

The Hero at the Wheel

Based on an account by the historian,
Dr. Marvin A. Rapp

The steamer Erie, a magnificent vessel of over 500 tons, once sailed regularly with cargo and passengers in the State of New York, in the United States. A little after 8pm the evening of 9 August 1841, this steamer was four hours out of Buffalo and 8 miles off shore, opposite Silver Creek, and pushing ahead through the night toward Dunkirk. It was a fairly rough sea but it had started to abate with the falling wind. The ship's records listed 300 people on board, mainly Dutch emigrants. That night the Captain T. J. Titus was content because the ship was both on time and on course.

Then suddenly, without warning, a fire broke out. There appeared to be no beginning and no spreading, just all at once, after an explosion, a red, lurid, flame reached out firing everything. Then was heard the most feared words aboard ship, "Fire!" Captain Titus instinctively turned to the bow of the ship and said to the helmsman, a man called Luther Fuller, "Put the wheel hard to the starboard, remain at your post, and keep the boat headed for shore."

By now the entire hold was afire. New paint and varnish seemed to be feeding the flames. Desperately men pulled up the boards from the deck and threw them into the water. Then they jumped into the water hoping to grab hold of these for support. From the cabins could be heard the shouts and screams of those trapped behind closed doors.

The Captain told the engineer to stop the engines in the hope that would lessen the fanning of the flames, but the intense heat made that impossible. He then attempted to enter the cabins but falling beams and flames drove him back. He yelled again to the helmsman to hold fast to his course, but flames had already spread to the wheelhouse.

He ran to help with the launching of a lifeboat. It was lowered, but so many frantically tried to get into it that it sank in the water. Another was lowered but, again, due to the continuing panic, it tipped over. One after another of the lifeboats failed to stay afloat.

The Captain looked about the deck. He could see no-one. However the boat was still headed for shore, the helmsman apparently still at his post but the flames and smoke made it impossible to see him. Seeing there was nothing more he could do, Captain Titus jumped into the water and, with assistance, he managed to grab a part of the keel. Looking at the boat, all the upper part had burned away and the hull was dull red with flames. It would surely not be long before everything would go down.

After what seemed an age in the water, the Captain observed that another ship was coming towards them. That night 50 people were rescued, but no less than 250 people lost their lives.

At the Inquest following the tragedy, Captain Titus paid a hero's tribute to Luther Fuller, the helmsman: "He remained at the wheel and never left it until he was burned to death. He was always a resolute man."

The survivors were deeply moved, realizing that this helmsman, "the man at the wheel", had been prepared to sacrifice himself to save their lives, steering them towards the safety of the shore.

There is Another, even our Lord Jesus Christ, who, in His great love for His people, "remained at the wheel" when He hung upon Calvary's cross, dying in the place of those who would otherwise have perished on account of their sins.

He died for us that we might be saved and know eternal life through faith in Him.