

Wilhelm Gustloff Museum – Survivor Account

Captain Paul Vollrath

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Tragedy of the “*Wilhelm Gustloff*”

By: Captain Paul Vollrath

I suppose to piece a story together after 35 years is rather a tricky job, yet this is that I try to report, soberly and to the point, will stand in my memory forever. Oftentimes it appears to me as it only happened the other day. This is an actual report, as I saw it, of the greatest disaster the sea has ever seen and which, let us sincerely hope, will remain forever a single tragedy.

It is the report of the sinking of the liner *Wilhelm Gustloff*, on which I served as senior second officer at the time of the disaster. It is the story of desperate people trying to escape from the diabolic holocaust of war and everything connected with it.

This tragedy at the end of the war seems to me to have been the grand finale of the slaughter, murder and insanity and if for no other reason, those people gave their lives, it may serve for time immemorial as a reminder to those, who took part and to generations to follow that wars should be prevented by all means, whatever the cost may be.

I believe this to be the first attempt to report this disaster by a survivor who happened to be at the time in a senior position on board this ill-fated ship. I do know that quite a number of stories have appeared in various papers and magazines, even a film has been made of this tragedy, but I regret to say that all these publications were more or less highly distorted, exaggerated and had little in common with the actual facts and events.

I believe that with speculations and spine-chilling yarns little is being achieved, although I do admit that it is what normally brings the money in and boosts sales of individual papers. But I sincerely believe, too, that in doing so a disservice is done to those, who had to give their lives. If we are not able to build a tombstone for those unfortunate people, my report may help to keep the memory awake of those who died, drowned, were disabled for life or lost their homes and all they possessed.

We all know too well the real background of the last months of the war in Eastern Europe and I do not wish to attempt to take these into consideration. I merely would like to report the events as they happened to me at the time. Brief notes, which I made then, may assist me.

In November 1944, I was posted to the 2nd Submarine Training Division in Gdynia (Gotenhafen). Attached to this unit were two ships, former passenger liners, to accommodate staff and trainees. They were the *Hansa*, a former liner of the Hamburg-Amerika Line, prior to the war employed on the North Atlantic run between Hamburg and New York, and the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a liner built for the "Strength through Joy" (KdF) movement of the party to take ordinary working-class people on cruises to Norway, the Baltic Sea, Madeira, and the Mediterranean, who otherwise would never have been able to afford that sort of enjoyment and recreation. She was a big ship, 25,484 gross tons and while she was not designed as a luxury liner as such, the latest comfort was built in and considered just good enough. Money seemingly did not play a very important role.

More suitable ships for the purpose they were used for during the war could not have been found. They had everything, which otherwise would have had to be built ashore; they were self-contained units, accommodation, administration, catering, light, heating, everything was available and what is more, men, fit for sea service, did not have to be employed to keep the ships running.

A merchant marine crew, men who were either unfit for active service, for health reasons or old age kept the wheels going. In addition, a number of Yugoslav merchant seamen served as deck crew on board. Both ships were lying along side a pier just opposite Gdynia in a part of the harbor which the Germans called Oxhöft and which was inside the area set aside for training submarine crews.

Even in November 1944, the war in the East appeared still very far away and the thought that one day we may have to abandon Gdynia looked like high treason to me.

But I believe it was not a month later, during December, that training was completely stopped and instead of trainees, staff and old submarine crews were armed with spades and shovels and off we went into the outer suburbs of Gdynia to dig tank trenches. Even then I explained this to myself to be no more than normal precautions and not of an urgent nature. Little we knew and less we were told or cared to know and no attempt as made to bring light into this general confusion.

We still believed that final victory would not be far off (so much for the power of propaganda), but in spite of our eager faith we heard at the time that Russian troops had broken through the German lines and Russian tanks had been roaming at will far behind the German lines. They had been reported inside East and West Prussia. We saw refugees from these parts of the country in Gdynia, who had left their homes obviously, so it seemed to me at the time, to escape an imaginary danger. How right these people had been, I only realized very much later. May this foresight on their part have saved them?

But all this could simply not be the whole truth, a simple argument, yet it did not fit into our plans. As easy as that, I may add that this was not the only opinion of young fellows but old and sensible people had the same views.

But these refugees also reported rape, murder and untold atrocities and it was hard to believe that all these reports were far-fetched fantasies and imagined dreams. No, something had to be true, as otherwise these people would never have left their homesteads, they would never have exchanged a safe house against a very uncertain future. Their looks and the state in which they arrived obviously spoke of a severe urgency.

The training course was abruptly stopped early in January 1945 and I was posted to the 22nd Submarine Training Flotilla, which, as part of the 2nd Submarine Training Division had its base in the same grounds as my former command occupied. My new home was now U 351, a training submarine and here I was to complete whatever was found to be necessary to make me a fully qualified member of the submarine service.

Barely a week was I on board, when one day we received orders to get ready and evacuate Gdynia. The flotilla was to withdraw to a new base, Wilhelmshaven (this may be called the German equivalent of Portsmouth) on the River Jade on the North Sea coast. U 351 was to go to the port of Pillau, further up the coast and serve as a generator unit to keep the lights in that port going, since all harbor installations had been bombed.

I was to report as second officer on board the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, to relieve the regular second officer, who had fallen seriously ill. I had been picked for this job as a former merchant marine officer. I remember not having been particularly delighted about this change and I remember too, having told the chief officer, who happened to be a friend of mine, something to that effect and that I did not fancy the idea to lose a fifth ship. I had lost four ships already, almost five, during the war. Three in the Mediterranean Sea, one in the English Channel off Boulogne and almost one off Le Havre by mines, bombs, and gunfire.

Not that I had any premonitions, normally one has those things always after the event, but experience had taught me that contrary to what I had believed early during the war, that I would get through unharmed and no ship I served on at any time would be lost, now every ship I served on would get sunk, and me being killed would only be a matter of time.

I didn't think that I was a Jonah either; the ferocity of war was such and the beating and hammering we received was so severe that you could hardly expect otherwise at the end of the war. Up to now I had been extremely lucky and it had become to me sort of a routine job to lost ships. Could I be lucky again? In any case I prepared for the worst as I did not like to be taken by surprise or worse, still with my pants

down. Cigarettes, a bottle of “Half and half” – a popular spirit made by Mampe at that time, a flash lamp, a knife, and a Mauser pistol and I got ready.

I was prepared. But what about all those thousands of refugees who boarded the ship almost at the same time I joined her? Who thought that it was the easiest way to escape the merciless war? Who thought that a trip to Denmark across the Baltic Sea was nothing but just a trip, no more, and although their belongings had to be left behind at least their lives had been saved?

Without causing unnecessary panic, I could not very well tell anyone of my thoughts. We all sincerely hoped that nothing would happen and that we would get through the mine infested Baltic Sea without mishap. It was clear, though, to everyone that this would not be one of those peacetime cruises. To some personal acquaintances I gave, in strict confidence, some advice. Experience had taught me that the upper decks, even when shelled, were safest. I now know that three people were thus saved; their parents however down in some of the cabins, perished.

During these last days in port, the crew was kept busy in getting lifeboats ready, distributing lifebelts to refugees, checking rafts, roll-calls, charts and navigational equipment. During the long years alongside various piers in a number of German ports, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* had not received the attention which is normally given to a seagoing vessel. On top of this, quite a number of lifeboats had to be requisitioned by the German Navy to serve a variety of purposes.

Some of these lifeboats had been anchored in various parts of the harbor in Gdynia and bottles containing some chemical, which, when released, caused fog, had been put on each boat to serve as a floating anti-aircraft fog dispenser. The fog was to prevent enemy aircraft, during attack, to spot their exact target. But in spite of that they bombed whatever they wanted at liberty and almost unharmed.

Hurriedly, some of these lifeboats were brought back and whatever else could be found was requisitioned without much ado, such as Carley floats, rafts, small motor launches and what else there was in the shape of a boat or float. Wherever there was place on the upper decks, these crafts were to float up in the event of an accident, which in fact they did and thus saved a number of lives.

Instructions as regards how to use and fasten lifebelt were broadcast over the ship's intercom, and the passengers were instructed what and what not to do during the passage. Many of these refugees had never seen a ship before, let alone sailed in one and it was difficult to acquaint them with routine matters and explain that under no circumstances was smoking on deck during passage allowed, that all portholes were to be kept closed and that no attempt was to be made to unfasten the heavy steel blinds to open them. We at least wanted to make sure that no telltale lights could escape and give our position away to any prowler in the dark.

Women, children, old and invalid people were ordered to occupy the many cabins. During all these days refugees arrived in a seemingly endless stream. They probably had been waiting already for days and nights patiently, uncertain whether or not they would be taken on board and evacuated. I believe trains at that time were still running to some make-shift schedule but no one was able to say if they still got away and through, because at that time the Russian army was all over the place and in fact already West of Gdynia, driving through Pomerania towards Mecklenburg as fast as their tanks were able to carry them.

Rows of rows of these unfortunate people waited patiently alongside the ship for their turn, their last few belongings packed into bundles. Sleet, snow, and ice covering everything with a white blanket, reminding me of one of Hyronimus Bosch's frightful paintings.

I certainly do not remember that bribes had to be paid to get on board, or that people were arrested and hustled ashore again. Perhaps this might have happened but I wish to repeat that I never heard of these things until after the war. We could not care less who or who was not allowed aboard, we were interested to get as many people on board as possible, as long as they waited their turn.

At the same time, at various other places, the same thing happened as with us. There were the other liners *Hansa*, *Potsdam*, *Cap Arcona*, *Hamburg*, *Deutschland*, *Robert Ley* and many more smaller cargo vessels, all getting ready for the big retreat and likewise taking refugees on board, columns of cars and lorries alongside with stores and provisions. It was the same picture in Königsberg, Pillau, Danzig as it was with us. This operation was more improvised than organized, a set plan seemingly had not been drawn up beforehand.

Wounded, maimed, and crippled soldiers with their whole nursing staff and medical orderlies arrived from Kulm or Kulmsee. The complete military hospital was taken aboard by us. They were divided up and billeted into the large lounges and halls. As well as it was possible under the circumstances they were made comfortable on mattresses, chairs, settees, and couches or whatever else was available.

The catering staff had been instructed to get a much food ready as possible with emphasis on much, for many people had to be fed and there could not be a question of choice selection. After all the ship had originally been designed to carry approximately 1,500 passengers and a crew of approximately 500. We now had already over 5,000 people on board and more were coming all the time. The main thing was therefore to have something hot, never mind Cordon Bleu standards.

The nautical personnel were increased. Apart from the captain, chief officer, myself as senior second officer and the third officer, two additional captains and two second officers reported for duty. In addition to the civilian crew, a number of navy personnel also reported for duty.

Gdynia at that time appeared to me like a humming beehive. People were everywhere, the whole life of the town seemed to be displayed on the street and in the open. Refugees, with their meager belongings on carts, prams, and anything else with two or four wheels and what could be called a vehicle, stood around in clusters and exchanged the latest news. Even then their last few belongings disappeared, children were lost and families and old friends and neighbors were separated.

In between tanks, army units, naval personnel, nurses and Wrens (Women's Naval Auxiliary) tried to make their way. A knot of men, soldiers, children, material, weapons, machinery, which I was sure could not be disentangled. And as it was ashore, so it was in the various harbor basins; transponders bringing troops from the Baltic front, destroyers, minesweepers, tankers, cruisers, patrol boats, everything seemed to be on the move.

All the refugees whom we took on board during all these last days and who did not seem to diminish were counted bodily by our purser and his staff and the few remaining stewards brought them to their places or cabins. Apart from these refugees we had a considerable number of naval personnel on board, belonging to various units but mainly to the 2nd Submarine Training Division.

Sailing day was to be January 30 and during the evening of the 29th, the gangways were drawn and no more people were allowed on board. As far as I can remember, we were to proceed together with the *Hansa*, the submarine depot ship *Wilhelm Bauer*, destroyers, some submarines and quite a number of other, smaller ships and naval units in a proper convoy, to some port in Denmark.

At noon we did in fact proceed. It was difficult to get away from the pier – at first the ship drew too much water, Gdynia not having been designed in the first place to accommodate ships of her size; secondly, during her long stay in port, a heavy mud layer formed around the hull of the ship. However, eventually and with the help of some tugs we succeeded after about two hours. We passed the breakwater and there, still at anchor we saw the *Hansa* still taking refugees on board, who had been brought alongside by tenders.

But instead of the convoy assembling and proceeding together as originally planned, we proceeded on our own toward the peninsula of Hela with one minesweeper as escort ahead of us. There too we did not stop but instead a small torpedo boat, *Löwe*, a former Norwegian torpedo boat, *Gylter*, introduced herself as our escort, together with an even smaller torpedo retriever boat, *TF 1* of 500 tons. This was our spectacular escort force, two small units of the German Navy without any practical experience of escort duties, no submarine chasers and that in spite of a submarine warning having been circulated and being imminent in the very area we were to pass through. For the first time during the whole war Russian submarines had been able to clear the very extensive minefields and nets laid at the mouth of the Gulf of Finland and broken out.

Shortly before we left, it had been agreed that it was advisable to take the more northerly route instead of the coastal route. This was supposed to be a mineswept channel called Route No. 58, running approximately 20 nautical miles North of the Pomeranian coast parallel to it. The coastal lane was supposed to be mine infested. The whole Baltic Sea was at that time already mine infested, dropped by planes and certain lanes, which were marked every five nautical miles or so by marker buoys were kept clean. This was, of course, more wishful thinking as the available minesweeping force did not by far suffice to do a proper job.

Apart from that a minesweeper could sweep a lane up to 100 times and a ship passing over the 101st blew up. The intricate devices incorporated into the last magnetic and acoustic mines defied any normal mine detecting devices, no matter how modern they were.

It is futile to argue today what would have been the better way to sail. A certain risk either way had to be taken; it was just a choice between mines or torpedoes. But in deciding on the deep water way, the naval authorities should have provided us with a better escort force.

With the help of the naval personnel, we introduced an effective look-out system. As far as I can remember, each watch had eight look-out men, everyone his own sector to starboard and port. We had a walkie-talkie radio set inside the chart room to get in direct and quick touch with our escort. Granted, the look-out men were not of much use, particularly as there was sleet and snow and everyone who ever had to do that job will readily agree with me that one could not see much under those weather conditions.

Who was to spot a conning tower in that foul weather, pitch dark? Yet, by chance perhaps the wake of the ship, the bow wave could have been detected in time, we could not take any chances. All a likely attacker had to do during this memorable night was just to pick on one of the marker buoys, stay put, and wait – something was bound to pass along sooner or later. And that we were on the retreat was most certainly known to the Russians, for movements of this magnitude could not be kept secret for long.

For about 1.5 hours, we sailed a northerly course out of the Bay of Danzig to arrive at the turning point leading us into lane No. 58. Our escorts tried to keep pace with us, as best they could. Not that we were speeding along; the ship had originally been designed for a speed of 15 knots, now we made around 10 -11 knots due to the fact that some damage had been caused to the shafts as a result of a near mine explosion earlier during the war.

There was no gale but the sea was short, force 5, and the wind blew with the same force from a westerly direction. Shortly after passing the peninsula of Hela on our port beam, the small torpedo retriever boat reported taking on water in her engine room. She stood at the time astern of us and had to be released and returned to port.

These comparatively small boats were not really meant to do sea duty, they were more or less coastal craft and useless in even moderate weather.

I was on watch from 16.00 to 20.00 hours and up to that point, nothing really happened. But when darkness fell, shortly after 4pm, I noticed that the steaming and position lights had been turned on. This is normally the duty of the officer of the watch and I stormed into the wheelhouse to demand an explanation and was told that a convoy was expected ahead of us on a converging course. To avoid a collision, the lights had been turned on. I had never heard such nonsense during all my war time career; no lights, absolutely no lights were to be shown under any circumstances and the fact that perhaps we might run the risk of colliding with another ship in the dark did not worry me as much as showing telltale lights to prowlers. We might as well have smoked openly on deck.

Anyway I strongly objected to this and eventually the steaming lights were turned off. At 20.00, I was relieved and before leaving the bridge I passed on course and all other details to the next officer of the watch. Shortly before a German airplane passed nearby and we exchanged recognition signals and I was wondering why that had been done?

The command position was rather confused. Here was a merchant ship, with a merchant crew, assisted by naval personnel and all sorts of suggestions were passed on – suggestions made by naval personnel. In short disagreement between the two commands was in evidence, which certainly did not help.

Our supper was brought up into our cabins, as that was about the only place left, since the whole ship was taken up by refugees and naval personnel. After supper we talked shop for a little while and at about 21.00 the two officers of my watch left for their own quarters to retire.

At 21.09, I was just about to swing myself into the bunk, of course, fully dressed, when we received the first hit. Mine was my immediate reaction, but shortly after that a second and third explosion almost tore the ship apart. There was no doubt any longer, these were torpedoes. How I got out of the bunk and into my shoes, which I had taken off against better judgment and how I got my lifebelt into position I do not remember, but I do remember that tying up the strings on the life-belt caused difficulties.

My hands were trembling; I am not ashamed to admit that. I was shivering with fright all over, as I had experienced each time I had lost a ship. But perhaps instinctively I did the right things; it was by now, after all, a routine job to lose ships. With my two small parcels, cigarettes, bottle, flash lamp, revolver tucked underneath the life-belt, flash lamp at the ready (the light was shut off immediately after the torpedoes struck), I made my way to the chartroom. The door was blocked and no matter how hard I tried, I could not open it. Anyway, I said to myself there

are plenty of staff around, they can look after themselves so I went back and passed out onto the bridge deck through a side door on the starboard side.

What I had to face here already so soon after the explosions made me forget altogether to get to the bridge. Immediately after we had been hit by the torpedoes, the ship stopped and listed to the port side. Emergency lights had been switched on in the meanwhile and at least one could see better. I lit a cigar, perhaps just to cool my nerves and a lady came to me begging to be saved. Well, I said, there is nothing to worry about, don't you see I am enjoying a cigar?

On the starboard side, people had assembled already and tried to get into the lifeboats. But unfortunately, because of the already heavy list and the fact that the lifeboats hung in gravity davits, the center of gravity had already shifted too much to port and the lifeboats did not move. Perhaps, and in addition to that the falls and rollers of the lifeboats were iced up and acted as stoppers and as much as we tried to get the boats moving, we did not succeed.

On the upper decks of the ship, the crowds assembled patiently. Granted, there was a certain amount of commotion and excitement, granted there was pushing and shouting going on, but there were no signs of panic. In resignation, people just waited around or just gave a hand. I do admit that I do not know what went on below decks and in the cabins; I was too busy getting people from the starboard side to the port side and into the boats. But I cannot, in spite of various stories which appeared later on, verify that people committed suicide or that people were shot.

While I was still busy on the starboard side, I heard someone mentioning that the captain and the officers on the bridge had committed suicide. Indeed shots had been fired but in the excitement people did not know that red starshells had been fired to attract ships in the vicinity and come for help. I went forward to the bridge to report how things were going with the lifeboats and secondly to try and stop these starshell shootings.

Whoever happened to be at sea that night inside an area of 10 nautical miles must have heard the explosions. Apart from that, as I found out when entering the chartroom, our VHF transmitter was working and calling for help. In fact here too, there was no need to do that either because our escort has been close at hand. Our normal wireless transmitter was out of action right away, but to me all that was immaterial.

Back I went to the starboard lifeboats. What was I to do? How were we to save all the thousands of people in so short a time, because with the ship listing fast and I knew that she would not last much longer. I knew too that not by far enough life-saving equipment and lifeboats were available. Regretfully, I have to admit that. We survivors may always remember that thousands of people drowned or froze to death for us in the biggest of all sea disasters.

It was now high time for me to look after my own lifeboat, No. 6, on the port side. I had given strict instructions that, no matter what, without my permission the boat would not be lowered and I tried to get as many people from the starboard side to the port side, but strangely, most did not want to come – thinking that it was safer on the high side of the ship and away from the water. They may have feared too that they might be sucked under.

On my way to the port side, I passed through the main hall and saw a casual acquaintance of mine, a Wren, whom I had given some advice of how and what to do just in case. I asked her, in an act of bravado, to give me a kiss, which I got without hesitation, though kisses were not so easily exchanged then as they are now.

The port side appeared to be strangely deserted. All of the davits were empty and all the boats bar mine gone. I encountered the chief officer lying in the scuppers with a leg injury, an old man of 68 years of age, visibly shaken and unable to move, so I helped him into my boat. Once more I went back to the starboard side to get more people, which I found to be hard since by now the list was quite heavy and it was an uphill struggle.

But in spite of this I got there and luckily some more people joined me and back once more we went. At 22.00 hours, I finally joined my boat and down we went into the dark uncertainty. Perhaps less than 15 feet, that was all the boat had to be lowered for the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was almost lying on her side. It was a little difficult to get away from the ship, as lots of debris was floating around, the boat being packed to over capacity was hard to handle and the oars could not be used immediately as people were milling around everywhere.

Apart from that it was pitch dark and there was hardly a seaman in the boat who was able to help me; the people in their fright shouted around and screamed helplessly.

This was the only time that I remember someone taking his revolver in his hand and threatening to shoot people if they were not instantly silent and did what they were told, and that was I. Perhaps my shouting did more to restore order than the gun, which could not be seen anyway. In any case, very quickly I had the boat under control and away we went.

One of the captains stood on the bridge wing, about 20 feet above us and shouted who was in charge of the boat and I replied to that. To this his reply was “Mach’s gut!” – “Good luck!” Around us, all around us were humans floating and shouting for help, debris, floats, wooden planks, rafts, everything that could float.

Without endangering the lives of the people in my boat, I could not have taken on any more. These boats were designed to take about 60 people and a quick nose count had given me the figure of 90. The boat was heavily weighted in the water,

much more than it was designed to carry. The gunwales were almost down to sea level.

Perhaps the decision not to take any more people and leave them to their fate was the hardest I ever had to make. Here was comparative safety inside the boat, on the other side certain death. Even today I often ask myself why did you not at least attempt to get some more into the boat? But still my answer is that should I have done so, the boat would have capsized, there were too many people swimming in the water.

Luckily enough the wind and sea had died down, as otherwise I am not sure if the boat would have made it. At 22.10 hours, one hour dead after the first torpedoes had struck, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* went down. I had stopped rowing, as that was senseless and it would have meant getting too far away from the spot. We were perhaps 50 yards away; the emergency lights on the upper decks were still burning and I saw someone standing on the side of the huge funnel even at sea level.

Fortunately, there was a doctor in the boat and I told him to look after the people. My cigarettes and the bottle were passed around and this certainly helped keep up morale and courage. There was not much else one could do. For about an hour we drifted around; every now and then I made out the shadow of a ship. I saw a destroyer, a merchant ship the *Minden*, if I remember correctly, and the cruiser *Admiral Hipper*. Slowly they moved around sometimes even stopping to pick up survivors.

At about 23.00 hours, the *Löwe* came alongside to pick us up but I shouted over to them not to bother, we were fine and to look after those still in the water and on rafts. Later on they once more came close and told us through the megaphone that they were going to drop depth charges and indeed a short time later, we heard the explosions and the boat made creaking noises.

For this sort of treatment these lifeboats had certainly not been constructed. The water shock was too severe and suddenly I feared the boat may split open. I sensed that there was a murmuring of disapproval going on in the boat and I could not make out why at first.

After the ship had gone down, there was a dead silence around us, each of us left with out thoughts alone. It was incredible to believe that hardly an hour had passed between the life and death of thousands, wiped out, swept away, drowned, frozen to death. How many of approximately 8,000 people had been saved? This was a question I asked myself again and again.

Only then did I remember that when drifting away from the *Gustloff's* side I had seen a huge hole, the ship having been torn open up to the foredeck. And just there, deep down, where the swimming pool was, 60 Wrens had been billeted. One hour this inferno had lasted and dragged love, hopes, and wishes down to the bottom of the

sea. What is one hour, 60 minutes, 3,600 seconds? Sometimes it may appear to be eternity and I am sure no one will ever forget this.

I remember, too, that when the ship went down the siren went off, like a last greeting or the moaning of a dying animal. I had encountered that experience before and landlubbers always say that ships do not have a soul. Technically, this behavior is easily explained by stress, but I always thought that it so very much reminded me of the last cry of a dying animal.

At about 2.30 hours, the *Löwe* finally came alongside and took us over. One may question how she so easily found us each time but my flash lamp did indeed give good service. How many more people could have been saved if lifejackets had been supplied with flash lamps? It was not so very difficult to get alongside the torpedo boat and get the survivors transferred. She was low in the water, flush deck and the people scrambled over to her into safety. And only then did I notice that we had a completely crippled old man in the boat, unable to move, funny how fate works. Once on board the torpedo boat, a lady came up to me and told me that she nor others did not like me sending the boat away time and time again, to rescue others first; that was the explanation for the grumbling in the lifeboat at the time, but she told me I had been right after all.

The crew of the *Löwe* did outstanding work in spite of many attempts to save lives having been futile. Men and women were stripped and hosed down with hot water and put into bunks, in twos and threes, nude as God had made them, happy to be alive, no care in the world if they were lying next to the opposite sex or not. Hot drinks were served and blankets dished out. I saw members of the ship's compliment stripped; they had given their clothes to the survivors.

Up to 4.00 hours the *Löwe* drifted around picking up more survivors until it was realized that nothing more could be done. Of the total number of survivors of about 800 people, the *Löwe* saved about 300, indeed a splendid feat for so small a craft.

After a few days in Kolberg, a small seaport on the Pomeranian coast, where we had been landed, we made our way further West by submarine first to Sassnitz on the island of Ruegen and thence by ship, rail, road on foot, home.

The *Wihelm Gustloff* sank in lat. 55 deg. 8.4 min. N. long. 17 deg. 39.5 min. E. in 61m depth. This position I had been given immediately when I came aboard the *Löwe* by her commanding officer.

In 1947, I passed over this spot again in a merchant ship and once more everything came to life, an epitaph stood before my inner eye and I clearly saw the inscription in huge letters – "NEVER AGAIN!"