

## THE GREATEST SEA DISASTER IN HISTORY

*Fleeing the Red army juggernaut, the 8,000 refugees huddled aboard the Nazi liner. Suddenly, the Soviet U-boat struck . . .*

by BUD GREENSPAN

**D**ANZIG SHIVERED UNDER a blanket of snow. Thousands of ragged German refugees who had made the trek from the East ahead of the advancing Russian armies huddled in the ruins of the once great Polish city. It was January 30, 1945.

In the harbor of Gdynia lay four German barrack ships built by Adolph Hitler in the middle 1930s as part of the "Strength Through Joy" movement that highlighted the early days of the Nazi resurgence to power. The ships were the *Hansa*, the *Hamburg*, the *Deutschland* and the *Wilhelm Gustloff*.

The heavy guns of the Russian artillery made slight rumbles of thunder as they pounded Königsberg less than 100 miles away and sliced the remnants of the German forces into a demoralized frenzy. The soldiers ran, leaving behind their armor and equipment as the Polish had six years before.

In Danzig, refugees from the East prowled the streets begging anyone who looked like an official for a chance to board one of the barrack ships. Thousands of helpless people carrying meager belongings lined the roadways. They had to wait while members of the city's high society bribed their way aboard. Jewels and clothing were priority items. When they failed, aristocratic ladies were not reluctant to perform



personal favors in return for tickets and evacuation papers.

The human cargo had begun boarding on the 25th and continued until the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was packed with more than 8,000 passengers. She was built to hold 1,800.

Fights broke out at once as ticket-holders encountered trouble getting aboard. Many were carried screaming hysterically back down the gang-plank. They had learned too late that they had sold their jewels, possessions and honor needlessly. There was no room for them aboard the teeming vessel.

For as early as nine days before, Admiral Doenitz had sent orders from Berlin giving four Submarine Cadet divisions top priority aboard the ships. Other naval and maritime personnel and women marines had next priority. Then finally came the ticket-holders.

Aboard the *Wilhelm Gustloff* a woman screamed uncontrollably as deckmen seized her trunk and threw it overboard to make space for another passenger. Her plan to smuggle her husband aboard had failed. For now he lay in 60 feet of water frantically clawing to escape from the trunk that had become his tomb. Other passengers were too busy trying to maintain their places aboard to console the screaming woman.

Police roamed the docks looking for able-bodied men trying to steal aboard disguised in women's clothing. At the last moment some 200 wounded German soldiers were taken on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*.

The captains of the *Hansa*, *Hamburg*, *Deutschland* and *Wilhelm Gustloff* met and decided that all

four ships should weigh anchor at noon, rendezvous off the town of Hela, then proceed as a convoy down the Pomeranian Coast. They would be protected by minesweepers, the only available vessels in the area.

This situation was comparable to a fighter pilot able to protect himself against anti-aircraft fire but with no means to ward off enemy fighter planes. For the barrack ships were not concerned with mines. The danger lay in Russian submarines reported patrolling the Pomeranian Coast.

The four ships weighed anchor, the passengers lining the railings of the freezing, snow-swept decks, and rendezvoused off Hela as planned. But there the *Hansa* signaled she had mechanical trouble, and the convoy hove to.

The *Wilhelm Gustloff*, because of the estimated 8,000 human beings crowded aboard, lay lower in the water than the others and the rising sea was playing havoc with the wretched passengers jammed into every available space in cabins and passageways. Sanitary conditions were abominable. The odors resulting from the mass seasickness and lack of toilet facilities combined with the cold to make the passengers forget their thankful prayers of a few hours before.

As the ships waited for the *Hansa*, the captain of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* made a momentous decision. His ship was drawing too much water in its shallow surroundings. He would have to go further out into the open sea. He signaled his decision to the other captains who unanimously urged him to wait for an escort. But



the situation was too pressing, and the captain gave orders to proceed at full speed.

The *Wilhelm Gustloff* got under way, her only escort a minesweeper. The sea was heavy and the snow still falling. Those refugees fortunate enough to have spaces in heated cabins undressed and made themselves comfortable on mats and mattresses; the others bedded down as best they could in whatever quarters they could improvise. Many used their life preservers as pillows instead of wearing them. An occasional baby's cry mixed with the angry cursing of a man whose face was stepped on in the dark.

At 9:16 a torpedo struck the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. The torpedo hit a little forward of amidships with a muffled explosion. The ship staggered but lost no forward speed.

Ten seconds later a second struck. It stopped the *Wilhelm Gustloff* dead in the water. The panic below decks was unbelievable. Then a third torpedo hit and knocked out the ship's electrical system. In the darkness, the miserable people turned animal. They had to get on deck. The feeling was compulsive. Men forgot their families and rushed topside, trampling those unable to immediately gain their footing. Women and children tried hysterically to follow.

Regardless of the fact that rescue ships would be sitting ducks for the concealed enemy, the captain ordered red distress rockets sent up, and the ship's wireless crackled out the news.

The *Gustloff* lay immobile 25 miles off the town of Stolp. She was

alone. The escorting minesweeper had presumably moved away into the night to avoid meeting up with the same fate.

On the main deck, members of the *Gustloff's* crew stood with pistols drawn trying to stop the onrushing tide of refugees fighting their way to the lifeboats. Warning shots were fired at first, but to no avail; then the men took point-blank aim. Several passengers dropped wounded to the deck, but the crew was quickly overrun.

The fates continued to intervene, however. The ship had taken a 25-degree list and the lifeboats on the starboard side could not be used. But this did not stop the hysterical mob that slipped and trampled each other on the ice-coated deck.

At the boats, the horror continued. The guide lines were frozen tight and the davits were immovable. Nevertheless, the refugees crowded into the useless boats. When single lines were chopped loose, whole boatloads of screaming people were thrown into the freezing sea while the boats hung empty above them.

Two of the boats jammed halfway between the deck and the sea, and a tragic and pitiful ceremony took place. Members of families that were still together embraced for the last time; then, fearing the ship would topple on them, they leaped into the sea.

A half hour after being hit, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was still afloat, though listing at a 40-degree angle. The hysteria of the passengers subsided, mainly through exhaustion. The captain was further able to



soothe them with news that rescue ships were on the way. Many of the passengers were calm enough now to go below decks and search for their lost families. About ten o'clock, a great shout went up from the main deck as lookouts spotted a rescue ship—a navy barge. Almost at the same moment, a terrible explosion amidships rocked the *Gustloff*.

Bulkheads already weakened by

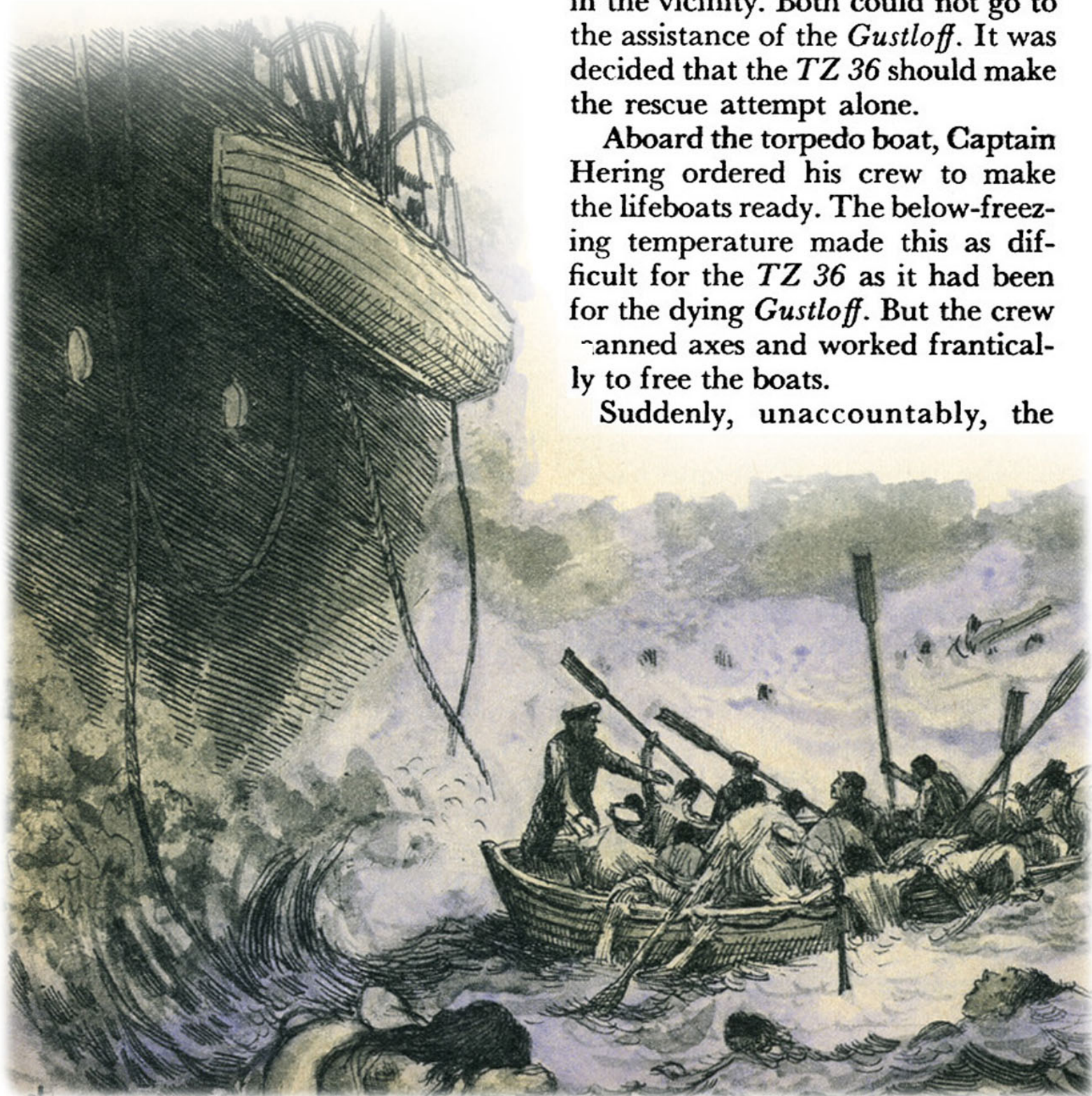
Powerful waves rolled the two ships together, crushing the half-frozen survivors in an icy vise.

the torpedo hits gave way. Tons of water rushed into the holds, trapping emergency crews working there. Slowly the *Gustloff* turned on its side and more than 2,000 people below decks were drowned in unbelievable horror.

Fortunately, other rescue ships were moving into the area. But as a torpedo boat, the *TZ 36*, and the ten-thousand-ton cruiser *Admiral Hipper* approached the stricken ship, their below-water warning devices told them a submarine was also in the vicinity. Both could not go to the assistance of the *Gustloff*. It was decided that the *TZ 36* should make the rescue attempt alone.

Aboard the torpedo boat, Captain Hering ordered his crew to make the lifeboats ready. The below-freezing temperature made this as difficult for the *TZ 36* as it had been for the dying *Gustloff*. But the crew manned axes and worked frantically to free the boats.

Suddenly, unaccountably, the





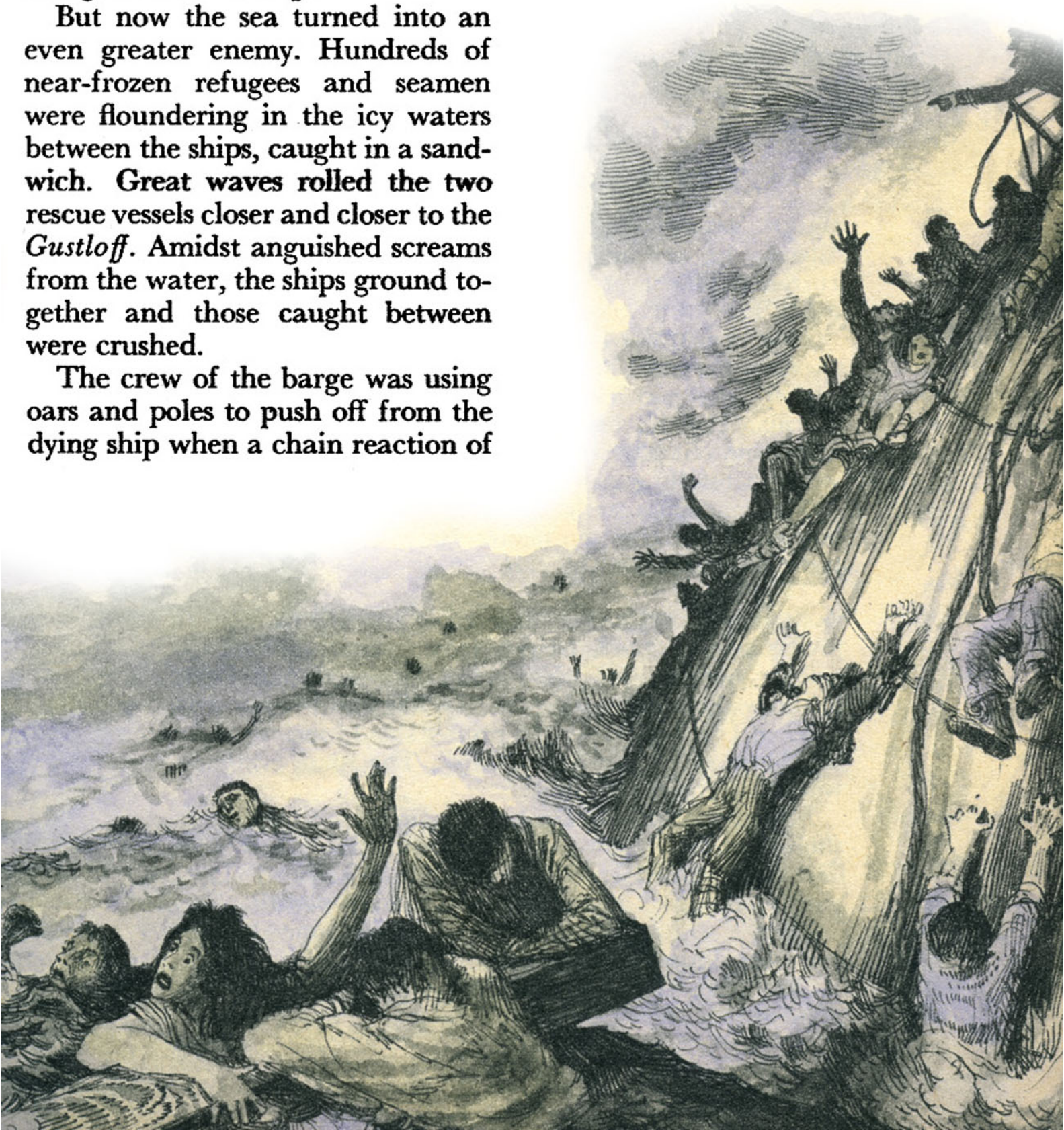
lights went on all over the *Gustloff*. She now lay on her side with men and women clinging desperately to the exposed hull. Ice quickly formed and many slid grotesquely into the sea. The navy barge had worked its way in parallel to the *Gustloff*. Only 100 feet of open water separated the two ships. The *TZ 36* was also moving into position with its bow directly behind the stern of the barge. This placed both rescue ships almost alongside the *Gustloff*.

But now the sea turned into an even greater enemy. Hundreds of near-frozen refugees and seamen were floundering in the icy waters between the ships, caught in a sandwich. Great waves rolled the two rescue vessels closer and closer to the *Gustloff*. Amidst anguished screams from the water, the ships ground together and those caught between were crushed.

The crew of the barge was using oars and poles to push off from the dying ship when a chain reaction of

below-decks rumbles began. It was the *Gustloff's* death rattle. She went down quickly, lights blazing.

The rescue work began. The navy barge picked up as many as possible, but the sea was heavy and there were more dead than alive dotting the water. The *TZ 36* moved back into position, Captain Hering ignoring his own danger from submarines. Landing nets were strung over the





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sides of the torpedo boat and the crew worked feverishly hauling in anybody that looked alive.

Captain Hering stayed until warned that a Russian submarine was moving in quickly. He could no longer risk the lives of his crew and the more than 500 survivors he had picked up.

As the *TZ 36* moved out, the foaming wake of two torpedoes was spotted. Captain Hering maneuvered his ship expertly and they missed by inches.

The torpedo boat steamed away at full speed leaving a macabre scene behind. Still on the water floated

hundreds upon hundreds of dead, some frozen stiff to oars, bits of wreckage, anything that could be clung to in a last desperate grasp at life. The rescue ships proceeded to the island of Rügen in the Baltic Sea, where more than 900 survivors were transferred to a hospital ship. Many of these died later from exposure. There is no exact figure of the dead. There were too many stowaways aboard the *Gustloff*, and no official records remain.

But from all accounts, it is known that about 7,000 perished in the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, the greatest sea disaster in history.



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