When launched she slid down the greased ramp at a weird angle, thus entering the water at an awkward angle and causing a huge wave to hit the viewing dock. One of the spectators suffered a heart attack and died (Schumacher).

The bottle not breaking was also attributed to the Titanic, of which the Edmund Fitzgerald was regularly compared, for she was also considered unsinkable. Like the Titanic, the Edmund Fitzgerald was the top of the line for its ship type. From the Captain's cabin to the crews she was state of the art through and through. Also like the Titanic her Captains kept her going strong and broke records for speed and for tonnage hauled on the part of the Fitzgerald. All told, the Edmund Fitzgerald surpassed the million-ton mark six times between 1958 and 1977 (Schumacher).

The ship’s primary purpose was the carrying of taconite pellets which are used to make steel. For many years taconite pellets were considered to be junk, but the depletion of iron ore and an improved smelting process helped the once lowly taconite become a profitable commodity. Ships like the Edmund Fitzgerald moved huge amounts of these pellets through the Great Lakes to ports close to refineries (Schumacher).

Thomas Bentsen was the only crew member of the Edmund Fitzgerald that was from Michigan. His mother worked at a local flower shop. She reported to work as usual since she had not heard the news of the ships sinking, and she did not find out for two days. Her son Tom
worked on the Edmund Fitzgerald to accumulate the hours he needed to become an engineer, soon he would have been an officer. Many others that perished that faithful night were from the Great Lakes area, but Tom of St. Joseph was our only native son (Schumacher).

Ironically two aboard the ship that night had decided it was going to be the end of their careers. Captain McSorely had been talking of retirement so he could spend time with his wife in Toledo. Robert Rafferty also was looking forward to retiring. He was only on this voyage because the normal ships cook had taken sick and couldn't make it. Bob liked working on the Edmund Fitzgerald although because he sent a postcard to his wife saying that he probably would be seeing her soon, some say this shows he had a bad feeling about the voyage (Schumacher).

The Coast Guard has officially claimed the crew as "missing and presumed dead" (Dempsey). No bodies were ever recovered, and many believe that they are still trapped aboard the Edmund Fitzgerald. Most of the families were not interesting in retrieving the bodies for burial. Ruth Hudson, whose only son died that fateful day, said: “That is their grave. We want it recognized as their grave and want it left undisturbed” (Rosentreter). Unfortunately that has not always been the case.

There have been many videos and television programs spotlighting the Edmund Fitzgerald. This has angered many of the family members of the lost crew since these people are repeatedly diving to collect film footage to use. According to Hudson one individual dove down, took pictures of the wreckage, and then proceeded to sell the pictures (Dempsey). This practice upset the families greatly. The families have gained some comfort from the tragedy however.
At the request of the family members of the victims, the 200 pound bronze bell that was aboard the Fitzgerald when it sank was recovered by the Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society on July 4, 1995. The bell is now on display at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point, in Paradise, Michigan, as a memorial to the lost crew (“Edmund Fitzgerald Shipwreck,” pg. 1).

With the recovery of the bell it gave family members the much needed closure after 20 years. Every year on November 10, there is an event at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum in honor of those lives taken on the Edmund Fitzgerald. The bell is struck 30 times for each of the 29 lives lost in the Edmund Fitzgerald as well as 1 ring for everyone whose lives were lost in the Great Lakes (“Edmund Fitzgerald Shipwreck,” pg. 2). There is also a bell ringing service as the Mariner’s church commemorating the men (“Memorials,” pg. 1). To this day, the bell is used as a centerpiece in a memorial to the 29 men who lost their lives (“Edmund Fitzgerald Shipwreck,” pg. 2).

Among the bell ringing ceremonies, there have also been plays, books, television series, and even a top ten song in memory of the Edmund Fitzgerald. Two plays have been written: one titled “Ten November” by Steven Dietz and the other titled “Holdin’ Our Own” by Shelley Russell. “Ten November” is about the final voyage of the ship up until the sinking and what happened after. “Holdin’ Our Own” is about the lives of the crew men (“Memorials,” pg. 1).

Various books have been written about that fateful November day, the lives of the men lost, as well as speculation as to the cause of the sinking. Probably one of the most important memorial tributes to the Edmund Fitzgerald was the song written by Gordon Lightfoot titled
“The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.” The song was written about the ship’s voyages and the sinking of the ship. It was released just months after the ship sank and instantly became popular.

One of the most impactful memorials for the families of the victims was the consecration of the gravesite. The service held on July 17, 1999 at Mariner’s Church in Detroit, involved the U.S. Coast Guard as well as the families of the lost men. This service gave the families the final closure they needed after twenty-four years to mourn their loved ones (“Memorials,” pg. 1). This is the place considered to the gravesite of those men. This powerful service ended with the laying of wreaths, and of course, the ringing of the bell twenty-nine times in honor of the tragic deaths that November day (“Memorials,” pg. 1).

With the sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald, the media went crazy. It was all over the newspapers and radios about what had happened. Many people were trying to find a cause for the sinking but even to this day there is controversy over the actual cause. Many of the memorials that were created are also influential in the media. One of the many reasons so many people know about the shipwreck is because of the song. Even though the song became increasingly popular, many people did not realize the song was based on truth, they thought it was just a “great story” (“Memorials,” pg. 1). After researching the song, many people were aware of the tragedy that befell the Edmund Fitzgerald, and now due to the song more people are becoming aware of the its legacy every day (“Memorials,” pg. 1).

The Edmund Fitzgerald is important to remember because so many innocent lives were lost that day and on others throughout the Great Lakes history. Many ships have been lost on the Great Lakes and they should be remembered. The Edmund Fitzgerald will forever be remembered in Michigan history as well as American history. It put the Great Lakes on the map.
With the memorials built, the people in Michigan and the United States have a way to remember those lost on that tragic November day. The memory of those lost will also live on in the song “The Sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald.”

**Bibliography**


Madsen, Joyce Styron. "Disaster on the Great Lakes: The Mystery of the Edmund Fitzgerald."


