***General von Steuben’s* Last Trip**

**Translated from a 1940s newspaper article.**

**Wilhelm Gustloff Museum**

Pillau in East Prussia. February 9, 1945. Tens of thousands of refugees from all parts of Eastern Prussia crowd in the streets, houses and ruins of the city and the port.

The ship - Your hope.

Since the afternoon of February 3, gray and cloudy, the former luxury steamer of the North German Lloyd "*General Steuben*" has been in the harbor basin of the former U-Flotilla 21. Until a few weeks ago, the 17,500-ton ship was an submarine barracks in Danzig-Neufahrwasser.

At the beginning of February, it went on its first evacuation trip from Pillau to Swinoujscie with weak escort and got through happily with well over a thousand wounded. After the wounded had been handed over to a hospital platoon command, the ship left Swinoujscie on February 6, moored a few miles away from Swinoujscie due to fog, and finally entered Pillau on February 8. The refugees have been storming the ship since the early hours of February 9th.

So they press in to get aboard in most cases, they are ordered to reject anyone who tries to save himself from the increasingly narrow bridgehead as a man capable of fighting. Supported by broomsticks and fence slats, the wounded streamed in from the dressing places and from the Königsberg hospitals. Others lie restless, aware of their total helplessness, on makeshift stretchers, freezing, hoping for warmth, medical help and rescue.

The ship quickly fills up far beyond its target occupancy. The large promenade decks become mass camps where the wounded lie head to head. Slightly wounded people are crowding in the lower decks. In the corridors, the nurses and paramedics find it difficult to find their way between mattresses and people who have felt something like security, warmth or hope for the first time in weeks. In the afternoon there are more than 2,000 wounded and around 1,000 refugees on board, plus the crew with 100 heads.

Around 3:30 p.m., the ship is pulled into the middle of the harbor basin by tugs. At the same time as the "*General Steuben*", the old torpedo boat "*T 196*" and the even older mine search boat "*FT 10*" from Pillau depart as escorts. "*T 196*" takes two hundred refugees from Königsberg on board at the last moment. After a Soviet hunting reconnaissance aircraft had appeared above the "*General Steuben*" berth in the morning, two Soviet fighters observed the approach and called "*T 196*" at low altitude. They turn as the ships reach the open fairway and begin their fateful journey under a snowy-gray sky with calm sea.

The "*General Steuben*" is painted in camouflage colors, sails under the war flag and has light flak on the upper deck. It is not identified as a hospital ship and runs with dimmed lights.

The hungry receive food for the first time, the half-frozen warm themselves. Perhaps one or the other of the wounded who are lying helplessly on their mattresses thinks of the danger at sea. But the uninterrupted help of the doctors and nurses, who work continuously, gives them a feeling of security, which after the terrible tension of the past week does not reveal the remaining dangers.

With Extreme Strength Going Ahead

With a 10 to 13 mile journey, the escort glides into the night. The artillery fire rumbles for a long time from the land battles. Between 10pm and 11pm "*General Steuben*" enters the most dangerous area between the so-called Stolpe Bank and the Pomeranian coast at Stolp. Here ten days ago the torpedoes of a Soviet submarine overtook the "*Wilhelm Gustloff*", the downfall of which was kept as secret as possible and is hardly known to the wounded and refugees on board.

"*General Steuben*" starts to run at full speed. The old minesweeper is difficult to keep going. February 10, 1945 begins. The clocks on the bridge almost indicate the first hour when suddenly a dull detonation shakes the ship. At the same time the alarm rings "fire in the ship". The "*General Steuben*" glides on for a short time as if nothing had happened. On the upper deck, the operating teams rush to their guns. Then the ship remains motionless. All of the following takes place in minutes in which a thousandfold fate and a thousandfold death come together.

In the glare of the spotlights, which immediately shine over from the escort "*TF 10*", and in the light of the emergency signals that are locked on the bridge, "*General Steuben*", which is hit by a torpedo on the starboard side, sinks forward with the foredeck. Shrill screams follow the silence of the first horror. The corridors are filled with explosive yellow vapors. Only a few manage to get on deck in the foredeck. Together with barrels, boxes and life rafts, they glide over the smooth deck that quickly dives into the sea into the icy water. Within a few appalling minutes the bow of the "*General Steuben*" dives to the front funnel.

The Struggle for Life

The whole ship flips to the port side, and only on this side can three or four lifeboats be launched into the water in a hurry. Any orderly rescue work is impossible from the start. The refugees and wounded in the lower decks are often surprised in their sleep by the rapidly penetrating water. There is no way out of entire decks. Only a few manage to escape through beaten portholes.

The shouting of the trapped people, which sounds for miles across the sea, makes shots of those who open up or try to fight their way out by shooting others. Those who can save themselves from the upper decks flee to the aft deck, which rises higher and higher above the sea. Instead of jumping straight into the water and looking for rescue on the countless rafts floating around, they crowd here like black, screaming grapes.

While the torpedo boat "*T 196*" moves up and down and throws depth charges to keep the Soviet submarine from further attacks, "*FT 10*" keeps as close as possible to the sinking ship and seeks a shuttle service with the lifeboats that came into the water to put. Jacob's ladders are deployed from where crew members of the minesweeper bring people on board who are frozen with cold.

A Cry of A Thousand Times

For a few minutes it seems as if the aft piece of the "*General Steuben*" will stay afloat. The terrible screaming on the upper deck subsides somewhat. But shortly after 1 a.m. the ship finally begins to sink. The aft ship rises steeply out of the water with slowly grinding screws. Black clusters of people, often tightly clamped together, fall from a height. The screaming inside the ship swells again, unforgettable for all who survive the catastrophe. Shortly thereafter, the ship goes almost vertically into the depth, and the pull sweeps the countless. Suddenly, as with a single, cruel cut, the thousandfold cry of those sentenced to death breaks off.

300 Snatched from the Baltic Sea

In the crippling silence that suddenly lies over the searchlight-lit sea, an hour-long struggle for the life of those who have escaped the death ship and the suction and drift in the icy water begins. The self-overloaded escort ships take around three hundred men, women and children on board. Most have to be pulled individually on deck. You are not even able to get a line anymore.

The few wounded who escape the catastrophe are still clearing in the face of the buoys thrown at them. They are so exhausted that they don't even respond to calls. Dead faces float on the surface of the water with frozen faces. For almost seven hours, "*T 196*" and "*FT 10*" fight for the lives of a few hundred people. Many come on board as if dead and wake up more from their torpor.

When the winter morning of February 10th begins to dawn, the boats pick up speed and put the small group of survivors ashore in Kolberg a few hours later. The rescued later arrive in the West. The number of victims of what was then the second largest disaster in sea history is only estimated. But with sad certainty it exceeds three thousand. Most of their names will remain unknown, victims of a war waged to the point of hopeless destruction.