

It was 7:00 a.m., February 17, 1885, and the A.F. Crockett, a coastal schooner, was hard ashore about ten miles southwest of the Cedar Hammock Life Saving Station at Hatteras Inlet on Ocracoke Island.

Cedar Hammock Life Saving Station:

(Photo Needed)

According to an account of the wreck and the rescue operation, gathered from contemporary records and printed in the Coastland Times newspaper many years later: “[T]he wind was blowing fresh from the west and a high sea [was] tumbling in on the beach.”

“[T]he transportation of the [beach] apparatus [was] a very tedious and laborious task.”

“At times the water rushed up so far on the shore that [the life savers] were obliged to retreat back of the sand-hills.”

“Progress under these trying and exhausting conditions was necessarily slow, and the keeper...proceeded on ahead [on foot] to signal that assistance would soon arrive.”

Another famous wreck was the British Steamship, Ariosto, that went aground on Ocracoke Christmas Eve, 1899. According to the original Life Saving Records:

“About 4 o’clock Surfman Guthrie...discovered, during a brief interval when the weather lighted, the masthead light of a steamer...ashore.”

“An accident to one of the shafts of the beach-apparatus cart caused considerable delay soon after the crew started...”

“The tide making over the beach was especially deep at a point where the hurricane of August 16-18 had cut an inlet, and the keeper was obliged to secure the aid of five citizens...to help his crew get the gear to the wreck....”

“On account of the surf running over the beach there was very serious difficulty in finding a place sufficiently high and solid to bury the sand anchor where it would hold and to place the Lyle gun where it would be out of water. Both had to be frequently moved during the operations.”

Imagine a typical Outer Banks scene from the late 1800s. It is winter, maybe December, January, or February. The temperature is in the thirties, perhaps colder. Ice is forming on the rigging of a three-masted schooner, which has wrecked miles from the Life Saving Station. Gale force winds are whipping across the island, and are approaching hurricane force. The raging surf is pounding the beach with powerful waves, then rushing back to sea.

Rip currents are cutting deep gullies every half mile or so.

A lone surfman is walking the beach, protected from the elements only by his oilskins, and often up to his thighs in seawater, scanning the angry sea, always on the lookout for vessels in distress. The weather is thick. Rain is mixed with sleet, and heavy, roiling clouds scud over the island. Daybreak is still hours away.

Suddenly the surfman spies a light at the top of a mast...rolling with the waves...too close to shore. He is miles from his station. He lights a signal lamp, hoping the captain and crew of the stranded vessel will see the light and remain on board to wait for the Life Saving crew. That is always their best option, unless the ship is in immediate danger of breaking apart.

The surfman turns and hastens back to the station. He has been on patrol for hours, and it will be hours more before he can sound the alarm.

Back at the station the surfman arouses the keeper, who summons the crew. They are ready within minutes for they have been practicing their drill several times each week. In spite of the worsening weather they never waver. Miles away a sailing vessel from some unknown port is foundering in heavy seas. The crew (and perhaps even passengers) are total strangers. They may hail from some foreign country and speak an unintelligible language. They may be white, black, or some other color. It does not matter. The surfmen of the United States Life Saving Service are dedicated to risking their own lives to save every stranded seaman.

When asked why he ventured out in a hellish storm to save sailors on a wrecked ship, one life saver observed that the rules state that life savers must go out...nothing says they must come back. Every rescue was an extraordinary story of courage, bravery, and commitment.

Ocracoke's first U.S. Life Saving Station was established in 1883 at Cedar Hammock, near Hatteras Inlet. Today, all that remains of that station are several rows of barnacle-encrusted pilings. Even now they stand guard in the often turbulent surf at the north end of Ocracoke Island.

The original station crew consisted of six surfmen and the keeper, James W. Howard, who gave all orders, was in charge of training and discipline, commanded all rescue operations, and filed a thorough wreck report after every sea disaster.

Keeper James W. Howard:



At Cedar Hammock, miles from Ocracoke village, surrounded by blowing sand and ever-changing tidal flats, the men of the Life Saving Service carved out a tiny settlement. Most of the surfmen brought their wives and children, and built modest homes near the station.

By 1897 Keeper Howard and his wife, Zilphia, even had charge of their three grandchildren after the untimely death of the children's mother.

No stores graced the north end of Ocracoke. No church bell pealed to beckon worshipers to Sabbath day services. No school marm called her charges to learn their lessons. No doctor lived nearby to tend to the sick and injured with medicines and instruments from his black leather bag.

Supplies were brought in by boat, as needed. The keeper offered prayers when appropriate, and read from the Bible as occasion demanded. Captain Wilson, an educated gentleman from the mainland, eventually arrived and instructed the handful of youngsters in reading, writing, and arithmetic, relieving the keeper of that duty. When illness struck Keeper Howard opened his medicine chest and dispensed Castor Oil, Kaopectate, Laudenum, or other tonics. If necessary, he lanced boils, sutured lacerations, or set broken bones.

During periods of bright skies, placid seas, and steady breezes, when sailors were usually safe from harm along the North Carolina coast, the keeper and surfmen busied themselves inspecting their apparatus, oiling movable metal parts, repairing equipment, painting the station and out buildings, patrolling the beach, and practicing their drills.

Each surfman had specific duties during a rescue, and they were expected to work flawlessly as a team, and to perform their assigned tasks quickly and efficiently.

At the alarm, "Ship Ashore," the men rushed to their stations, awaiting the keeper's orders.

The beach cart was readied with shot line, projectile, whip line, faking box, hawser, Lyle gun, powder, charges, sand anchor, crotch, tally board, blocks & pulleys, shovels, and, of course, the breeches buoy.

Four of the surfmen were harnessed to the beach cart, and proceeded to pull the sturdy

vehicle miles through sinking sand, wild wind, pelting rain or sleet, and frigid seawater, to the stranded vessel.

Reenactment (Readying the Beach Cart):



(Need Photo. Photo by Amy Howard.)

At the site of the wreck the rescue operation was initiated. Signal lights or flags alerted the waiting captain and crew that help had arrived. In almost all cases the code “MK” warned sailors to stay on board and not risk abandoning their ship without the assistance of the life savers.

The small brass Lyle gun was set down on the sand and loaded with charge and projectile. Actually a miniature cannon, the Lyle gun was invented by Lieutenant David Lyle of the U.S. Army Ordnance Corps, in 1878. One of only a very few guns specifically designed to

save lives, rather than to take lives, the Lyle gun could shoot a projectile (attached to a small diameter hemp line) almost 700 yards to a stranded vessel.

The Lyle Gun:



(Need Photo. Photo by Amy Howard.)

While the keeper and his assistant prepared the Lyle gun, the other surfmen were

busy readying the rescue lines and other apparatus. Two men dug a hole in the sand and buried the sand anchor, two heavy boards fashioned together in the form of an “X.”

One end of the shot line was attached to the projectile. The line itself had been wound (in a zig-zag pattern) around pegs in a wooden “faking box,” a maneuver designed to keep the line from tangling as it payed out. The box was carefully turned upside down near the Lyle gun, then set aside. The Lyle gun was fired, sending projectile and shot line into the rigging of the stricken ship.

Firing the Shot Line (notice the projectile just above the trees):

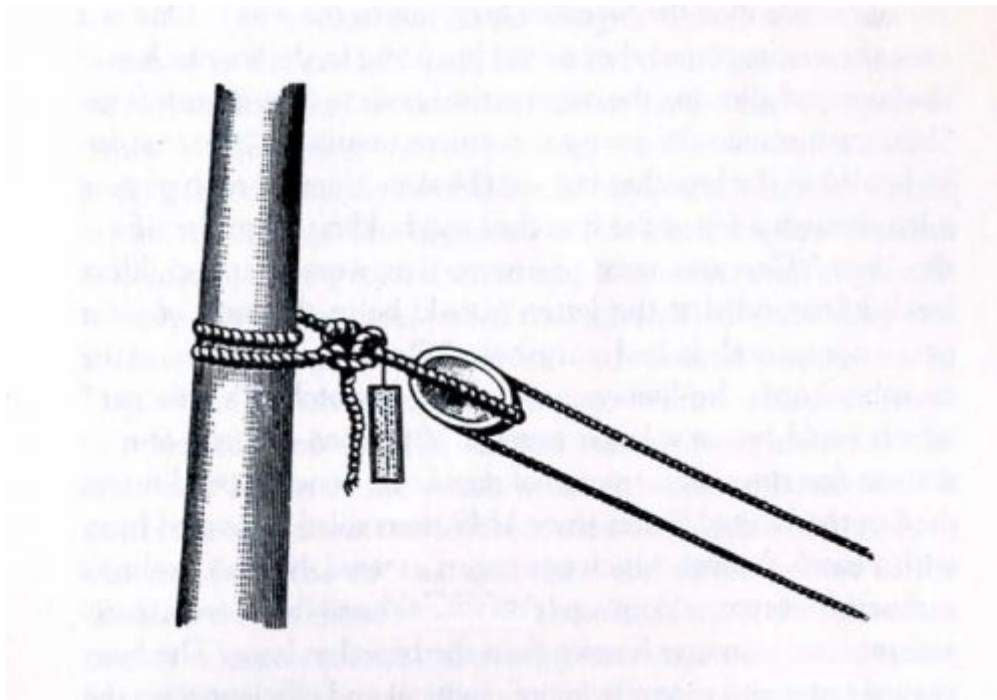


(Need Photo. Photo by Amy Howard.)

Upon seizing the shot line, the crew hauled it aboard. Attached to the other end they found a wooden pulley (or “tail block”), threaded by a larger “whip line” (a looped, or “endless”

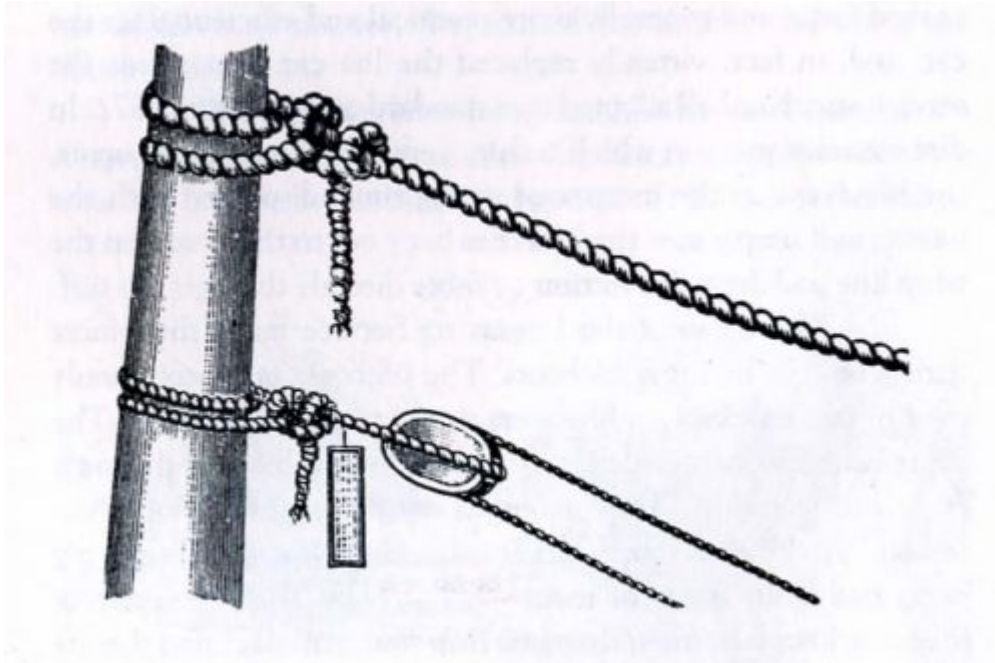
line) and a small “tally board” with instructions written in both English and French. The tail block was then firmly tied to one of the masts.

Whip Line Attached to the Mast (from Annual Report of the Operations of the United State Lifesaving Service, 1900):



That completed, the surfmen on shore fastened a three-inch hawser to the whip line. By pulling on the whip line, they conveyed the hawser to the vessel, where the sailors fastened it securely to the mast several inches above the whip line.

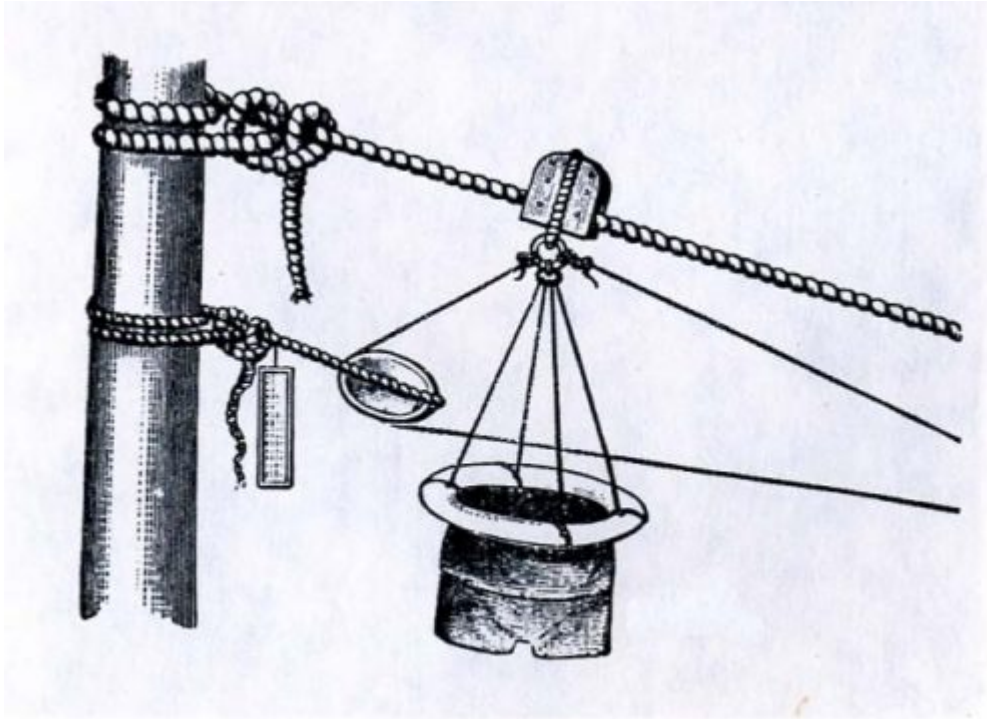
The Hawser Attached above the Whip Line (from Annual Report of the Operations of the United State Lifesaving Service, 1900):



The shore-side end of the hawser was then tied to a double pulley attached to the sand anchor. By raising a wooden “crotch” under the hawser, and pulling strenuously on the lines passing through the double pulley they were able to stretch the hawser tight and keep it safely above the angry breakers.

The final rescue apparatus was now ready to be deployed. The breeches buoy, a life ring fitted with canvas trouser legs, hung from the hawser by the self-descriptive “traveling block.” The traveling block, in turn, was fastened to the whip line which ran through the tail block attached to the ship’s mast.

The Traveling Block & Breeches Buoy (from Annual Report of the Operations of the United State Lifesaving Service, 1900):



The life savers could now draw the breeches buoy to the ship, where passengers and crew anxiously awaited their turns.

One by one everyone on the stricken vessel climbed into the breeches buoy and was pulled to safety by the surfmen of the US Life Saving Service.

Rescue by Breeches Buoy (from Harper's Weekly, 1888):



(Photo by Amy Howard.)

Most rescues by the Life Saving Service were successful. Few mariners who waited for the courageous surfmen perished. Sometimes, however, sailors and passengers panicked and made the mistake of launching lifeboats, which quickly overturned, throwing all of the occupants into a raging and unforgiving sea. Most drowned. At other times, ships broke apart before the life savers were able to make their way to the wreck. Many of those unfortunate sailors drowned as well.

Bringing survivors to shore was not the end of a rescue operation. Rescued sailors had to be given dry clothes, food, and lodging, at times for several days, back at the station which might be miles away. One memorable wreck on Portsmouth Island in 1903, the *Vera Cruz*, carried 22 crew members and 399 passengers. In this case, although a fresh northeaster and a strong ebb tide had forced the *Vera Cruz* into the breakers, the life saving crew was able to use their open surfboat. It took them 41 trips to bring everyone on shore. The people of Portsmouth village used four and a half barrels of flour to bake bread for the survivors, most of whom were smuggled Portuguese immigrants who spoke no English.

When sailors drowned or otherwise perished, the life savers then had to bury the bodies, usually in unmarked graves in nearby sand dunes. That cheerless task completed, the surfmen then had to disassemble their apparatus, stow Lyle gun, hawsers, pulleys, breeches buoy, and other equipment, and pull the beach cart back to the station.

Sometimes the keeper and his men were taxed to their limits. In Keeper Howard's 1885 report of the rescue of the crew of the A.F. Crocket he writes, in his idiosyncratic style, "They weer cold. Had them [the survivors] carried in boat to station, gaving them dry close, making them as comfodled [comfortable] as cold [could]. Also sent Horse down beach to stop beach apparatus. Men wore out. Returned to station 4 am, beach being so bad, crew so wore out, left cart on beach."