

“S-O-S”

By Hewitt S. Morris

The freighter *SS West Harshaw* (Emergency Fleet Corporation/US Shipping Board) was one of 111 steamships built of her design (Design 1013), constructed and put into service between 1918 and 1920 as a response to the exigencies of World War I; *West Harshaw* was launched in 1919. On 24 July 1926, the freighter was just two days out from New Orleans, en route to London with a cargo of wheat, when the ship’s young radio operator, Hewitt Morris, started receiving radio transmissions warning of an approaching hurricane off the Dry Tortugas, some sixty miles west off Key West. Radio communications in those days came in the form of the dots and dashes of Morse code, and when Mr. Morris reported the desperate S_O_S of an Italian steamer in distress, the captain gave the order to go to the rescue.

Most of us have heard the bare facts of sea rescues before. Morris’s first-person account brings the world of the merchant mariner from a single point in time to life. As a first for *Sea History*, we printed excerpts of his story in the Spring 2011 issue (*Sea History* 134); the full text of the manuscript can be read here. We understand the debt we owe our merchant marine, and by sharing Morris’s story, we hope to contribute to our overall understanding of the role they played in our nation’s history. —*Burchenal Green, President, National Maritime Historical Society*



Hewitt Morris inside SS West Harshaw’s radio shack. Photo courtesy of Kent Morris.

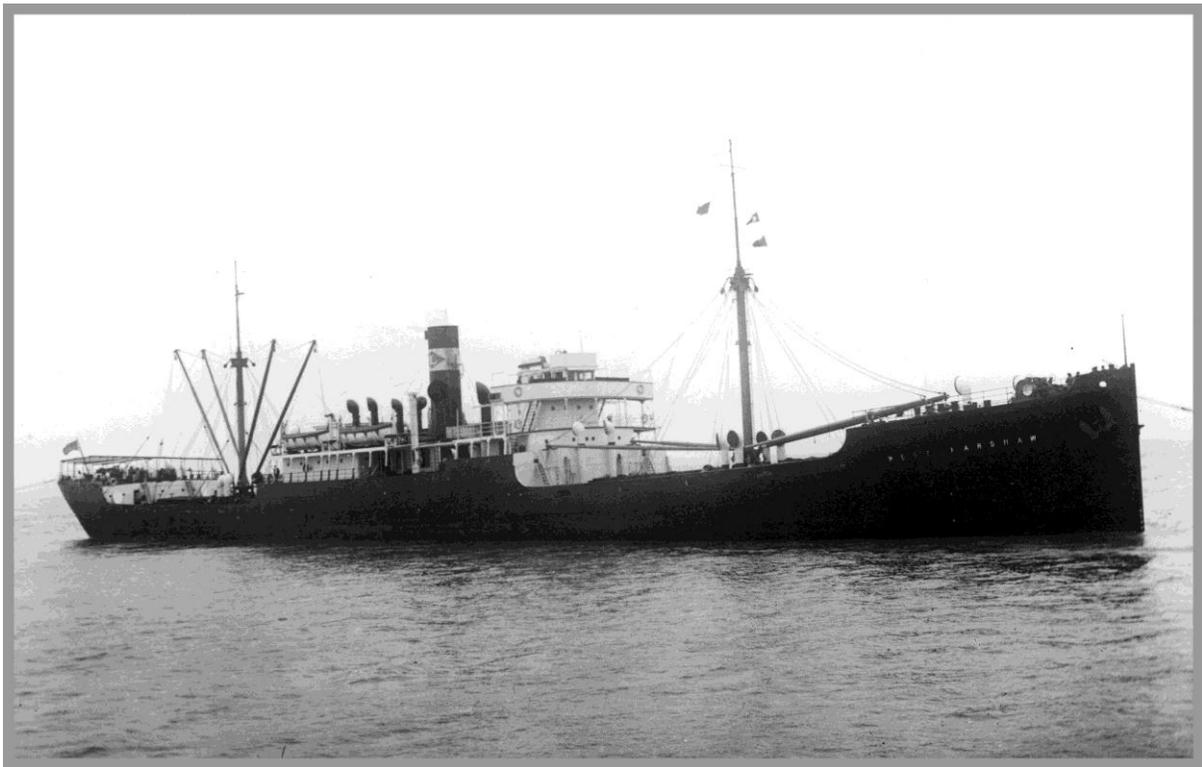
To the southeastward of the United States, from the Florida Straits down through the Caribbean, there extends a vast archipelago of island-broken sea: the Bahamas, Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, and the other smaller islands of the West Indian string, which stretches in a long contorted “S” from the northeast coast of Venezuela up to the Florida peninsula. Books of history and fiction speak of this island neighborhood as the notorious Spanish Main and relate of the piratical raids of ships flying the black flag of skull and crossbones. Marauders made inaccessible strongholds of the hidden uncharted channels and harborage with which this ragged insular group abounds, from whence they could swoop out unannounced to prey upon passing shipping—and then, another rich merchantman loaded with Aztec treasure would fail to reach home.

Those adventurous days of piracy have gone, but there still lurks along this island-dotted vicinity a much formidable menace to shipping which dashes out and across the seas with less warning than the bloody corsairs of old, leaving a mass of maritime wreckage and foundering vessels in its turbulent wake.

This [lingering] marauder of the modern Spanish Main is known as the West Indian hurricane. Invincible and relentless during the summer and autumn months when it makes its sporadic visitations,

the cyclonic West Indian Hurricane receives its gentle birth among the soft rarified airs of the tropical Caribbean, from which it sweeps along the island fringe and up the Florida Straits in an immense boomerang curve, gathering momentum and accelerated fury with every league.

Such was the setting that occasioned the insertion of a small note in the current issue of the *World Almanac*, under the heading of “Chronology, 1926”:



SS *West Harshaw* of the American Dixie Line. Photo courtesy of the Steamship Historical Society of America.

July 28—DISASTROUS GULF STORM

Gulf Storms (July 26-27). have done \$8,000,000 damage at Nassau, in the Bahamas; \$3,000,000 in Santo Domingo, and \$2,000,000 at Miami and other Florida coast places; at Nassau, 146 were drowned with 400 missing, 75 boats sunk and 500 homes destroyed; near Santo Domingo, 54 bodies have been washed ashore; 5 were killed in Georgia and Florida.

“75 boats sunk;” another was threatened—and another epic of the sea was engraved in the swirling waters off Florida reefs. That is the tale we wish to recount. A strictly true yarn of the sea, of a ship—and of radio. A narrative wherein there is no human hero; but a venture wherein the senses of the individual are subordinated and merged into the feeling of the innately alive mechanism he controls; when he falls into complete resonance with the straining ship as she rises to meet each onslaught of the sea, with the sweating gaps and dancing ammeter as sparks jump and leak across saltwater soaked insulators in endeavor to permeate the tempestuous outside—and when he incarnates his ship, and his radio, with a being like his own.

If, just following NAA’s evening weather broadcast on the night of July 24th (1926), one of the malaria-stricken ghosts haunting on the Isle of Dry Tortugas—sixty miles to the westward of Key West—had happened to cast his eyes in the right direction, he might have sighted the United States Shipping Board steamer *West Harshaw* laying at ease some miles to the sou’ward. Twenty miles to the south, the official figures in a message turned in to “Sparks” for transmission read, and must have been correct as Dry Tortugas’ 19-mile light was just visible as its revolving beam swept the rim of the northern horizon. Whereas this thin, man-made envelope of steel had five minutes before been rushing onwards to conquer a quarter of the Earth’s circumference as a slave of the great god Commerce, it now drifted idly, unmoving. All resulting from a few infinitesimal impulses of electric current coming in contact with the four unpretentious wires strung high between the *West Harshaw*’s masts, oscillating down a lead into the wireless shack to continue their course through a maze of switches, coils and vacuum tubes, to be transformed into audible sounds, and then deciphered into intelligences by the radio operator: “HURRICANE WARNING”!

Ever since passing out of the Mississippi delta two days before, en route to London from New Orleans, Sparks had twice daily been copying ominous warnings regarding the formation of a "tropical disturbance" down in the Caribbean Sea and advancing slowly northwestward. Now, the admonishing advice any old salt will extend is that a West Indian hurricane is one animal mortal man should never start an argument with as long as he can possibly, even ignobly, beat a safe retreat; but, as these blows seldom travel as per schedule, not much serious attention was given it until it was changed to "hurricane warning dead ahead." When, with less than five minutes' interlude since NAA's concluding signature, the Master of the *West Harshaw* ordered the engine room telegraph swung midships with its indicator resting on "Stop."

A big blow is the last thing one would expect that evening. It was one of those drowsy, drugged, tropical nights; quiet without a movement save the slow, restful roll of the idle ship—the same precise roll every ship assumes when at rest, no matter how calm the seas. And above, in a clear sky, the moon was serenely scribing its course through a few isolated splotches of great fluffy white clouds. While, in the auditory realms of radio, the general lassitude of Scourge Static gave little evidence to portend a radical change in atmospheric conditions. No matter what appearances were, the weather savants at Washington had spoken and gave protective advice, leaving the unknown sea-traveler little prerogative but to unconditionally accept and act upon the handwriting in the air, as it were.

Alongside the *West Harshaw*, the SS *West Erral*, another Shipping Board vessel bound for Havre, had also hove-to, arrested on her voyage by the selfsame warning. The two vessels seemed like a couple of puppets, with the Weather Bureau at Washington the puppet master, exercising arbitrary control over their every movement by jangling unseen radio cords via Arlington's powerful weather forecasting transmitter. Side by side the two marionettes drifted in the swelling Gulf Stream until, twelve hours later, Uncle Sam's weather prophets again manipulated the master waves, bidding them proceed with safety by advising through the clarion note of NAA that the storm center was veering off to the eastward of the shipping lane. Once more the engines began whirling "Full Ahead," but only until Arlington's next weather schedule, when the clear ICW (Interrupted Continuous Wave) note cut the intervening thousand miles like a premonitory scream that the hurricane, on altered course, was sweeping across the Bahamas, hard-by.

This time the *West Harshaw* hove-to some sixty miles west off Key West, with plenty of company. Scattered all around the horizon, six tank-steamers in all, could be seen likewise lying-to and preparing for the worst that might be expected: dismantling ventilators, lashing deck gear, and improvising preventer stays. They had all advanced too far for safety.

On the bridge, the *West Harshaw's* captain was reconnoitering with his mate when, from out of the murk to the west, there slowly hove into view the silhouette outlines of an approaching ship. On she came, a peculiarly constructed vessel; obviously a freighter but with stack and engines situated back aft in the manner of a tanker—an uncommon type of vessel that, once seen, seamen never forget.

"That's that Italian motorship that was in port with us. The Ansaldo San something-or-the-other," remarked the mate, who had been observing her approach through marine glasses. And as the ship moved abeam, "Yep, that's that Italian all right. She's making the same ports as us, on practically the same sailing schedule. Got about the same cargo, too: wheat, I heard." Still, the moving ship continued on her way, leaving the drifting *West Harshaw* far astern. When the mate again turned to the captain with a grimace, "I'll bet that Italian skipper over there is grinning and soliloquizing, 'Here's where I show those Yanks up and beat them to London.'" Under his breath the mate also muttered, though personally to himself, "If I was master of this packet I'd sure open 'er up wide and give that guy a race, hurricane or no hurricane." Such an idea never once occurred to the captain; he was an old-timer and experience-seasoned with more conservative and cautious foresight.

Rapidly the receding vessel merged into the gathering haze of the east. Unlike the small three-masted schooner which had several hours before boldly sped past on the wings of an increasing fair wind, all unaware of the danger that was crossing his bow in the straits ahead, the unhesitating

steamer, fully equipped with wireless, had undoubtedly received the hurricane warning but seemed to have elected to give no heed.

There, in the southernmost environs of the Florida Straits, the *West Harshaw* laid for the next twenty-four hours, intermittently drifting with quiet engines and sometimes going slow ahead to make the vessel ride more steadily. But it made little difference. Ever since passing Sand Key, the wind had been springing up. First a gentle breeze, then a strong one, increasing on up until it was raging a full gale; whipping up gigantic seas and tearing the waves to ribbons as if a colossal comb was being drawn across the surface leaving a train of frothy furrows. Down in the trough the old hulk would get, with the wind on her beam, and then merrily roll and wallow in drunken contentment. One minute giving a dizzy lurch to the port, her port bulwarks dipping clear under the sea—a slight hesitation—and then back up she would swing, shoveling the water up like a mammoth scoop, only to go over on the opposite side and repeat the same tactics; the decks continually one mass of seething foam, roaring and shifting from side to side with each list of the vessel; the heavy grey seas breaking and crashing with such tremendous force as to take the paint off—not wear it off, but tear it off in jagged patches leaving the clean bare steel exposed to the ravages of saltwater rust.

So the day continued, becoming worse and worse. Hourly the Skipper rushed through the blinding sea drenched atmosphere up to the wireless shack on the after boat deck with a weather message for Sparks to pass over to NAR, at Key West, on its way to Washington. Ships all around were shooting them in—keeping NAR on the jump every minute—in answer to NAA's morning request for weather reports from the storm vicinity as often as possible.

It was later in the evening, around eleven or twelve o'clock on the night of the 26th–27th. The Old Man had just come up to the radio shack for Arlington's latest weather advisory, and had sat down on the corner of the table for his customary chat. First, though, before becoming congenial, Sparks once more clamped the receivers on for a last survey of the ether along ship waves before closing up for the night. The 'fones were no more than clasped to his ears—the receiver tuned from NAA's 2,655-meter wave down to 600, and vacuum tubes turned up bright—but what an uncanny, before-experienced tenseness came over him. Something unusual—untoward—was abroad in the ubiquitous, super-sensitive domains of radio; something unresonant. Not a sound disturbed the quiet tranquility of the air. Silence, ominous silence, prevailed in strange, unnatural contrast to the usual incessant patter of dots and dashes from a hundred and one ships during that generally traffic-laden hour. Swinging the receiver dials either to right or left brought only the same empty echo punctuated by a few stray, sprinkling discharges of tropical static. The hushed, unreal quietude that portends disaster.

Tense moments. Suspense—but suspense rarely lasts long in reality, despite the time-dragging tricks of imagination—and then the resounding tattoo of dots and dashes from another ship right abeam beat against the receiver diaphragms like a series of bomb explosions in a vault.

"Anything new on S-O-S? the unknown ship asked, without signing.

"S-O-S?" thought Sparks. His hair rising; a chill ebbing down his spine. "That explains it!"—that unnatural silence, which every experienced seagoing operator immediately connects with distress signals, though not knowing why.

The inquiring ship had received no answer. So, a few more adjustments to the receiver, and a quick, snappy question shot out into the silence-drawn air brought a reply from the unseen operator abeam that the Italian motorship *Ansaldo San Giorgio II*—with radio call letters "IAH"—had called for assistance a short time before, giving her position as ten miles northeast of Hillsboro Inlet, Florida.

Another short tedious wait of straining ears and the signals of IAH began to weakly impinge the taut, vibrant ether. Weak, though as clear as a pin dropped in a deathly quiet room, the low, uncertain spark commenced to spell out in Continental Morse the disabled vessel's predicament in broken bits: "Rudder broken"—"All lifeboats destroyed"—"Seven or eight miles off shore and drifting closer" and the climaxing statement of "six feet of water in number five hold."

A second barometric chill shivered along Sparks's spine; now stiff, bolt upright. "Helpless! Hurricane! Off a dangerous storm-irritated coast!" flashed through his mind, emphasized as he felt the *West Harshaw* plunge and tremble to the onslaught of a sudden burst of wind and sea.

He swung around. But the Skipper, having sensed the unusual, was already leaning over his shoulder. Nervously he thrust the slip of paper with the distressed ship's position into the captain's hand and cried, "There's another ship, a passenger ship, in communication with her but not offering much positive assistance—the S-O-S ship is still requesting aid!" His eyes flashing, body vibrating with poignant excitement.

The Old Man was less disturbed. After a musing survey out the open door he quietly observed, "I don't blame the passenger skipper. That's dangerously close in to shore, and he has too great a responsibility—too many lives in his care. But—with us it is different." He ended thoughtfully. Again his eyes roved out the open door to meet the pandemonium of outraged elements, a holocaust of restless fury. The ever-stoic pipe he removed from his mouth, and spat a goodly gob on the radio room floor. Sparks cursed: "He always forgets that I'm the guy that has to clean this deck!", he thought to himself with vehemence. With abrupt decision the Skipper stood up. "Give him a call, Sparks, and ask if he still needs assistance. If he doesn't, I'll go down and have the chief to open 'er up and we'll head his way." And then he walked out of the room.

Electrified, in tune with the situation, Sparks's finger was already on the motor-generator button. Wide open the old Navy transmitter buzzed off the dot-dot, dot-dash, dot-dot-dot-dot of IAH while the generator slowed down to a dismal wail, unused to such overburdened usage; meters danced—volts, amperes, kilowatts, shimmying in dizzy vibrations across the scales; blue flame brushed from an overloaded aerial switch as if impatient to have the freedom of the air, murky and stormy as it was. Three calls brought an answer and then he informed IAH of the *West Harshaw's* benevolent attitude.

Five minutes later—or was it five hours?—the faltering dots and dashes of IAH, as if searching their way through the darkness, crept down from the swaying antenna. An answer! How slow the characters seemed to marshal into code formation! But an answer the man at the receiver will never forget; two words of broken English spelled out on a sputtering spark coil transmitter—"COME YOU"!

Unceremoniously, unconsciously, Sparks rattled back an acknowledgement, dropped the receivers and key, and dashed wildly up to the Skipper. No time was lost. Down in the engine room bowels of the ship the conference went. The low hum of the racing turbines increased to a mad, high-toned, screaming whirl—running wide open; twelve full nozzles spitting live steam at two hundred and seven pounds pressure against the dashing vans of five turbine rotors.

"Nothing can stop us now!" thrilled Sparks. The frequency of his spirits rising with that of the engines as the old packet straightened out and commenced to tremble from bow to stern, plunging through each onrushing wall of water with an irresistible prow and lightly skipping over each yawning trough in between. "We're off!—Tearing through a ninety-mile gale at twelve and a half knots an hour!" And twelve-and-a-half per is a twenty-five percent overload of speed for a ten-knot freighter, even in moderate weather.

(Reuter's Telegram.)

(Received 29th July, noon.)

NEW YORK, 28th July.

A message from Santo Domingo states that meagre reports of hurricane damage to the island of San Domingo estimate the loss at 3,000,000 dollars. The steamship *West Harshaw* has sent a radio message that she has taken the disabled *Ansaldo San Giorgio* in tow for New York.

Nassau, in the Bahamas, was badly wrecked by the hurricane and the radio station is down.

From *The Evening Post*. Thursday, 29 July 1926

Outside, the storm was carrying on as inexorable as ever. In fact, increasing in intensity with each mile advanced, as Skipper now judged they were experiencing a hundred-mile gale; and the steadily falling barometer indicated the *West Harshaw* was plunging on towards the hurricane's very vortex.

On the other hand, inside, the day broke into a long monotonous stretch, with Sparks standing continuous watch. After the initial reception, chasing an elusive S-O-S is not as thrilling as one might expect. Permission had been granted for traffic to be resumed. And from up and down the coast, from NAN's scratch spark to NAR's low, smooth ICW note, the clattering rat-a-tat-tat of inarticulately jammed dots and dashes ceaselessly paraded in the receivers. Close-by, the loud, soft note of WAX drummed against the diaphragms in a perfect succession of code. QRM was rampant.

Through this dinning barrage, this clattering miasma, the more rickety note of IAH's scratchy spark coil would leak at intervals, inquiring about progress. But little promising could be given her. The farther the *West Harshaw* went, the more uncertain and impossible things appeared. The wind had shifted from off-shore, which was a blessing in one way as it eliminated the possibility of the *Ansaldo* being blown on the rocks. But who could tell where she was drifting—being blown onwards by a roaring hurricane and riding the swift, storm-accelerated current of the Gulf Stream? The sky had been so overcast that neither the *Ansaldo* nor the *West Harshaw* had been able to obtain a celestial sight for the past two days; all positions were dead reckoning. And the storm had put the radio compass station at Jupiter, Florida, out of commission. Things were indeed looking black for the *Ansaldo*.

Black indeed, although another ship had lately picked the warm scent of the foundering vessel and was injecting another aid of radio into the search. Somewhere in the wind-swept vicinity, the SS *Gulf of Mexico* was endeavoring to locate the *Ansaldo* by the pointing finger of ship radio compass—the eye that pierces through fog and darkness.

'Twas along towards early evening when the howling devils of Eolus had reached their most peak'd crescendo of mad revelry that, after a long interval of silence from the two hunting vessels which may have given the hapless *Ansaldo* the harrowing thought that they had both deserted her, IAH again called the *West Harshaw* in that stumbling tone with a message containing a startling, pathetic plea in its erratic syntax. "Please you and KUG (call letters of the *Gulf of Mexico*) come me more," came trickling down out of storm-immersed air as if a last hope, or dying supplication.

Frozen stiff, all attention, Sparks coaxed the reluctant signals from the maze of underbrush interference by delicate verniered adjustment of secondary tuning dials, to the accompaniment of disquieting thoughts of a slowly settling stern, decks awash, and swirling, gurgling green waters. He knew not how to answer. Although material assistance had been impossible so far, now it seemed as if he could not even offer moral assistance. His hand played for time by thumping out an unnecessary number of acknowledging OKs on the key, and then made an empty attempt at a heartening suggestion by, "Proceeding your position wide open, OM." But far was he from feeling the spirit he tried to inject into that answer, for time and time again great clouds of thick weather bore down on the racing *West Harshaw* in tantalizing derision, necessitating a reduction of speed for safety. And still less did he—or anyone else from the captain down to the lowest deck boy—realize with what veracity he had answered, as the next will show.

As it happened, he had just come down from 800 meters where he had been futilely trying to obtain a radio compass bearing from NAQ, at Jupiter, when IAH began to pound in his ears as loud as thunder—almost puncturing the drums—and broadcast, "Who is light on left?" The signals had that paralyzing strength of a ship close by, in sight. Although no call letters had been signed there was not the least doubt in Sparks's mind as to their origin, for after twenty-four long hours of tuning to those peculiar ragged, staggering splashes he could pick them from the hopeless jam of a million. Hard over on transmitting he swung the antenna switch with a dull thud, and in a hurried, excited fist that could hardly be termed good sending, he told IAH that he was very, very loud; to hang on a minute and he would go up on the bridge and find out if the mate had sighted anything yet.

Up he went, still more excited, across the narrow rail-less gangplank that connected the after boat deck with the midships section as if not a breath of wind was stirring. And there, leaning with elbows on the bridge railing, found the third mate calmly observing a faint light just off the starboard bow.

"That's the S-O-S ship!" yelled Sparks, jumping at conclusions.

"No—", the mate returned, unbelievably; with his head ducked against the gale.

"It is, by gum!", Sparks quickly retorted, and gave his reasons. Although still unconverted to what seemed to him to be a wild, foolishly founded statement, the mate finally consented to go below and rout the Skipper out.

The captain came directly up but seemed not much impressed either. To him, too, Sparks excitedly yelled, "That's her!"

After taking a long circumspective look at the dim point of light, he turned around and answered with finality, "No, it can't be. She was reported thirty or forty miles to the south of us."

Thirty or forty miles to the south of us? Have we passed her?—left her?" The thoughts raced through Sparks's mind, colliding with one another in hazy incomprehension. Although it was entirely new to him, it seemed that considering the increasingly heavy weather and shifting winds and turbulent, eddying Gulf Stream, the Skipper had lately decided it foolhardy to continue on in close to shore where the *Ansaldo's* position was reported twenty-four hours previous. Besides, he had figured the disabled vessel was probably drifting from three to five knots an hour in a northeasterly direction due to wind and tide. So therefore, taking all into consideration with the possibility of a clearing allowing a celestial observation farther north, he had continued the course on up the coast, thinking it more plausible of running across the luckless vessel out there. Even at that, he had little faith in the slim chances and was reluctant despite Sparks again putting forth his positive conviction: "I know that's that Wop ship—she's as loud as can be—right on top of us!" He finished half hysterical. It didn't matter to him whether they were in the North Atlantic or five miles south of the South Pole, that was IAH for sure. By long experience, he could tell the signals were right in the immediate vicinity because of their unusual strength and the peculiar way they pounded the receiver diaphragms in paralytic clicks.

Whether the Old Man decided it was useless to argue further or whether he really took hope, only the inner workings of his own mind can tell, for the next thing he told Sparks to tell the *Ansaldo* was to burn a red light to make certain. Sparks did, and then rushed back up on the bridge for results. No sooner had he arrived but the Skipper whirled around and cried, "It's him!" And a moment later another rocket lifted out of the darkness off the starboard bow in a great, flaring arc. Found at last!—sixty miles from the reported position!—all due to an unexpected gratuitous radio.

As soon as the *West Harshaw* pulled abeam the *Ansaldo*, the captain brought several messages back to the wireless shack, including one to the master of the helpless vessel, saying the *West Harshaw* would keep a close watch over him through the night and at daybreak get into communication whether he wished to abandon his vessel or take a tow line. His messages all cleared—it was then 1:30am of the 28th—Sparks closed up and took a trip up on the bridge for a good look at the object of his last twenty-four hours of continuous watch.

There she was—laying about a mile off the port beam—a long black shape riding deeply in the water, greatly resembling an immense black cigar half submerged, and with not a light visible. Lying helplessly in the trough with decks awash fore and aft, she rolled and wallowed with each buffet of the sea as if a dying animal in the last throes of resistance; each succeeding comber breaking over the defenseless vessel, sometimes dashing a drapery of spray mast-high—a sorry sight for one who loves to feel the engine-pulse throb of a proud sea-voyager as she steams out and over the distant horizon in all her majesty. Anyway, there she lay—the prize! The second mate, then on watch, was tickled green. He couldn't stand still. Pacing nervously backward and forward, trying his hand at predicting what they would do and raring with impatience for daylight to come.

Soon Sparks left, but had hardly hit the deck before he was stopped by the mate's whistle. He turned, and the mate motioned him back up. By his actions and the manner in which he was scanning the after horizon with marine glasses it was evident something had gone amiss.

Upon Sparks's return to the bridge the mate pointed a hand first back aft and then forward, and said, "Look at that." Two lights could be seen just merging above the ill-defined skyline—ships bound their way. "Wonder if they have sighted her? Wonder if they intend to stand-by too?", he thoughtfully questioned, as if addressing no one in particular. That furnished food for serious thought. They were the first to locate the disabled foreigner, and as she was in no immediate danger but what the *West Harshaw* could succor as well as any, they naturally felt a technical pride which they hated to divide with a later comer. But still the paramount question remained: Did those other ships likewise intend to stand-by and endeavor to beat them out in a grand daybreak race? The following half-hour witnessed a continuous flow of conjectures and arguments between the two men. Were the two faint lights standing still? Had they also hove-to? Or were they slowly moving around the horizon? They were so far away, and considering the heavy weather undoubtedly going at reduced speed, that it was next to impossible to be certain as to their movements on such short notice. And their lights, at times plainly visible, would often become entirely blotted out as they dipped down in the trough of a mighty wave or swell.

After ceaseless watching and hoping and not a little selfish worry, the faint specks of light commenced to slowly shift their locations on the dull skyline and finally dimmed out of sight altogether. Two simultaneous sighs of relief went up from the *West Harshaw's* bridge. Still unhampered! Other ships came during the night, only to follow the same retreating course and withdraw as silently as they made their appearance. The explanation being that all the numerous vessels hove-to south of the storm area had at last begun to move northwards in convoy.

With the coming of morning—a morning when the sun peeped from behind a deep grey bank of horizon-floating clouds for just one brief moment to abdicate in favor of a dull, overcast sky for the rest of the day—came the other aspirant for the drifting trophy. The *SS Gulf of Mexico* had traced her down by means of radio compass. Wasting no time, she took the initiative by saying she was getting her lifeboats ready and would pump oil on the windward of the *Ansaldo* (The *Gulf of Mexico* was an oil tanker). Competition! Swift action was necessary. The skipper of the *West Harshaw* pulled a coup de main by counter-wirelessing the *Ansaldo* to make ready to receive a tow-line. This evidently sounded good to the Italian captain; why should he consider deserting his ship when there was an offer and a reasonable chance of towing his vessel to safety? He was still on top of the water, despite his sea-swept decks and leaky hold. And then, he would always have help close at hand in case necessity should force a hurried leave. Therefore he sent his appreciative thanks to the *Gulf of Mexico* but refused her aid.

Then followed eight long hours of discouraging maneuvering in repeated unsuccessful efforts to get a line aboard the disabled vessel. To bring two plunging, unanchored steel hulks into close proximity during a full gale and mountainous seas is a dangerous task. The slap of a mighty swell amidships, or a powerful gust of shifting hurricane wind, and smash! There are two ships frantically calling for assistance instead of one. Commuting a line by means of line-carrying was tried; but the gun barrel was shattered upon the second trial. Finally, 'way past noon when discouragement was overwhelming, a line was floated over to the *Ansaldo* on a buoyant barrel and picked up. And then is when the "villain" appeared on the scene. That is, the villain from the *West Harshaw's* personal point of view.

First, it is necessary to travel back a little to obtain a proper introduction to the new character. The night before, while the *West Harshaw* was still vainly searching for the *Ansaldo*, Sparks had relayed a message from the Naval radio station at Jupiter to IAH, containing the information that a Coast Guard cutter had left Key West at eleven o'clock that morning, followed by a wrecking tug at 1PM, to render assistance to the distressed vessel. Then, just past midnight, after Sparks had broadcast on the languid air that the *West Harshaw* had located the *Ansaldo* and was standing by her, the wrecking tug called inquiring his position. As usual, the first thing that shot through his mind was the thought of a contestant for technical honors. So, taking things in his own hands, he evaded the direct inquiry by saying they were somewhere off Jupiter, exact position unknown due to cruising around on various courses. That had to satisfy the tug, although it still came on in the general direction; while the Coast Guard cutter, upon being informed that the *West*

Harshaw was giving the *Ansaldo* assistance, turned and went back, recognizing that her usefulness had been superseded. All that morning, while the *West Harshaw* was attempting to get a line over to the *Ansaldo*, the tug's radio signals were getting louder and louder. And at last, just before the successful attempt, they were beating in the receiver so strong that Sparks was continually scanning the horizon, expecting him to heave into sight at any moment. He even advised the Skipper of the tug's approach.

Then is when he swung over the horizon. Right on past the *West Harshaw* Mr. Tug steamed as if she did not exist at all; his crew busily occupied on deck preparing towing hawsers for immediate use. Abeam the *Ansaldo's* bow Mr. Tug stopped, swung around and backed in close; and after two attempts succeeded in landing a heaving line aboard. The minute the line struck the deck the Italian mate threw it back overboard, and no matter how much the tug captain vaped about having orders from New York to take him in tow—orders, probably, yes; but only those issued by the tug's owners for him to assist the *Ansaldo* as a free lance on a purely salvage basis—the Italian master flatly refused his aid.

Beaten at that end of the line, the tug's next move was to steam up alongside the *West Harshaw's* bridge and sing out for the Skipper, and peremptorily inform him that he was fully equipped to tow the *Ansaldo*, but ended quite a bit more compromisingly with "Can I give her a line?"

What? Such audacity! Give up now after two day's fight? The Skipper's answer was brief, final, and choked with passion and feeling. In answer to the tug captain's "Can I?" he retorted without hesitation or finesse, "You can go to Hell!"

Debonair, overburdened with politeness, such as a midget in the seagoing class should be, the tug's master enthusiastically replied, "Thank you, captain!" His megaphone in one hand and the other raised on mock salute.

Whipped. Defeated all around—for the time being at least—Mr. Tug nobly steamed out of the immediate waters of operations, though much unlike the retreating dog with tail curled between his legs. More like one confident of success in the next sally, he seemed. Around the horizon he darted hither and thither, always doggedly hanging on the outskirts; always watching, patiently waiting, expecting something to go wrong at any minute to compel the inexperienced freighter to recognize defeat in the towing game so that he might swoop down and snatch the prey with a free hand. A circling buzzard, he seemed; something to fear and keep a weathered eye on. As the mate graphically expressed it: "if that scavenger once gets a line on the *Ansaldo* he won't only claim salvage, but he'll probably charge the Italian master and his crew passage ashore." Then, more thoughtfully: "You can't blame him though; that's his trade. He's working for his own interests, and we're working for ours by trying to outwit him."

In the meantime, the *West Harshaw* was once more treading waters; this time heading towards Jacksonville with her gigantic catch demurely tagging behind at the end of a two-hundred-fathom towing cable. And again, radio had assumed a key position. From the bridge, the mate kept minute watch over the stalking tug's every visible move, while from the radio shack Sparks kept auricular record of his strategy, conveyed over the ether. For two days and a night he had stood continuous watch; first a vigil of tracing IAH, now a siege of twirling dials focused on the small, irritating tug-fly. What communications was he holding with IAH? What new compromising terms of service was he offering? What messages was he transmitting ashore, and what orders was he receiving from his owners in distant New York? Every line of information gleaned from the air was vitally important, for Mr. Tug was not despairing yet. Not he! He surely must have something up his sleeve—flying around the faraway circle of vision like a restless vulture, never tiring.

On across the warm Gulf Stream the *West Harshaw* cut her way, slowly fighting the strong cross currents as she bore the prostrate Italian out of the storm-infested area toward the mouth of the St. Johns River. Six knots all that night and up into the following morning the log registered; continuous towage save for one interval before dawn when the tow line parted. It had become sufficiently calm and remote from the migrating hurricane center by that time to allow running a line by lifeboat, so the convoy soon got under way again. Eternally, throughout the black night, the

gloating lights of the tug hovered near—always keeping a safe distance but still confidently, greedily, waiting.

July 29th. The vessels, towed and towing, now out of the helpful push of the Gulf Stream, were nearing the shallow, shoal-ribbed waters of the coast. The *Ansaldo*, becoming frolicsome, was pulling far over to the starboard of the *West Harshaw*, bucking and tugging at the tow line as if in the clutching grip of an eddying shore current. Another broken line seemed imminent. The *West Harshaw's* skipper called a halt to reconsider. He wirelessly the *Ansaldo* suggesting they send to Jacksonville for a tug to take stern lines in order to steady passage through the converse currents of the remaining seventy-four miles. The operator on the tug intercepted the message; and up to the foreground Mr. Tug pounced, the white, frothing "bone in his teeth" curling back from the prow like a ravenous animal licking its chops in expectant glee of a choice morsel hard won. His reward—the haughty freighter was contemplating a request for added assistance! Had the tug captain figured this all out beforehand? Had he foreseen this very trouble besetting the inexperienced freighter with its ignorance of the finer tricks of the salvaging and wrecking trade, and sad lack of proper towing equipment? It looked much that way.

A message he immediately shot to the *Ansaldo* with his terms, and another to the *West Harshaw*—mockingly jeering. The *West Harshaw's* skipper became furious. The tug coming to a stop alongside the recumbent *Ansaldo* and evidently receiving a listening ear from the Italian captain made him still more furious. The air sizzled and burned hot with swift dots and dashes, each jamming the other in hurried effort to clear traffic with IAH first.

And then radio, the master player of multiple personalities, re-entered on the stage of action in a freak role and mockingly turned the tables on both the rival contenders.

Back on the *Ansaldo* things had taken a radically different aspect. "Marconi," the Italian Sparks, had just presented his captain with a storm warning which was broadcast by a neighboring naval station a few minutes before. To a tight, ship-shape vessel, a mere ordinary storm warning meant little. But to the *Ansaldo*, after what she had experienced during the past three days—powerless at the mercy of a slashing hurricane—and still a helpless vessel in anything but seaworthy condition with ineffective rudder and leaking hold, a storm warning assumed magnified, terrifying proportions. The *West Harshaw* had discontinued towing and had suggested sending for a tug; by the time of the tug's arrival from Jacksonville another of those ferocious West Indian hurricanes whose center she had just weathered might be enveloping her again. So the Italian captain must have reasoned. He wasn't ignoring another storm warning, no matter how mild. Spurred to frantic action, he dumped part of his deck cargo of lumber overboard and managed by some means to effect makeshift repairs to his ailing steering gear. And then he yelled, motioned, and finally wirelessly to please turn him loose, "Storm warning. We no have too much time to lose," recognizing the *Harshaw's* useful assistance and emphasizing he had no wish to defraud her. But go to "Jacksonville quick," he must. Such was the galvanizing effects of NAA's key, which appeared to the Italian in his frenzy to foretell the sure repetition of a grave danger he had once succeeded in passing through but had no desire to encounter again.

From the decks of the *West Harshaw*, not knowing the sincerity of these late developments and with the tug maneuvering alongside, it looked damning certain that the *Ansaldo* intended to drop their line and accept that of the tug; the storm warning and repaired steering gear which had previously been reported as "irreparable" being just a blind. The skipper—the whole crew—fumed and shook with inarticulate sounds into a state of fit. After making a hard-pushed hundred-and-twenty-mile run through the worst species of weather in answer to the Italian's S-O-S, standing by her all night, and then towing her for a hundred and forty-five miles from the storm area into the smooth waters of safety, why! It appeared the blackest of deals to put over on them, her benefactors. And if you will—her savior, too, for it is very questionable whether the disabled vessel would have been able to weather the remainder of the hurricane in her helpless physical condition with leaking hold, buckled deck plates, broken hatch covers, smashed lifeboats, and useless rudder and engines, had the *West Harshaw* not towed her from the disturbed vicinity in which she was impotently drifting.

As a last chance the Skipper evaded turning his tow loose by requesting the master to try again and guaranteeing his safe delivery over the remaining short distances to Jacksonville. But all to no avail. The fear-stricken Italian was beyond reasoning; desperate with frenzy he started to cut his own anchor chain which was being used as a towing line, and let the whole length of it slide down to Davy Jones'.

The tug was also unaware of the storm warning developments aboard the *Ansaldo*, and in view of the activity on her decks with the chiseling of the tow chain, he thought for sure that his turn had come. And Mr. Tug showed it too—made it only too apparent to those on the *West Harshaw*. He hustled around, maneuvering in close to the *Ansaldo*, his crew feverishly getting lines in readiness. Oh! That damnable tug! There was not a man aboard the *West Harshaw* but who would not gladly fit a stop-cock to the windpipes of each and every member of the tug's crew. Should he come in after all the hazardous work had been done and then pull the prize out of their powerless grasp? Ye gods! What irony!

The first few explosions of passionate exclamation over, the bridge of the *West Harshaw* had quieted—had been deserted. While in the chart room, a scene of anything but leisurely inaction was in progress. A mighty, clinching bluff was under way to curtail Mr. Tug's success. The Skipper and mate were jointly dictating, while Sparks was typewriting as best he could the jammed, QRM-ing sentences of the two as only a radio operator possibly could; typing a statement the Skipper intended to take over for the *Ansaldo's* master to sign, acknowledging the *West Harshaw's* services and stating in signed black and white that he did not require the assistance of a tug or any other towing vessel on the remainder of his way to Jacksonville. Sparks had previously sent a message to the Italian captain requesting him to wait, that the skipper wished to board him; a request sea ethics would not allow him to refuse.

A lifeboat over the side under the impetus of six strong pulling oarsmen soon annulled the bare half-mile separating the two vessels. And then, once aboard the *Ansaldo*, after a royal reception with those profuse courtesies only a Latin can extend without seemingly overdoing it, explanations were in order and everything which a minute before had seemed utterly lost turned out well. The Italian captain explained the storm warning incident, the repaired rudder, and declared that he had not nor intended to accept the tug's assistance. In fact, it seems plausible to assume that he showed his friendliest esteem and sincere appreciation to the Skipper in that delectable Italian style, 'twixt the glass and the lip. He willingly signed the Skipper's statement and then requested the *West Harshaw* to escort him to the River St. Johns.

Then the two freighters pulled out this time, their boon companion of the past two days, Mr. Tug, was left for good, stranded. Not to be entirely worsted, though, he set stoically to work and possibly realized expenses by picking up the valuable timbers the *Ansaldo* had jettisoned in her hurried race to get to her disabled steering apparatus. The end was just a fatuous trick of fortune. They were both ships of fortune, as it were, in a spirited contest for technical honors; outwardly, bravely endeavoring for a philanthropic cause; but inwardly, obsessed just a little with the thought of salvage gain. Possibly, as the sportsmen say, "The best man won;" possibly, no.

The short run to Jacksonville was uneventful. Arriving there late at night on the 29th, the *West Harshaw* received her last message from IAH:

Master,

S.S. *West Harshaw*,

Thank you for your good help and assistance and I wish you a very good trip. My thanks for all your crew and your wireless. Regards.

Currarino.

(Master, M.S. *Ansaldo San Giorgio II*)

Out of the home-inviting mouth of the River St. Johns the *West Harshaw* then set her course, steaming up past Cape Hatteras to where the Gulf Stream shoots out across the Atlantic in a more easterly direction; ever pushing onwards toward the distant advancing horizon to continue on her

three-weeks' voyage to faraway London-town, as unperturbed as if nothing had happened to disturb her monotonous grind—that was the creature of iron.

And out on the decks and in the radio shack the vain creatures of flesh loudly vociferated their exposition and conjectures of the incident, while the clear 500-cycle note of KEFX swung up the coast and out across the seas, throwing a thousand-mile barrage of dots and dashes ahead of the vessel; creeping on over towards the eastern longitudes until that siren-like call mixed and mingled with those foreign notes of GCK, FFU and OST, as unseeking and unheard as in the past—that was the spirit of the indefinable quantity, radio.

About the Author: Hewitt S. Morris (1905-1973) left home at seventeen to become a ship's wireless operator or "Sparks", the name given to radio operators before vacuum tubes were invented. From 1923-1928, Morris plied the oceans and visited major ports across the globe as a crewman in ten merchant ships. He entertained thoughts of making this sea-going adventure a career, but an opportunity ashore intervened, and instead he pursued a career in the sound and communication field (his company installed the first "talking picture" equipment in movie houses starting in the late 1920s). Later he became president of Altec Lansing, a world leader in audio products. He once said that the sources of his education were the Harvard Classics and his five-year tenure at sea.

The Law of Salvage – A Summary

The law of salvage entitled the owner, officer, and crew of the *West Harshaw* to assert a salvage claim and receive a monetary award for services rendered to the *Ansaldo San Giorgio II*. The historic purpose of salvage awards is to encourage vessels to render aid to other vessels in distress. The rights of salvors are recognized throughout the maritime world.

The seminal United States salvage case is the *Blackwall* case decided by the United States Supreme Court in 1869. It, and subsequent cases, set forth the essentials of salvage as:

- 1) a marine peril to the property to be rescued,
- 2) voluntary service not owed to the property as a matter of duty,
- 3) success in saving the property or some portion of it from impending peril.

In the event the right to an award or the amount of it were not amicably agreed to, the *West Harshaw's* owner, officers, and crew could have filed libels (complaints) in an admiralty court, petitioning the court to resolve the issues and render a money judgment against the *Ansaldo*.

The amount of a salvage award is at the discretion of the court, which would take into account the essentials set forth in *Blackwall*, and such things as the danger to the *West Harshaw* in effectuating the rescue and the skill and contribution of her crew in aid of the rescue. —*Thomas F. Daly, NMHS Trustee*