

Crippled and overburdened, the indistinguishable hulk crawled toward the southeast and Ontonagon Harbor. Lake Superior would show no mercy if any of this calculated risk fell short of its goal. A southwest wind rose, impeding the slow craft as it crawled toward Ontonagon. It was bow heavy, lifting its rudders too high for good steerage. The bow wanted to fall left in the wind, with a starboard engine pushing. And to add to the challenge, a vandal had tried to saw the steering wheel shaft off, to take as a souvenir. Erickson had replaced the unreliable with a pipe wrench. The craft wanted to turn left, out toward the open lake.

The harbor entrance at Ontonagon is offset. The southwest arm juts out farther than the left. As the Outer Island approached, Erickson posted a watch at the bow. As soon as the bow cleared the right arm, he would slam the boat forward to catch the left wall and safety. Like a massive bankshot on a watery pool table, the craft hit the breakwater, fifty feet inside. By 4:30 p.m. on Christmas Eve, the Outer Island was tied to the papermill dock at Ontonagon, and a watchman sent a weary Bayfield crew home for the holidays.

A gift is sometimes not so easily given nor easily received. At 8 a.m. on Christmas Day, the watchman called to report: The Outer Island had sunk at the dock in seven feet of water. Work began again, this time in safer surroundings. From massive damages from dynamiting the craft loose from the ice, from excessive weight, the vessel would sink three more times before March 1st. By the fourth attempt, very little was overlooked by the now-experienced salvors. The centerline hatches, opened to pump all compartments, had been blocked by sandbags. A workman with a backhoe was scraping remaining ice from the deck to float the vessel higher in the water. No one had told him of the sandbags.

Erickson turned his back on the work to sip a bowl of chicken noodle soup that his wife, Shirley, had brought. "It was the most expensive bowl of soup I ever ate," Erickson said. One scrape of the bucket across the deck, the sandbags were pulled off, water poured in, and the 155-ton craft once again settled to the bottom.

Throughout the winter the crews worked to break out ice, clean machinery, restart engines and make the vessel seaworthy. Time goes slowly in an Upper Peninsula winter, but this one would be different. As Sil, the waitress at the Ontonagon Cafe said, "It sure made the winter go fast."

An onlooker once commented that it was a good thing insurance covered damages to the boat. "We didn't have insurance," Erickson said. "Most of the materials and almost all the labor was donated. People you competed with-you thought were they were enemies-were there giving what they could. That's the way boat



Doug Swanson inspects the original Gray Marine Diesel engines below decks where he spent time as electrician's mate on the LCT-81.



Inside the pilot house of the Outer Island. Larger portholes and a new binnacle have been added since the War.

people are." After a winter of a hundred days of salvage, on March 1, 1973, the Outer Island was met off Bayfield by a welcoming fleet of fish tugs. It has worked out of Bayfield ever since.

Sixty Years On

As we stood on the deck just outside the pilot house where the portside 20mm gun was once mounted, I could tell that Dad was thinking about all those months spent living on these old landing craft. Our tour that summer day fulfilled a long-held dream for Dad--to once again set foot on an LCT and think back to a youth spent in the service of his country in the "Amphibs".

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