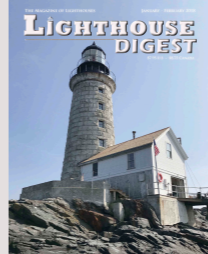


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## Lightship Tragedy

**Trapped Crew Could Not Be Rescued - Lone Survivor Clung to Ship for Eight Hours**

By [Timothy Harrison](#)[Comments?](#)[>> Click to enlarge <<](#)  
[The lone survivor, Ronald Murton, from a ...](#)

-Being a crewman stationed on a lightship was considered the most dangerous duty by nearly every lighthouse organization in the world. This was because, regardless of the weather, a lightship was not allowed to leave its station. It was assigned a particular location because it was with too dangerous or impractical to build a lighthouse at the site.

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Lightship disasters were not uncommon. The Nantucket Lightship LV117 was rammed by the RMS Olympic in 1934 and sank with the loss of some of its crew. A hurricane in September of 1944 sank the Vineyard Lightship with the loss of its entire crew near Cuttyhunk, Massachusetts. Although it was not the weather that caused the demise of the Diamond Shoals Lightship in 1918 off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina; instead it was a German U-Boat that was the culprit.

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[Wrecked on the Goodwin Sands, the South Goodwin...](#)

But, generally speaking, it was the weather that was the biggest threat to lightships and their crews. Such was the case on the night of November 26-27, 1954 when tragedy struck Trinity House's South Goodwin Lightship just north of the narrowest point of the Straits of Dover in England.

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[Headline from a local newspaper recounts the ...](#)

The entire crew of the South Goodwin Lightship lost their lives that night. Amazingly, the one person who miraculously survived by God's will, was not a member of the crew.

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[The South Goodwin Lightship in heavy seas...](#)

Ronald Murton, a 22 year old employee of the British Ministry of Agriculture, had been assigned to the South Goodwin to study bird migration. Having been living onboard for a month, he had become friends with the crew and was by then acquainted with the dangerous life onboard the vessel. But he could never imagine what would happen in those final fateful

moments.

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[At low tide a U.S. Air Force helicopter was able ...](#)

Murton recalled, "I was in my bunk with just my pajamas on, but the gale got so fierce I could not sleep. I put a wool cardigan over my pajamas, slipped on a greatcoat and went up to the bridge."

Murton said it was close to midnight and upon arriving at the bridge he saw the captain and several crew members trying to take bearings to see if the

ship was still on its moorings, but they soon concluded that the ship was drifting and rolling aimlessly in the gale. Murton then went down to the crew quarters and shouted to them to get alert, that they were in trouble.

Murton, along with five crewmen and the captain made their way to the ship's galley. The captain shouted that he was going to the radio room to call for help. But as the captain turned to leave through the hatchway, the ship lurched violently, shuttered and without warning turned over on her side.

Murton recalled the events, "The sea burst in through the hatch of the galley which was now upright, and swept me onto the stove. Fortunately, the sea had put out the fire."

"I struggled in the swirling foaming water. Then with the sea filling the galley I took a chance and dived through the hatch. I just managed to grab the outside of it and pull myself through.

"That must have been around 1:30 am. I climbed to the side of the ship amidships. Seas were coming over me and it was as much as I could to hold on to the rail.

"All through the night with the icy wind howling and the sea bursting over me, I hung on." And for the next eight hours he hung on to the rail, all the time wondering when his body, exposed to the full force of the bitter cold elements, would give out and he would slip away, into death.

In the meantime the crew of the nearby North Goodwin Lightship had seen the light disappear on the South Goodwin Lightship and had placed a radio call for help. The Royal Life Boat Service launched several life boats but because of high seas they were forced to turn back.

While Murton was clinging to the rail for his life he said that even over the howling wind he could hear a tapping sound coming from within the ship. He assumed that it was members of crew signaling from within an airtight compartment for help.

Going into his ninth hour of clinging to the ship and just as he felt he could hang on no longer he heard an airplane and saw it circle overhead. Wrapping one arm around the rail, he signaled with the other arm, hoping that they would see him.

A few minutes later a United States Air Force search and rescue helicopter, from Manston Air Force Base, flying in high winds, arrived on the scene. The helicopter hovered overhead and dropped a life-line to Murton. He thrust his body into the noose and was hauled up to safety. He had been saved.

Finally, on November 28, the Trinity House lighthouse tender Patricia was able to reach the scene with frogmen from the RMS Romola. The U.S. Air Force helicopter returned, and at a low tide was able to land on the sand bar and deliver oxy-acetylene burners and other cutting equipment. The frogmen searched the vessel but could not find any survivors or bodies. Apparently the sea had carried them all away. No bodies were ever found.

Ronald Murton had survived the worst storm in two centuries and the crew of the helicopter was awarded medals for bravery. However, proving once again just how dangerous lightship duty was, the seven members of the crew paid with the ultimate sacrifice.

This story appeared in the September 2009 edition of Lighthouse Digest Magazine. The print edition contains more stories than our internet edition, and each story generally contains more photographs - often many more - in the print edition. For subscription information about the print edition, [click here](#).

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