THE UNITED STATES' MEDAL OF HONOR IN FROSTY WATERS - COXSWAIN GEORGE WILLIS, USS *TIGRESS* (1873)

by Glenn M. Stein, FRGS

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The United States' Medal of Honor is not thought of as a *non-combatant* lifesaving award, but once upon a time the medal was bestowed upon naval personnel several times for acts of gallantry in saving (or attempting to save) fellow human creatures from perils at sea. In fact, it was not until 1942 that the Medal of Honor became a solely combat decoration for the United States Navy and Marine Corps.

Naval Medal of Honor, type 1, with first style ribbon and fouled anchor (1862-1888) (photo: D. Boyce)

When it was established in December 1861, the Navy Medal of Honor was only intended for enlisted men of the Navy and Marine Corps; officers would have to wait a further 54 years before being made eligible. The original provisions of the medal (the first decoration authorized by Congress to be worn on the uniform) contained a scant few words which opened the window of opportunity for it to be awarded for lifesaving at sea:

"*. . . which shall be bestowed upon such petty officers, seamen, landsmen and marines as shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry in action and* ***other seamanlike qualities……"***

Over a decade passed before Congress created the Gold and Silver Lifesaving Medals on June 20, 1874. As of 1880, among several awards to civilians, one Gold Medal and two Silver Medals had been bestowed upon naval personnel (to one officer and two enlisted men respectively).

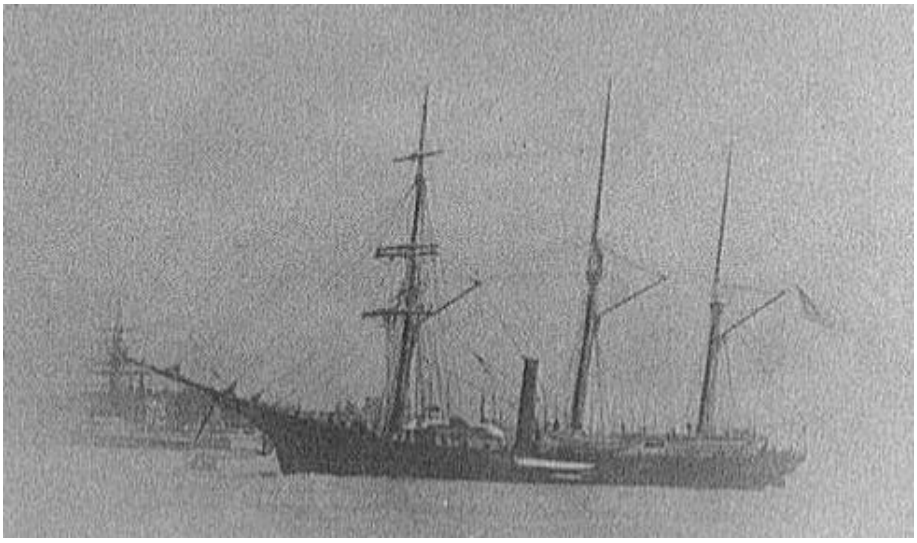
By this date, at least 55 Navy Medals of Honor were awarded for non-combatant heroism. The first ones had gone to seven sailors of the USS *Rhode Island*, who were engaged in saving the lives of men on the sinking USS *Monitor* during a heavy gale off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, on Dec. 30, 1862 (one of which was posthumous). In the history of the Medal of Honor, approximately 185 awards have been made to the Navy and five to the Marine Corps for non-combatant heroism.

The Army Medal of Honor was approved by President Lincoln only six months after its naval counterpart, and it too was originally intended to recognize "gallantry in action, and other soldier-like qualities" among enlisted soldiers. However, there were two striking differences regarding the Army award: (1) In March 1863, Congress passed an amendment to make Army officers eligible, and (2) In the history of the Army Medal of Honor, only three have ever been awarded for services other than combat heroism. One was given to Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh, US Army Air Corps Reserve, in 1928, and another recipient was retired Major General Adolphus W. Greely, who received the medal in 1935, "For his life of splendid public service".

One incident that resulted in the award of the Medal of Honor which truly combined extreme bravery and 'seamanlike qualities' was the result of actions by Boston native George Willis, Coxswain on the USN-chartered Canadian steam sealer *Tigress*.

In May 1873, under a civilian crew, the *Tigress* had found some survivors on an ice floe from the US North Polar Expedition ship *Polaris*, after they had drifted for many months. From August through October, the *Tigress* was on another rescue mission in the Arctic, where she searched for additional survivors of the *Polaris*. The *Tigress'* captain, Commander James A. Greer, found papers and instruments in a camp previously occupied by members of the expedition and was told by natives that some *Polaris* survivors started making their way south in June in small boats constructed from the wreckage of their vessel.

Greer crisscrossed the ice-strewn waters, looking for the boats or whaling vessels that might have picked up the survivors. Fields of moving ice stretched across the water and hundreds of building-sized icebergs lumbered about--the combination was a powder keg for disaster. During the first week of September, the *Tigress* forced her way into Cumberland Sound, Baffin Island, where she remained for two weeks in order to repair the damage caused by repeated pounding from the ice.



USS *Tigress* (U.S. Library of Congress)

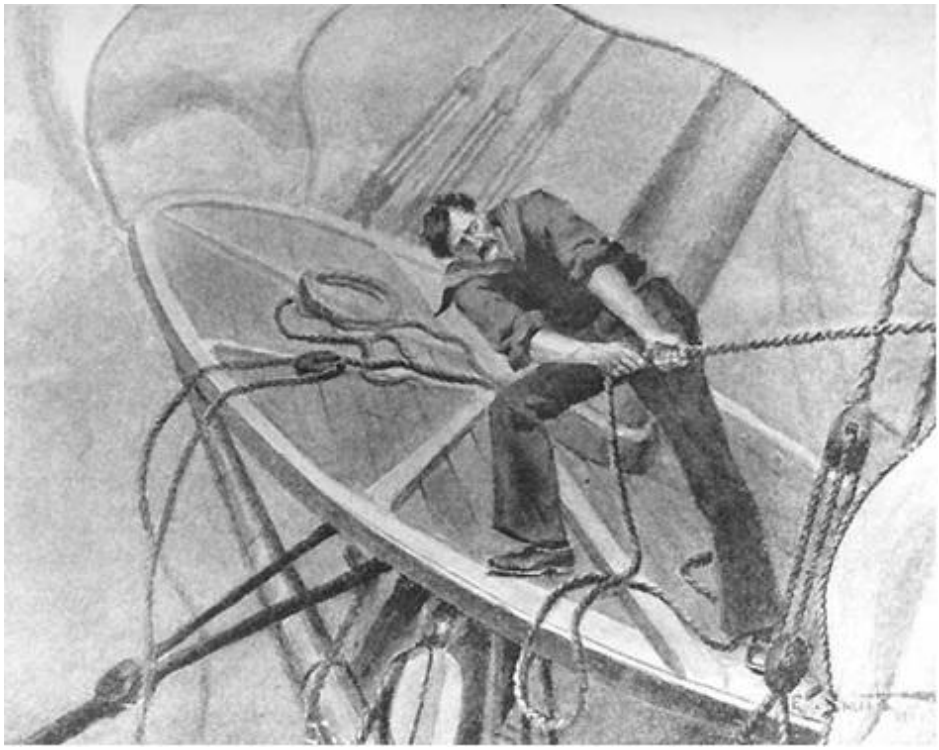
By the time Greer brought his command back out into the Davis Strait, what little daylight remained was fading with the approach of the Arctic winter. Before the *Tigress* could get clear of the streaming pack ice, a fresh northeaster blew up and menaced the ship. Greer ploughed her into the ice, backed off and under full speed surged forward again and again, ramming the white barrier. The wind steadily increased and the *Tigress* protested against the ice grinding at her sides.

Having broken out into open water, there was no time for rest and self-congratulation--silent, unseen leviathans prowled in the darkness. But the *Tigress* also struggled against the increasingly larger waves, cascading water along her decks: a storm at sea is an awesome thing to behold--the fury of Poseidon surging up from the depths and churning the ocean wave. This was the scene just south of the Arctic Circle on the night of Sept. 22, 1873, between Baffin Island and Greenland's western shore.

With the gale at its height, the whole of the ship's company was on deck (excepting Chief Engineer Melville's engine room crew), desperately holding onto lifelines or the weather rail. The *Tigress* was lying as close to the wind as possible and her engines roared to keep her there; the spanker was half-furled, with only a reefed staysail forward.

As the monstrous seas thundered over the ship, apprehensive eyes turned upward to see the fore topgallant sail flap furiously high above the deck. If the rogue sail caused the foremast to go by the board, the cold churning sea would devour the ship and the 44 souls aboard her.

Coxswain Willis realized someone must act and he struggled along a lifeline to the mainmast, where executive officer Lieutenant Commander Henry C. White received a salute from the determined petty officer. White was well aware of the danger posed by the errant sail, but no man was to be ordered aloft during the gale: he hoped good luck might carry them through. Willis, however, harboured no such feelings and asked to be assigned the task. Though White beamed at the sailor's devotion, he refused his request. More determined than ever, Willis insisted on going without orders and hauled himself forward to the weather shrouds.



Willis voluntarily furling the sails alone. (Photo NH 79943 – *Deeds of Valor*)

Twice thrown back by the wind and sea, Willis finally reached the ratlines, and nimble-footed, he gained the foretop. He then cautiously pulled himself up the topgallant mast shrouds until he reached the yard. Inching his way out to the end of the weather yard on foot ropes, he slowly tamed the violent sail. At any moment, the wind or the rolling ship could fling Willis into the frothing sea: without any hope of salvation. Bent over the yard, he clawed, tugged and lashed the spread of frosty canvas--never faltering. In less severe weather, the task required the efforts of several experienced sailors.

When Willis signalled the men on deck, they brailed up the canvas and slowly he furled the sail until reaching the mast. The Coxswain repeated his exploit on the leeward yard, with the other half of the bucking fore topgallant sail, on equally tenuous swaying foot ropes.

After regaining the mast, Willis paused so long to rest that one of the officers far below believed he was too fatigued to reach the deck and proffered $50 to any Jack Tar to go aloft and rig a boatswain's chair to bring him down. Alas, the saviour of the *Tigress* and her crew did not attract a rescuer among his shipmates. At length, Coxswain Willis recovered his strength and after carefully working his way to the windward side, made his way to the deck.

The *Tigress* continued her search for the *Polaris* survivors in the Davis Strait, until October 16, when she was forced to put into St. John's, Newfoundland, for coal. It was then learned that the survivors had been rescued and were in Scotland. Two weeks later, the vessel left port and arrived back in New York on November 9, where her civilian crew regained possession of what might have been christened the "White Tigress".

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