

June 1963

END OF THE "BEAR"

by M. J. Lownds,
of Halifax, N.S



W. Hugh Conrod

THE "stoutest ship ever built", the *Bear*, gave her final growl some time after 9.10 p.m. on March 19 off the southern tip of Nova Scotia. As darkness fell over the 90-year old veteran of the seas, 35-ft. waves were battering her hull, a hull that had withstood the pressures of Antarctic waters.

In tow of the tug *Irvingbirch*, the *Bear* left Halifax on St. Patrick's Day, bound for Philadelphia, but the luck of the Irish deserted her as the tow line broke. In the gathering dusk of March 19, Halifax Canadian Press Bureau member Ed. Walters was in conversation, via radio-telephone, with Capt. W. C. Chisholm of the *Irvingbirch*. As Walters spoke to Capt. Chisholm, the captain said he could just make out the *Bear's* riding light. The tug was standing by, waiting for the seas to abate.

Earlier in the day, crewmen Percy Coffin and Henry Dingle, both of Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, had abandoned the vessel after securing a rubber dinghy dropped by a U.S. Coast Guard aircraft from Boston. The tug picked up the men.

When last seen the old ship was partially dismasted and down by the head. She was listing to starboard, her square-rigged foremast broken in two while her main and mizzen masts were loose.

The tow line had snapped early on March 19, about 100 miles south of Shelburne, Nova Scotia. Capt. Chisholm stood by through the night, hoping to get another line on board the next morning, but that was not to be. As the search began in the early dawn of March 20, only the heavy, rolling sea knew the final fate of the *Bear*.

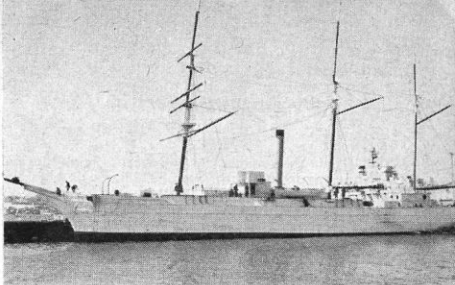


Above: The "Bear" adrift, with the tug "Irvingbirch" standing by, and (below) a closer view showing more clearly the ship's broken foremast

Royal Canadian Air Force photographs



**The "Bear"
fitting out
at Halifax,
N.S.**



W. Hugh Conrod

Built in 1873 at Dundee, the *Bear* had a varied and famous career. Her first owner was Walter Grieve, a St. John's, Newfoundland, merchant. She spent her first 10 years afloat as a sealer. Then, in 1884, the U.S. Government bought her for \$100,000. In the same year she participated in the rescue of seven survivors of the 25-man Greely Expedition from Ellesmere Island in the Canadian Arctic.

For the next 42 years she was a patrol vessel along the Alaska Coast. In 1931, after a brief period as a floating museum at Oakland, California, she came out of lay-up and was used in the motion picture "The Sea Wolf".

After her film episode, she was purchased by Admiral Richard E. Byrd for \$1,050. When Byrd's Antarctic voyages, were over, the "stoutest ship ever built" was on Greenland Patrol from 1941-44. In 1944 she was sold to the Shaw Steamship Company, of Halifax and came to Dartmouth in 1953 after an extensive refit for sealing, but she was never again used for that purpose.

She lay, almost a hulk, in Dartmouth, until purchased by Mr. A. M. Johnston, Philadelphia restaurant owner, who planned to use the old ship as a combined floating restaurant and museum.

In a telephone interview with the "Halifax Chronicle-Herald," Johnston was quoted as being "pretty well upset" when he heard the news of his loss. The whole city of Philadelphia and most of the United States was looking forward to the return of the *Bear*. Mr. Johnston added that a big welcome had been planned.

He stated that the vessel was insured for \$150,000 and that "there is no personal financial loss in the project itself. The big loss came from the money we expected to make with the ship. We had anticipated doing \$1,000,000 worth of gross business a year with a net profit of \$50,000, and of course that is all lost."

The attempted tow has been widely and bitterly attacked especially in view of the weather conditions at the time.