

THE PRINSENDAM FIRE

HISTORY'S GREATEST SEA RESCUE

It took extraordinary efforts in the air, on land and sea, plus an incredible run of good luck, to save 524 people in the treacherous Gulf of Alaska.

by Josh Eppinger



Background photo shows one of two Canadian Forces CH-46 helicopters which flew north from British Columbia to aid in rescuing survivors from the liner *Prinsendam* in the Gulf of Alaska. Locating one of *Prinsendam*'s lifeboats, chopper moves in (inset) to make pickup.

Cover photos courtesy of Canadian Forces' *Sentinel* magazine

Passenger ship *Prinsendam* position 57-38° N., 140-25 W. Fire. Fire in engine room. Flooding engine room with CO₂. Conditions unknown. Passengers 320. Crew 190.

In the command post of the U.S. Coast Guard's Rescue Coordination Center atop the seven-story Federal building in Juneau, Alaska, the quiet of an early-morning duty shift is broken by the clacking of a teletype machine lining out the message above. It is the first alert in what is to become the most successful large-scale peacetime sea rescue in history. It is Oct. 4, 1980.

The spare message carries some awesome details. Fire at sea is the mariner's worst fear. Quickly, plotters pinpoint the vessel in the Gulf of Alaska, some 120 nautical miles south of Yakutat, the nearest village, on Alaska's southeast coast.

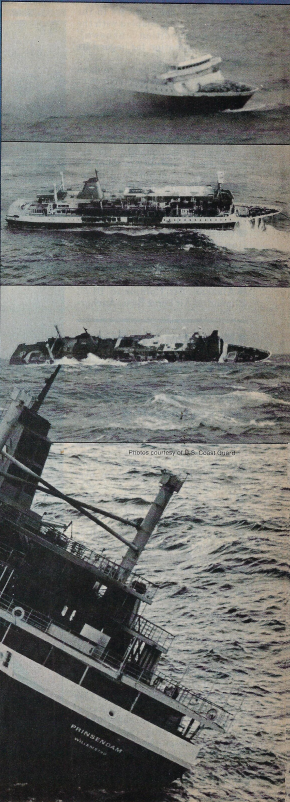
Aiding vessels in distress is the Coast Guard's stock

Photo sequence shows the death of *Prinsendam*. At right, aerial smoke pours from the liner as the fire that began in her engine room moves upward and forward. At this point she is adrift, and her bridge is intact...

... But hours later, under tow, *Prinsendam* is totally fire-ravaged. Water can be seen pouring from ports blown out by explosions as ship rolls in mounting seas and bagins listing dangerously to starboard...

... Bottom photo shows list from all perspective. At right is the last photo taken as the ship lies nearly on her beam ends, cut adrift again, before sinking in 8,000 feet.

Photos courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard



In trade, the numbers in the cable's final line, coupled with the ominous "condition unknown," herald an operation far beyond its routine scope.

Adm. Richard Schoel, roused from sleep at his home, arrives at headquarters to take charge. On a huge map covering one wall of the operations room, Schoel plots the available forces against one small target, the *Prinsendam*.

Schoel moves quickly. He assesses the availability of all of his immediate command—and more, since the magnitude of this mission leaves him no choice. Sweeping from west to east, Schoel lines up the deployment:

- Coast Guard Rescue Coordination Center (RCC) on Kodiak Island—two HH-3 helicopters and two HC-130 aircraft. Distance: 250 nautical miles from *Prinsendam*.
- Alaskan Air Command, RCC, Elmendorf Air Force Base, Anchorage.

No matter how many cruising adventures you've thrilled to in the past, this is the one you're likely to remember the longest.

—*Prinsendam* brochure

age: one HH-3 helicopter and one HC-130 Hercules. Distance: over 370 nautical miles.

■ Coast Guard RCC, Sitka: Two HH-3 helicopters. Distance: 170 nautical miles.

■ Canadian Forces from British Columbia: Two CH-46 helicopters, one Argus and two Buffalo aircraft. Distance: over 600 nautical miles.

■ Coast Guard cutter *Boutwell*, docked in Juneau for centennial celebrations. Distance: 300 miles by sea.

■ Coast Guard cutter *Woodrush*, docked in Sitka.

■ Coast Guard cutter *Mellon*, on patrol near Vancouver. Distance: 550 nautical miles.

The *Prinsendam's* alert has also been received by the *Williamsburgh*, a 1,000-foot supertanker located five hours (90 nautical miles) south of the *Prinsendam*. The *Williamsburgh* is bound for

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Texas with a full load of 1.5 million barrels of Alaskan crude, loaded at the pipeline terminus port of Valdez. The tanker immediately turns and retraces its wake at a plodding 17 knots.

In addition, another more distant oil tanker, the 850-foot *Solo Intrepid*, en route to Valdez from San Francisco, and a container freighter, the *Portland*, bound for Anchorage, are alerted. In the tradition of the sea they, too, head for the stricken liner.

Schoel knows that lines on a map don't reflect the real world of air and sea, where wind and weather shape

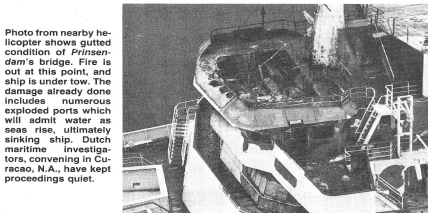


Photo from nearby helicopter shows gutted condition of *Prinsendam's* bridge. Fire is out at this point, and ship is under tow. The damage already done includes numerous exploded ports which will admit water as seas rise, ultimately sinking ship. Dutch maritime investigators, convening in Curacao, N.A., have kept proceedings quiet.

final courses and distances. At best, he sees his combined rescue fleet extended to its operating limits, with critical load factors and fuel allowances already flashing red against the background of the plan as his mind races.

The admiral also knows that luxury-cruise passengers, typically, have spent the better part of their lives earning the luxuries they can afford. With sea-water temperatures lingering in the mid-50s (Fahrenheit), there is no reason why a young, strong person could expect to live immersed in the Gulf of Alaska for much more than an hour. For some of these people, Schoel knows, you could cut that in half.

Later, he'll remember thinking: "It is really a question of whether the Good Lord will give us enough time." At the moment, he doesn't even want to think about the possibility that the remnants of a late-season Pacific typhoon, dubbed *Vernon*, could be moving into the Gulf within the next eight hours.

"This is your captain speaking. We have a small fire in the engine room. It is under control but for your own

safety, please report to the promenade deck." That is how passengers Richard Steele, publisher of the Worcester (Mass.) *Telegram-Gazette*, remembers hearing of problems aboard the *Prinsendam* just after midnight on the morning of Oct. 4. Steele and his wife and 322 other passengers—who had paid from \$3,125 to \$5,075 for their accommodations—were on the third day of a 29-day cruise from Vancouver, B.C., up the Inland Passage and across the Pacific to Japan, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore. There, a number of the passengers, a majority of them 65 and older, would cruise



Many elderly passengers suffered from exposure; some were jammed into lifeboats so overcrowded they had to stand.

room of the diesel-powered ship, the noisy, oily routine of the engineer's department had been shockingly upset. Fire! The one element all inspections are programmed to guard against had somehow sparked, flared and spread. Almost immediately, the crew that had been grabbed from duty stations, bunks and sleep to fight the flames knew it was fighting a losing battle against the flames.

How had it started? At this writing, only the Dutch Shipping Inspectorate, the investigating authority, has a clue and will not release details until its proceedings are concluded. Asked to speculate by EM, a Coast Guard fire expert suggests that combustion began in or near the filter system of one of the main fuel tanks. It is not known precisely how long the engine room had been on fire before the passengers were notified and the distress call sent; yet by 1:00 a.m., the heat and smoke had become so intense in the engine room that the firefighting crew literally had to retreat. They sealed off the engine room and flooded it with carbon dioxide in hopes that this would smother the flames. It didn't have much effect.

The mission begins

"Have we got a mission for you. There are 520 people in the Gulf of Alaska," Air Force Capt. John Walters had just been awakened at 3:00 a.m. (Anchorage is two time zones west of Juneau) by the RCC of the

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Alaskan Air Command at Elmendorf Air Force Base. "You've got to be kidding me," was his response.

An hour and a half later, after briefings based on still-sketchy information coming into the Elmendorf RCC, Capt. Walters and his crew were airborne in their HH-3 ("Jolly Green Giant") chopper. Accompanying them was an HC-130 Hercules four-engine propjet, which would provide both reconnaissance and communications for the rescue, and refueling for the helicopter (only this one Air Force HH-3 had in-air refueling capability). The aircraft also carried five pararescue specialists and flight surgeon Capt. Don Hudson.

The helicopter cut hours from its flight to the Yakutat staging area, about 350 miles away, by clearing Portage Pass, a narrow opening in the mountains, which is almost always socked in at that time of year. "It lifted enough to let us clear with about 100 feet to spare," recalls Walters.

Over Kayak Island, east of Cordova, the HC-130 slowed to 130 knots and extended a 90-foot hose from its wing tip. It then flew up underneath and slightly ahead of the copter until the HH-3 could drop down just enough to connect a telescopic probe from its landing pod into the funnel-shaped device (drogue) at the end of the fuel hose. Coupled, with the HC-130 creating a kind of draft for the helicopter, the two flew low and level at 110 knots as the airplane emptied 1,000 pounds of fuel per minute into the copter until its limit of 4,500 pounds of fuel was reached.

The first explosion

Like a number of other passengers, Isabella and Irving Brex of Seattle were awakened when they felt a shock on the port side. It may have been the first of many small but crippling explosions touched off by the blaze. This was accompanied by a loss of electrical power and complete stillness—no sound of the ship's engines. The smell of smoke in the corridors was pervasive, recalls Irving Brex. When the Captain's request to assemble on the promenade deck was made, the Brexes dressed as quickly and warmly as they could in their pitch-black cabin, took their life jackets and walked out to a rear fan deck. "I was shocked to see so many people still in nightclothes," remembers Brex. Passenger Steele, up on the prom-

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enade deck, sensed things were not right. "I saw the crew running up and down the stairs with heavy fire-fighting equipment. I started to go back for blankets, but there was no way. The smoke was becoming too thick and acrid."

By 2:00 a.m. the main lounge on the promenade deck was beginning to fill with smoke and passengers were asked to go out on deck. The main lounge, positioned about 100 feet farther forward, was opened and free drinks were served. An adjacent gift shop was opened up and a clerk gave away sweaters. The ship's entertainers serenaded passengers with songs such as "Mahalo," "Hawaii," and "South Pacific." By 3:45 a.m., the smoke had migrated forward again, seeping into the club, and a ship's officer repeated the order to leave.

The darkness also resulted in some bizarre ensembles: tuxedos and running shoes, nightgowns and furs. Those too thinly clad draped themselves with curtains pulled from the lounge.

Efforts to quell the fire over three or more hours had not gone well at all. The carbon dioxide system had only slowed it somewhat; heat and smoke were now, somehow, working their way slowly upward. The direction of the dining room—four life decks above the engine room on the promenade deck. Although an emergency generator on the bridge deck was working, the fire had caused a real electrical problem. A system between that generator and the emergency pump below the engine room. There was no water pressure for fighting the flames.

Tough decision made easier

On the bridge, Capt. Cornelius Wabeke, celebrating his 30th year as a ship's master with Holland-America, was contemplating the most painful decision of his career: to abandon ship. The decision was made somewhat easier, at about 5:00 a.m., by the relatively calm prevailing conditions: seas with swells of five feet; temperature, 57°; winds of 10 mph. And daylight was only a few hours away. The forecast, however, was not encouraging.

The rescue forces, mobilized by the ROC in Juneau, were on the move. One of the HC-130 aircraft from Kodiak was on the water when the *Prinsendam*, at 4:00 a.m., was and was circling overhead in its role as on-scene command post. Two Coast Guard HH-3 helicopters, fueled to their limit of 10 hours of flying time, immediately lifted off from their

base in Sitka for the 1½-hour flight to the stricken vessel. In Juneau, police and firemen were actually scouring the city's many taverns and nightspots for the crew of the Coast Guard cutter *Boutwell*, anchored on 24-hour layover during Juneau's Centennial celebration. Its crew secured, if not in prime seagoing condition, the *Boutwell* cast off at 4:00 a.m. with orders to "proceed east as fast as best speed." Once clear of the restricted channels, the cutter proceeded at 27 knots.

Overcrowded lifeboats

"I'm sorry. The fire is completely out of control. We have to abandon ship," Capt. Wabeke's order at 6:30 a.m. produced an evacuation that has been described variously as orderly and chaotic, calm and frantic, heroic and cowardly. Six lifeboats, each of them designed to handle 60 to 65 passengers, but jammed with as many as 90, were launched and lowered, along with four small inflatable rafts carrying 25 people. The ship's gunnery chief guided the vessel and then hung uselessly against the side of the *Prinsendam*.

Many of the crew members, predominantly Indonesians, were the first to scramble into the lifeboats, actually bolting past elderly passengers for the safety of the boat deck. Some of the Dutch officers took command of the lifeboats and others diligently patrolled the *Prinsendam's* deck for a hundred yards from the lifeboat stations. With all available boats and rafts loaded, some to much more than capacity, 15 passengers and 25 crew members were still left on the burning cruise ship.

PO Michael Oliverson, helping to illuminate the evacuation procedure with a floodlight from a hovering Coast Guard helicopter, recalls that the exercise "looked like a bad idea." Oliverson, in fact, helped prevent a major mishap when he blinked the lights to alert one lifeboat and prevent it from lowering itself directly onto another.

For passenger Steele, the descent down the side of the ship was anything but smooth. "I was one of 90 people jammed into a boat that was built to hold 60. There was no room even to sit and no one was in charge. We were lowered to about 30 feet above the water. Then the cables jammed. We went up and down like a yo-yo until we finally broke loose and just fell the last 20 feet into the water. Then it took about 25 minutes to get away from the hull because our motor wouldn't work."

Cmdr. Tom Morgan, piloting one of the Sitka helicopters, arrived as the tiny lifeboat flotilla inched away from the burning vessel. He lowered CWO Kenneth Matz, the Coast Guard's fire expert, directly onto the *Prinsendam*. Matz, who had spent 21 years fighting all manner of fires, was most concerned about the idea of being lowered in a basket. "My insides were up around my neck," he recalls, when the HH-3 gently maneuvered to set him down on the stern of the pitching, rolling ship.

Matz, with illumination from the helicopter, climbed through the rubble to the bridge where he conferred with Capt. Wabeke. "He seemed like he was in a state of shock," remembers Morgan, with engineers nearby. They all made their way back to the stern where a portable pump, capable of throwing 250 pounds of water a minute, plus extra lengths of firehose and additional fire-fighting equipment, had been painstakingly lowered onto the ship which now had a vertical pitch of up to 25 feet in steadily rising seas. Matz had to rig a hose and tackle arrangement to lower the pump. When he got to the vessel and then discovered that the hose-coupling hoses didn't fit, "I had to cut our hose to match theirs and practically fabricated new fittings to adapt to theirs."

With everything finally hooked up, Matz directed a crew to do what it could to cool down the skin of the ship. But after an hour and a half of trying without success to contain the fire, the pump fell into the ocean. "That was a real letdown," says Matz. The crew retreated to the bridge over decks which were now so hot the tar in the deck seams was bubbling. There, the remaining crewmen and passengers huddled under curtains, draped with whatever other fabric they could rip from the walls and attempted to avoid the thick, noxious smoke while awaiting a helicopter lift.

No way for fire to escape

Matz elaborates on his frustrations: "A big problem was that we couldn't vent the fire, give it an avenue of escape. We tried piling plywood against some of the portholes that had been blown out by explosions but that didn't work. The ship kept taking on water through the portholes and from our hose, but without a pump there was no way to get rid of the water. That's why it eventually started to list. The ship was laid out funny. The generator back aft should have been separate from the engine room. It wasn't."

Meanwhile, at 7:45 a.m., the super-

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tanker *Williamsburgh*, the largest tanker ever built in the United States, arrived on the scene to assist in the rescue. Its mammoth presence proved to be a blessing because, despite a full load of oil, it rode low in the water with a small draft, creating a high degree of stability. It also had a helicopter landing pad on its forward deck and had room in its superstructure for hundreds of people, despite carrying a crew of only 27.

Cmdr. Morgan and his helicopter crew, who had refueled in Yakutat after lowering Matz, were back hovering over the lifeboats with two other copters. "I saw that the passengers from the first lifeboat were having a terribly tough time climbing the rope ladders that had been let over the side of the *Williamsburgh*. It was just too much for those old folks to do. I must have liked that. It was taking too long. I decided right then we've got to start hoisting. They're not hacking it." It was 9:35 a.m.

Heroes by retired nurse

Isabella Brex, who had become separated from her husband Irving in the rush for lifeboats, had now been adrift for five hours. She remembers the *Williamsburgh* coming into view. "Oh, it looked huge," she said. "But, God, it looked good." When she saw that she had at least a 40-foot climb up a rope ladder onto the tanker, she said, "I figured I had no choice but to grab and start climbing. There was no way I was going to spend any more time in that lifeboat." That she was able to pull herself onto the *Williamsburgh* proved to be another blessing: She is a retired school nurse and her medical talents were immediately put to use in helping to treat the hundreds who would soon be deposited on the supertanker.

Cmdr. Morgan's decision to begin hoisting passengers and crew members set off an orchestrated series of lifts by three to five helicopters in which loads of 8 to 15 people, depending on total weight, were hoisted into the copters, flown over the *Williamsburgh* and unloaded as quickly as possible. The copters would then immediately return to a particular lifeboat to pick up more survivors. If one had to return to Yakutat for refueling, it would take loads of survivors into the town with it.

PO Oliverson, the flight mechanic of a four-man helicopter crew under Lt. Bruce Melnick piloted 110

survivors from lifeboats and put them onto the *Williamsburgh*, described the hoisting operation. "It took about three to five minutes to hoist one person 20 to 30 feet into the copter," he recalls. "I operated the hoist and gave directional signals to the pilot who could not see the lifeboat below because we were directly overhead. The person was lowered doorway in a way that allows me to lean out over the water."

"The basket would be lowered into the lifeboat, someone would somehow crawl in, hold on for dear life, and we'd hook it from her into the copter. Then another crew member would flip the basket over (crewmen had to literally bang on the knuckles of some frightened passengers to get them to release their grip), and carry the person back to the copter where we tried to distribute the weight evenly. When we reached our weight limit, we'd hustle over to the *Williamsburgh*, unload in about five minutes, and go back for more passengers."

Another crew member described the loaded helicopters as far from being sanctuaries of joy, however. While obviously relieved, the survivors presented a grim picture: snow-white, shocked and nauseated, in various states of undress and unable to control physical functions. Noise level on the helicopter was extremely high so communication was almost impossible.

No. 6 farthest away

Having made the first at-sea landing of his career to drop blankets onto the *Williamsburgh*, Air Force Capt. Walter Lincoln was ready to go to work—"and picked out a lifeboat that was farthest away from the supertanker. It was lifeboat No. 6, a boat that was to provide the rescue mission with its most anxious hours."

"On a floyer, I was struck by the jam-packed conditions and the age of the people," Walters recalls. "I knew then we better drop our PJs (parajumpers) into the water because those folks would have trouble with the hoist. (Unlike the Coast Guard's baskets, the Air Force copter was equipped with a jungle penetrator, an anchor-like device used primarily for river rescues). Sgt. John Cassidy and Jose Rios, dressed in full scuba suits, jumped from 10 feet into the cold Alaskan waters and swam with survival supplies and flares to the floundering lifeboat."

They helped to strap people onto the hoist and assisted—over a period of several hours—42 people from the boat up into the helicopter,

which then put them on the *Williamsburgh*.

Then, a series of coincidences occurred that led to leave No. 6 adrift with 18 people and the two paramedic specialists for 12 more hours.

Walters's Air Force helicopter was called to the *Prinsendam* to take off the 10-foot-long, 10-foot-wide lifeboat members and, at 3:30 p.m., Capt. Wabeke, "He was definitely the last man off the ship," said co-pilot Capt. Bill Gillam. "He gave us a hand-shake and a thank-you."

A Coast Guard helicopter on its way to the rescue site lost its instruments and was having problems navigating in deteriorating weather conditions. The Air Force HC-130, piloted by Capt. Dave Briskie—the flying gas station for the Air Force helicopter—was called to rescue the Canadian helicopter. Using directional-finding equipment and search radar, the airplane finally located the Canadians in low visibility and escorted them into Yakutat.

Capt. Walters's helicopter returned to lifeboat No. 6 and was beginning to hoist more people when a 10-foot-long, 10-foot-wide inflatable cable with the lifeboat rudder snapped and, demolishing the copter's hoist capability, Walters, now running low on fuel and without his refueling source, had no choice but to leave. The helicopter fortunately, the 850-foot tanker, the *Soho Intrepid*, was standing by.

Getting a steer from the *Boutwell*, which had arrived on the scene at 2:30 p.m., bucking crosswinds of 45 kts, Walters's helicopter landed on one-half-mile, Walters and Gillam finally shut down the copter on the deck of the tanker after 30 minutes of delicate piloting. It was 4:57 p.m.

Wide range of problems

On board the *Williamsburgh*, Air Force doctor Don Hudson and his makeshift medical team of paramedics, firefighters and even Alaska State Troopers—all whom had been airlifted to the tanker—faced more than 250 survivors who presented a staggering range of medical problems.

"It seemed to be a little bit of everything," recalled Dr. Hudson, including a woman with a brain tumor, epileptic seizures, terminal cancer, even one man with a malaria attack. "Everyone was cold and most were suffering in shivers from motion sickness," said Dr. Hudson. "Six or seven passengers were in advanced stages of hypothermia

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(dangerously low body temperature) and I was sure someone was going to die. We had three people that I would say had less than an hour before they were irreversible."

Dr. Hudson and his troops quickly instituted a system of triage—separating the most critical cases and taking care to slowly warm them back to normal. They organized a buddy system among the survivors so everyone was always being watched by a partner. Medics rotated among the survivors who were sprawled everywhere on five decks—in corridors, offices, store-rooms, the few cabins, the galley, on deck—examining each one every 10 minutes. Hudson himself kept moving, stopping now and then to look at people.

"As people came on board I would tell them, 'I need you.' 'Watch this guy's eyes.' 'Take her pulse.' 'Keep me posted.' I wanted to get across the feeling that people were going to die if they didn't help me," recalls Hudson. "That kind of involvement got them over thinking about their own ills."

Hudson felt that the age of the passengers contributed to a smooth and orderly operation. "If we had been dealing with people 35 or under, there would have been more panic," he says. "These older people had things in perspective. Their lives were straightened out. The wisdom of the years really paid off."

By 6:30 p.m., the last of the lifeboats was being emptied and two more Coast Guard cutters, the *Melton* and *Woodrush*, stood by as darkness descended. Soon after, the *Williamsburgh*, with some 380 survivors, made for Valdez, 14 hours away and the only port that could accommodate the 225,000-ton tanker. The *Boutwell*, with some 80 survivors aboard, had departed for Sitka earlier.

At 8:00 p.m., the Coast Guard in Juneau, working from the manifest of the *Prinsendam*, plus Holland-America and Customs officials' records, reported that they believed everyone had been rescued.

'Where are my PJs?'

At 9:16 p.m., Lt. Col. Bill Langley, 71st ARRC commander at Elmendorf, cabled the Juneau RCC: *Where are my PJs?* Confirmation of the missing lifeboat was quick to come from the *Sohio Intrepid* where Capt. Walters and his crew had been forced down: *PJs left in lifeboat with 20 survivors from Prinsendam. Left with PRC 90 radio and mark 13 flares.*

The Juneau command immediately dispatched the *Boutwell* back out to sea, along with an HC-130 aircraft from Kodiak. The remnants of typhoon Vernon, which had miraculously held off for most of the operation, had now closed in, bringing 35-foot seas, freezing rain and 40-knot winds.

In lifeboat No. 6, Sgts. Rios and Cassidy had rigged a tarpaulin over the passengers to ward off the rain and spray. "They literally saved peoples' lives," said *Prinsendam* cruise photographer Terry Allen, who was on the boat. "Some of the people got excited during the night," said Sgt. Rios. "They kept telling us to use the flares, but we didn't want to use them until we actually had a ship or aircraft in sight."

Irving Brex, 67 and a diabetic, was suffering shock from not having received insulin for 48 hours. Brex recalls: "While I was sick as dog, I initially felt it was only a matter of time until we would be picked up. But after a while, I was beginning to wonder how I was going to make it. I had to force myself to stay awake. I must have hallucinated a couple of times."

Last survivors picked up

Finally, at 1:00 a.m., some 18 hours after their ordeal had begun, they saw the sweeping searchlights of the *Boutwell*. Sgt. Cassidy set off a flare. Then, as the ship's searchlight scanned the seas, Cassidy, a veteran of about 60 rescue missions in Alaska, used a survival mirror to bounce the light back to the *Boutwell*. The ship caught the flash and edged up to the tossing lifeboat. The freezing, exhausted survivors were pulled into the warmth and comfort of the Coast Guard cutter.

The miraculous rescue was over. There had been no deaths or even a serious injury. The final count: 324 passengers, 200 crew—survivors all.

For six more days, the once-sleek, \$50-million cruise vessel was alternately towed and cut adrift to wallow in its own slow agony. It was a sad sight. Debris covered the decks, the bridge was gutted, the hull and cabin-sides scorched with ugly black streaks. Smoke continued to drift from its innards. The *Prinsendam* listed dangerously as it took on more water through its blown-out port-holes. Finally, just after daybreak on the overcast morning of Oct. 11, it rolled slowly over on its side, resting there for a minute and a half, before sliding bow first to the bottom in 8,830 feet of water.

PH