

Good Men Down



by Jane Meneely

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There was no question in Thompson Wallace's mind about going out that day. He was in debt and the ice had finally broken up. He'd owned the skipjack *Claud W. Somers* less than a year, and he was bound and determined to make good on her—she was the embodiment of his long-held dream to own his own dredgeboat. When the wind came up and the rest of the oyster fleet headed home, he stayed put in the open water at the mouth of the Honga River, determined to get in a few more licks. Then he headed back to Chance, the small harbor on the Deal Island narrows that he had left before dawn that March morning. He wasn't worried about the weather, though he knew as well as anyone how treacherous spring gales could be, how they could sneak up on you and hammer you to pieces. What he didn't know was that today the wind would build to near hurricane force—and that neither he nor his crew would ever set foot on dry land again.

The people who live on Deal Island still shake their heads over what happened on March 4, 1977. The details they offer differ to a degree—because so many people witnessed the event from so many different perspectives—but one thing is certain, they can recall the tragedy as if it happened yesterday, instead of nearly 30 years ago. Some of the eyewitnesses have since passed away, but the community of watermen that continues to

work the waters of Hooper Strait, Tangier Sound and the Bay beyond, has preserved their stories and woven them into the fabric of island life.

I saw this for myself when I first began asking questions about the *Claud W. Somers*. I had driven to Wenona, Md., the harbor on the end of Deal Island and home to a few of the Bay's last remaining active skipjacks. I'd gone into Arby Holland's little store next to the wharf and was chatting with Arby's father Paul. The older Holland had parked himself at a small table where he was dealing himself another hand of solitaire. He was telling me what he knew of the *Somers* tragedy, but he couldn't recall the name of the man who had offered Wallace a tow. "Just wait a second. These fellows will know," he said nodding toward crabber S. T. Webster and one of his buddies out in the parking lot. Both wore the white rubber boots and ubiquitous ball caps of working watermen. When they came in to retrieve some packing boxes for their soft crabs, Holland piped up: "You boys remember who's the man towed those boys in? Fellow from up Wingate, maybe?"

Webster frowned, and I thought he would say, "What boys? When?" But he knew just who Holland meant. "Don't rightly recall," he said, "but I'll bet Grant Corbin would know." Webster grabbed a package of crackers and joined in the conversation. "Thompson was a good waterman, lots of experience. I saw him sailing into the dock many a time. It's a shame about all that," he said reminding us that all but one of Wallace's crew that day were related.

In my quest for living memory of the incident, I did eventually talk to Grant Corbin; I also talked to Elsworth Hoffman, retired head of the local DNR who supervised the search when the boat didn't return; I talked to longtime skipjack captain Art Daniels; I talked to Esther Wallace, Thompson's widow, and Kevin Wallace, Thompson's son; I talked to Donald Mills, who went out in the foggy dark after the storm to try and find the men; I talked to Don Simmons, whose father, DNR officer Jennings Simmons, was with the group that found and retrieved the bodies; I talked to Snooks Windsor, who helped raise the *Somers* off the bottom once she was found, sunk in 20 feet of water at the mouth of the Honga River, and who watched as the bodies of the drowned men were brought ashore at Wingate. I talked to anyone I could find who had any recollection of the event—and gradually the *Claud W. Somers*'s story began to emerge.

Thompson Wallace was born and raised on Deal Island. He was one of 23 kids (yes, 23), the children of waterman Robert James and Roseana Wallace. By all accounts he was affable and well liked—and he had a streak of the devil. Afraid of nothing, they say. And he was ambitious. He'd set his sights on owning his own boat one day, come hell or high water.

Wallace worked on and around boats all his life. He was a jack-of-all-trades, and he'd captained plenty of boats—other people's boats. His name shows up on the roster for the 1971 Chesapeake Appreciation Days skipjack races as the captain of the *Ida May*, owned by Elbert Gladden. When the *Claud W. Somers* came up for sale, Wallace was at last ready to buy. The boat was a sorry mess, to be sure. She leaked like a sieve and the engine on her yawl boat was unreliable at best. But she wasn't that much worse off than some of the other

boats in the Deal Island dredge fleet—a total of 35 vessels at the time. And there was nothing wrong with her that Wallace couldn't fix.

The *Somers* came from good stock. She was built on Virginia's Eastern Shore by Tom Young in 1911, commissioned by Thomas Edward Somers, a Crisfield businessman, and named for his son Claud Williams Somers. She was 46½ feet long, with a 14-foot beam, and fast. With then-owner Captain Curwin Evans at the helm, she whipped the chines off the rest of the dredgeboats at the 1931 skipjack race—the last one before World War II. More than 30 years later, she whipped them all again, this time with Captain Linwood Benton at the wheel.

But by the time Wallace bought the boat from Jack Parkinson in the spring of 1976, her glory days were over. Wallace brought her around to Eldon Willing's boatyard in Chance and set to work. By the start of the dredge season, he'd gotten her reasonably sound—by his standards at least, and he was no slouch at carpentry and boat repair. She'd be nearly sunk at the dock every morning, but he'd get the pump going and she'd be floating again soon enough. She wasn't the only skipjack known to take on a little water overnight. Besides, water retention has always been the plague of old ladies.

Wallace took all her problems in stride, doing what he could for the boat when he had the time or the money—after paying her "mortgage," there wasn't a lot of cash left. He kept her together with sweat and prayers mostly. There were those on the island who told him to his face that he was a fool to run that decrepit old boat, that he was going to drown someone. But there were plenty of others who figured he knew what he was doing and would get by just as generations of oystermen before him had.

The winter of 1976—77 had been a bad season all round. There weren't many oysters to begin with—MSX had begun to ravage the already dwindling oyster beds. And worse, the Bay had been frozen solid for two months, shrinking the number of days the watermen could even get to open water. The watermen of Deal Island were desperate to get back to work when the ice finally broke up at the end of February during a welcome warm spell. Within days the ice had melted, save for the big piles of broken slab ice that had been pushed up on shore by wind and tide. Even more welcome was the news that the DNR had extended the oyster season two weeks beyond the usual March 15 cut off.

It was gusty that Friday morning, March 4, with four-foot seas and 15 to 30 mph winds. In all likelihood, it was going to get worse. Boats from Wenona could "see" the wind, according to Art Daniels, captain of the skipjack *City of Crisfield*. They didn't go out that day. But the Chance harbor is sheltered from a south blow, and 55-year-old Thompson Wallace went down to his boat in the wee hours and pumped it out as usual for the day's run. His crew gathered: his older brother, "Big George" Wallace, age 64; his nephew Carter Wallace, age 20; his wife's cousin Thomas James, age 20; his son Gerald Wallace, age 24 and home on leave from the Marines; and one non-relative, Levin Johnson, age 44. Another son, Kevin Wallace, age 15, was at the dock ready to go along when he was unexpectedly called home. "I was there at the dock when they left, but for some reason I can't recall, I didn't go out with them that day," he says now. Another regular crew member, Earl White, who passed

away recently, stayed home that day—"Didn't even get out of bed," he told me. He knew Gerald would be taking his place.

Captain Elsworth Hoffman, a Department of Natural Resources police officer from Chance, made the rounds of the harbor and advised Wallace not to go out that day. Reports indicated rough weather developing later in the afternoon. That wasn't enough to deter Wallace. In the dim predawn light, he started up his yawl boat engine and eased the skipjack away from the dock. The *Somers* pushed out of Chance harbor north into Tangier Sound, ran past Sharkfin Shoal and along the north shore of Bloodsworth Island, heading for the dredging ground off Hooper Island near the mouth of the Honga River. Any boat that was going out that day would have left the dock in darkness in order to be on the oyster "rock" when the sun came up, so as not to miss a single legal "lick" of the oyster bed. Like hunters, skipjacks can't begin their harvest till sunrise, but begin at sunrise they do.

Wallace would have been ready for any breeze that smacked him as he left the shelter of the harbor. His crew would have reefed the mainsail the night before. This was standard practice for a skipjack; it's always easier to shake a reef out than to put one in, especially on a cold winter morning. Wallace doubtless sniffed the breeze that morning and left his reefs in—three of them. A skipjack doesn't require but so much wind in order to pull a dredge. If it builds up too much speed, the dredge will just bounce along the bottom. The captain will gauge the wind and raise what he needs of his mainsail to fit the conditions. Wallace didn't need a lot of canvas that morning.

Then, as now, a skipjack was allowed to take 150 bushels of oysters in one day, but by the late 1970s, especially in the lower Bay, where MSX was more prevalent, nobody was pulling in 150 bushels a day. Half that would be a splendid haul for the Deal oysterman. When the wind really began to kick up at noon, Wallace had done reasonably well, but not well enough to quit. The other skipjack working that day headed in, while Wallace stayed on to get a few more "jags"—the waterman's term for a full dredge. He got more than he bargained for. From all accounts the winds were ferocious that afternoon. Landsmen clocked them at 75 mph. Paul Holland, working as an oyster buyer in Wenona then, says it blew 80 to 85 at its peak. Long before the crest of the storm, Wallace started for home. That's when hell took over. He started having trouble with that cranky yawl boat engine, and couldn't make way.

Buddy Jones, aboard his tonging boat the *Dana Matt*, was hightailing it for Chance when he passed the *Claud W. Somers* bound for Hooper Strait, according to an account printed in the *Salisbury Daily Times*, March 7, 1977. Jones said it looked like Wallace was having trouble, so he pulled alongside and offered to help. Wallace took Jones's spare battery hoping it would help get his yawl boat started. When that effort failed, Jones offered Wallace a tow. "I towed her about ten miles in the first two hours," Jones told the newspaper. "When we hit Hooper Strait, we were really in trouble." He said that by then the winds had reached 70 mph with 15-foot seas, and the towline broke loose from his cleats. Jones refastened it, but the line broke loose again. Fearful for his own safety, Jones donned his lifejacket and told Wallace and his crew to leave the boat and get aboard the *Dana Matt*. Wallace declined, saying "We're going to try to save her!" Buddy Jones said he'd get help for them and

motored away. Looking back, he saw that Thomas James had put on a life jacket and climbed into the skipjack's yawl boat, probably in another effort to get the motor started.

Meanwhile, Art Daniels had seen the *Somers* go out, but he hadn't seen it come back. He called the DNR to tell them Wallace might be in trouble. Corporal Walton Webster went out to look for the missing boat, but conditions were so rough, he turned back. When the *Somers* wasn't back in port by 5 p.m., Elsworth Hoffman, the DNR officer in Chance, decided to go look for it himself. He went down to his boat, but couldn't get the engine running. Conditions had deteriorated so much by that time, he recalls, that even if he had gotten the boat going, he wasn't sure he could have managed open water. Back in his office, about sunset, he got a radio call from the tug *Interstate*, probably heading to Salisbury with a tow of coal. The tug reported seeing a boat in trouble in Hooper Strait. From his description, Hoffman figured it was probably the *Somers*, but he was helpless to do anything, and other DNR boats were too far away. He could only wait—and hope that the fearless and capable Wallace could ride it out or get his boat to sheltered water. Maybe he already had.

Word spread quickly that Wallace was in trouble. When the weather abated, those who could went to look for him, and the Coast Guard and DNR began an all-out search. Donald Mills of Bishops Head remembers that there was a thick fog that night. He came upon a 55-gallon drum floating in the water—the kind a skipjack captain would have used to carry gas for the winder motor. "I knew I was close, and I kept looking. Seeing that drum, I knew the boat was down, but I thought maybe some of those boys would be hanging on to the mast." He found nothing.

According to some reports, searchers from Wingate, Md., saw the yawl boat around 9 p.m. It had broken away from the skipjack and had washed up on the beach at Bishops Head. A few hours later the body of Thomas James, still in a life jacket, was found floating between

Bishops Head and the Hooper Strait light, and would-be rescuers knew that chances of finding the skipjack or the rest of its crew were slim. Between the fog and the darkness visibility was nil. At that point, nearly midnight, they concentrated their efforts in the area where James's body had been found, thinking that Wallace had left Hooper Strait, running before the wind toward the harbor at Wingate. Or maybe he had tried to run her deliberately into shallow water to keep her from submerging if she sank. Helicopters with searchlights swept the area but still found nothing.

Finally, shortly before midnight, Henry Gootee of Golden Hill detected the boat on his radar, west and north of where people had been looking. "You know an area well, you can see something on radar that doesn't belong there," he says from his office at Gootee's Marine in Church Creek. He'd left his dock at 7:30 p.m. after hearing that a boat was in trouble. In the thick darkness he had his eyes peeled on his radar screen as much as on the water ahead. One by one the familiar markers came on his screen as he expected, but something unfamiliar showed up in the stretch of water above the Hooper Strait light. Sure enough, when he worked his way closer and could put a spotlight on it, he could see the top of the *Somers*'s mast, tilting out of the water about 300 yards off Norman Cove. There was no sign of life.

News of the discovery spread fast, and by morning as many as 50 boats had gathered at the site. Captain Ben Parks of Cambridge recalls heading out from Hooper Island with his dad aboard the family skiff. The Hooper Island volunteer fire company, he says, had the only "body drag" around, and they were always being called upon to use it. Not a pretty apparatus, to hear him describe it. It's a long steel bar on rollers, with sharp, three-pronged hooks dangling from it. "It'll snag anything," Parks says. He climbed aboard the police boat to help Officer Harold Pritchett with the drag, but they weren't having any luck. Back and forth, back and forth, they combed the whole area around the skipjack with no result. It wasn't until Charles Abbott and a few of the men from Chance had shifted the skipjack slightly in order to hoist her off the bottom that the bodies of the four Wallace men and Levin Johnson were found below the boat's mast. One by one the men were hauled aboard the police boat and taken to the Wingate public wharf.

"I remember seeing those boys lying there in the police boat like it was yesterday," says Snooks Windsor, who was at the wharf when the boats came in. He still operates a marina and railway there. "It's not something you're likely to forget."

Meanwhile, the *Claud W. Somers* was floated and towed back to Chance. Thirty-three bushels of oysters lay on her decks. Within a month she was sold to D. K. Bond, who ran her out of Chesapeake Beach, Md. Now she's owned and sailed by the Reedville Fishermen's Museum—one of only a few Virginia-built skipjacks left.

No one can say how or why the *Somers* ended up at the mouth of the Honga River when, by Buddy Jones's account, the boat was nearly through Hooper Strait when he left her to get help. Captain Ed Farley of the skipjack *H.M. Krentz* out of Tilghman, speculates that the yawl boat, with Thomas James still aboard and trying to start the engine, must have broken free of the *Somers*. Wallace may have been trying to chase the boat down to retrieve the boy. The skipjack, laden with oysters and doubtless taking on water faster than anyone could pump her out, just foundered, settling to the bottom with her load of oysters still on deck.

Regardless of the hows and whys, the outcome remains the same. It's part of the burden of working the water. Boats sink; people drown. Perhaps the story of the *Claud W. Somers* remains so deeply embedded in the communal memory precisely because no one can ever really know what happened. Or perhaps the telling and retelling of such a story is a community's first line of defense, a warning to its children about the vagaries of nature and the dangers inherent in working the water. It is, after all, a cautionary tale, and anyone "coming up on the water," as the islanders would put it, should heed the lesson.

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