SYNOPSIS OF THE STORY OF THE "PRINS WILLEM V"

At 7:15 p.m., on the evening of October 14, 1955, the 258 foot Diesel Motorship "Prins Willem V" was heading due east as she departed from Milwaukee Harbor on the last leg of the journey back to her home port of Rotterdam. A Sinclair tug was crossing her path heading due north. To avoid possibility of collision, the "Willem" changed her course to the right to give the tug the legal right of way with the intention of passing to the tug's stern. However, as later testified by the officers of the Dutch ship, there was no light on the tug to indicate that she was towing a barge nor were there any lights on the barge which the tug was hauling on an 800 foot tow. The crew of the tug, immediately seeing the impending dangerous situation, quickly cast the barge adrift, but the latter had just enough way on to drift into the starboard side of the "Willem" and rip a small hole in her at the bulkhead between her No. 2 hold and the engine room. The inrushing water soon stopped the engine and pumps and slowly filled the forward holds. One hour and 20 minutes later the "Willem" sank, rolling over on her starboard at a point 3.8 miles due east of the harbor entrance at Milwaukee.

Since soundings soon revealed a depth of 31 feet to the highest point on the ship, she was considered a legal menace to navigation and by federal law became the property of and responsibility of the Corps of Engineers, U. S. Army. Advertisement was made for bids. Max Gene Nohl, Milwaukee diver and contractor was the successful bidder. Nohl bid $50,000.00, Government pay him, to remove the hazard to navigation, the contract in addition awarding to him a clear title to the ship, her contents, and her entire cargo.

Nohl soon discovered after the contract had been awarded and after he started diving operations that the highest point on the entire ship itself was 40 feet, 6 inches below the surface. The ship's gang and some other loose wreckage extended upward from the hull and according to Nohl's theory had given the Army's sounding apparatus a false reading. Nohl cleared the protruding wreckage to the contract depth of 40 feet and presented his bill for $50,000.00 plus his claim for title to the entire ship and her cargo. Since the Army contended that they had made no mistake but that the ship must have settled to account for the difference, they contested the contract in a 16 month legal battle, but finally settled with Nohl at $15,000.00, also awarding to him the agreed title to the undamaged ship and cargo.

The ship is now lying on her starboard side at a list of 70 degrees, the damaged side down. She is on a hard clay bottom which varies in depth from 76 to 80 feet. Her beam is 40 feet. The port or lower rail is largely exposed.

The "Prins Willem V" is one of a group of sister ships operated by the Oranje Line out of Rotterdam and similar to numerous other vessels designed for direct service between Great Lakes and European ports. "Willy Five" was commissioned in 1947. Watertight bulkheads separate forepeak and No. 1 hold, No. 2 hold and engine room, engine room and No. 3 hold, No. 4 hold and tonnage room, tonnage room and afterpeak. Masts and electric cargo booms are located between 1 and 2 hatches and between 3 and 4 hatches. In elevation, her decks consist of Tween Deck, Main Deck, Bridge Deck, Boat Deck, and Flying Bridge. In her double bottom are fuel, water, and trimming tanks. She offers beautifully appointed accomodations for approximately a dozen passengers. She is a beautiful, modern, efficient small ship of a type noted to be highly profitable in its operation and in great demand.

Her cargo, insured at $750,000.00 is general and is salvageable. It consists of such diversified items as tin, Wisconsin air cooled engines, miscellaneous machinery, chemicals in steel drums, leather, hides, TV tubes, musical instruments, printing presses, outboard motors, and many miscellaneous items. The entire 715 ton cargo was packed for overseas shipment to Holland and European ports and should suffer very little damage in the clear cold fresh waters of Lake Michigan.
The vessel was insured at $1,250,000.00. The combined valuation of ship and cargo is thus $2,000,000.00.

Nohl has formed a small company which will provide for the forthcoming salvage operations. They now own or will shortly own the necessary salvage vessels, diving equipment, and pontoons. These pontoons, purchased from the Navy (Government cost approximately $85,000.00) are made of heavy neoprene, capable of being easily handled by one diver when collapsed and submerged, but each capable of lifting 25 tons when inflated. The company now owns enough of these pontoons to lift 50% more than the weight of the entire ship submerged. The plan is to remove only such cargo from her in present position as may be easily handled or will facilitate the floating of the ship; the ship will then be floated by the pontoons and beached, patched, pumped and unloaded at the dock.

All types of diving gear will be used in various aspects of the operation but it is anticipated that the bulk of the work will be done with company supplied DESCO U-9 Navy Lightweight Gear with attached mask and hinged faceplate, 2-way telephone, using a unicellular underdress (retaining its warmth wet or dry), employing a one-hour auxiliary breathing tank for emergency but normally using surface air connected with a quick release coupling. This apparatus may be used as a zero buoyancy apparatus with swimfins or as a negative buoyancy apparatus with heavy belt. Since the diver is on the hull at 40 feet, decompression will seldom be necessary.

The salvage plan is to insert the deflated pontoons into the cargo holds and other portions of the ship to create a controlled lift and righting moment such that she will rise to the surface and simultaneously decrease her present list of 78 degrees to 145 degrees as her port rail emerges. She will then be towed in and beached on her starboard bilge. A second lift will right her to zero list and she will again be towed in and beached. A temporary patch will then be placed over her damaged plate and she will then be pumped dry and towed in to the dock.

This job is apparently a salvage Man's dream. Were the ship one foot shallower the entire hull would have had to have been dynamited to clear the legal hazard to navigation. Were she any deeper, depth and decompression problems would introduce great physical and financial hazards. She sank at just exactly the right list to easily retain the pontoons under her main and 'tween deck in her four cargo holds and yet right herself as she is beached. She is lying on a clay bottom, hard enough to support her and yet not too hard or rocky to damage her. Although an ocean going Dutch ship with an overseas cargo, she sank in the fresh clear waters of inland Lake Michigan which will have little or deleterious effect on cargo or ship. She is lying only 38 miles from Milwaukee harbor meaning only a few minutes run from one of the world's finest harbors morning and night or in the event of bad weather. She is a beautiful little freighter carrying a high-lay saleable cargo. She was damaged just enough to sink her but not enough to involve any major repairs. She sank with her damaged plates down, exactly where they should be for ease in floating her. Other than a cargo of solid gold bricks, it is difficult to imagine a more ideal salvage opportunity.

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