

# All Hands Lost

## Kamloops • Isle Royale • Lake Superior

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Captain William Brian, wet and frozen from the brutal storm, gripped the wooden wheel, his knuckles sharp and white against the battered red of his hands. Near gale force winds smashed wave after wave across the decks of his ship, the *Kamloops*. The 250-foot, 2,226-ton, iron cargo ship was in a battle for her life, and all aboard knew that only his skill, and the grace of God, stood between them and the ravenous waters of Lake Superior.

Rounding the northern tip of Isle Royale, the vessel had a straight shot towards the protective port of Thunder Bay, only a few hours ahead. First Mate Henry Genest's eyes strained towards the bow of the ship, always on the watch for rocks or other vessels to appear through the driving sleet and snow.

With the wind and waves approaching from the starboard stern, Captain Brian reached over and shifted the ship's telegraph into the full ahead position. Chief Engineer Jac Hawman, bracing himself against the engine's boiler, acknowledged the change in engine power. Loud and urgent, he shouted for more coal to be shoveled into the burners. Covered in black coal dust and sweat, the two ship's firemen, Andy Brown and Harry Wilson, worked with a will to stoke the engines, fighting to keep upright as the ship lurched from port to starboard. Above the engine room, the remaining 17 crewmembers could do nothing but pray, braced against their bunks and trying not to be thrown onto the deck. Anything not bolted or tied down was rolling around on the ship's floors.

Seasoned from many years of lake travel, Captain Brian knew the dangers of Lake Superior's shallow shoals, shipping congestion, and severe storms. This would be the last crossing for the 1927 season. Intentionally pushing the ship's engines hard, he well knew they needed to make the protection of the harbor before nightfall.

Thirty-foot waves pounded the ship's stern as the winds increased beyond gale force. The temperature had dropped to 20 degrees below zero. A high load of metal poles and fence wire strapped to the deck was collecting ice. It was impossible to chip free due to the severe weather, and the added weight was slowing the vessel's forward

progress.

Suddenly, all pressure within the steam engine was lost. The Chief Engineer quickly shifted the engine room telegraph into “finished with engines,” indicating to the Captain that, for some reason, the engines had lost all power. The crew scrambled to ascertain what caused the power loss, so quick and without warning, and at such a desperate time.

Now at the mercy of the building waves and the blinding snowstorm, the ship was pushed off course towards the southwest. Captain Brian knew the dangers of Isle Royale’s rocky shoals, and ordered all available hands to assist with the engines. Long blasts of the foghorn called out for assistance from any ship within range of the *Kamloops* position. None would answer.

Darkness fell as the crew labored frantically deep inside the engine room. Captain Brian ordered both bow anchors to be dropped in a desperate attempt to prevent the ship from smashing onto a shallow shoal. Due to the deep water of the lake and the 30-foot waves, the ship’s anchors would not hold the helpless ship in position, but dragged slowly along the lake bottom. Continued long blasts on the ship’s foghorn desperately called out for assistance.

The night was black as coal; nothing could be seen beyond the frozen railings except blinding snow. The wind continued to blast the ship as freezing water smashed over the pilothouse and midship. The increased weight from the ice gathering on the ship’s decking was causing the ship to list to starboard. All aboard knew that their only chance for survival was to stay on board. Abandoning a ship in such extreme weather conditions would be suicide. Could she ride out the storm? Were the anchors holding position? When would the storm break?

The hours felt like days as they persevered, hungry and exhausted, fighting the elements and their fear. And without heat inside the ship, the extreme cold was taking its toll on the desperate crew.

Thoughts of wives, children, and loved ones, prayers and new promises swept through the minds of all the crew. If only God would provide safe passage through this nightmare, what better husbands, wives, and Christians they would all be.

Suddenly, the ship jarred hard to port knocking anyone standing to the deck. The intense sound of grinding metal on rock echoed throughout the innards of the *Kamloops*. Wave after wave continued to

grind the ship alongside the rocks. With the ship listing ever harder to starboard, the Captain ordered abandon ship.

Pitch-blackness, crashing ice-cold waves, and staggering winds met the frantic crew as they hastened towards the only two lifeboats aboard the doomed ship. Due to the starboard list, only the port lifeboat could be launched. Cold hands worked to loosen the dogs holding the lifeboat tight to deck. As she swung free and into the darkness, only God knows how many crew made it into the lifeboat — and how many were swept into the churning, bitter cold water.

As the anchors grabbed at the rock, Captain Brian held fast to the ship's wheel in an attempt to hold the bow straight into the waves. Just a few minutes, if he could hold her position for just a little time, it would give the lifeboats and his crew a better chance for escape and survival.

Some of the crew chose not to abandon ship, taking the chance that she would not sink but would beach herself onto shallow rocks. Maybe even a few had made peace with their maker, and either lay in their bunks or sat at their workstations. Waiting for the inevitable, silently saying their last goodbyes to their loved ones.

Ripping free from the rocky shoal, the ship pitched hard to port and back into deeper water. The small lifeboat and its occupants were lost into the blackness. Water rushed into the ship's holds as the weight of the cargo and ice-covered decks pushed her deeper into the waves. Bands that were meant to hold the pipe and wire fencing onto the decking snapped as the ship listed harder to starboard, spewing cargo and anything loose into the encroaching water.

One last tug from the anchors swung the ship's stern. Within a hundred feet of the rocky cliffs of Isle Royale's northern shore, the chains pulled the bow deeper into the oncoming waves. Within seconds, a wall of freezing water slammed across the bow, splintering the pilothouse from its cabins, and taking the good Captain from his ship's helm. The lake swallowed the entire ship, and so fast did she go down into those icy depths that only some few bits of floating cargo marked her descent.

The single lifeboat, with its water-drenched passengers, clinging for life in total darkness, still fought against Lake Superior's death grip. The turmoil and battering that these few survivors had just undergone was not yet sufficient to win their lives away from the night, the storm, and the lake. Isle Royale's rocky shore loomed overhead in the darkness, the enormous waves crashing hard onto its snow and ice covered shoreline. Like a toy, the wooden lifeboat was tossed about in

the waves, and then brutally smashed onto the rocks.

Could the frozen, battered men ask for another miracle? Could they survive the beaching, and make the hard scramble climb up the 20-foot cliffs with yet enough life and strength to find some kind — any kind — of shelter?

It has been said that Lake Superior never gives up her dead. Eight of the crew were able to make it to shore, only to be exposed to the harshest cold conditions Mother Nature could deliver. Gale force winds and temperatures dropping to 30 degrees below zero, quickly sealed the fate of the remaining crew. One by one, they succumbed to the elements and simply froze to death.

The newspaper told the tale in a simple, terrible headline: “All Hands Lost.”

### **Diving the *Kamloops***

Isle Royale is one of the islands of the Great Lakes, located high in the northwest corner of Lake Superior. It is part of a wilderness archipelago, an unspoiled land of forests, cold and beautiful waters, primitive vistas, and opportunities for hunting the historic shipwrecks of the Great Lakes.

Even though Isle Royale is located within the United States, with all the modern amenities that this implies, visiting and getting to the shipwrecks can be rather demanding. It lies within the state of Michigan; but is, in fact, closer to the Canadian coastline – roughly 22 miles to Thunder Bay, Ontario, while the Keweenaw Peninsula of Michigan is about 56 miles away. It is a minimum of two to five hours by boat to the U.S. or Canadian main land.

Ron Benson, closed circuit rebreather instructor and owner of Going Under Dive Center, located in Maple Grove, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis, invited me to join his CCR dive team for a week of Lake Superior wreck enjoyment. Being a southern Florida boy with thin warm blood, I quickly accepted the challenge. How cold could it really be, anyway? Heck, I worked in the frozen food section of the grocery store when I was younger. OK, much younger.

The main objective for the trip would be to explore and photograph the wreck of the *Kamloops*, one of Ron’s favorite wrecks, along with a quick visit and overview of some of the other north shore Isle Royale wrecks such as the *America*, the *Congdon*, the *Chisholm*, and the

*Emperor.*

Ron and local diver Matt Kriesel picked up Mel Clark, Erik Foreman, both from the Pacific Northwest's Seattle, Washington, area and me at the Minneapolis airport. Complete with a small trailer full of food supplies, a couple buckets of scrubber material, and about 40 small 19 cubic foot rebreather bottles containing oxygen and a diluent of trimix 15/60, our team of five divers would be set for a whole week of shallow and deep wreck exploration. Not to mention three nice-sized bottles of Crown Royal and a bottle of Parrot Bay coconut rum, my choice, to keep us warm at night on the boat. After a five-hour drive north, we found ourselves in a small Indian village with a giant casino called Grand Portage. With no time to squander at the tables, we loaded Ron's 42-foot dive vessel, *Deep Thought* with supplies, rebreathers, and extra warm clothing for me. Three hours later we arrived at the State Park's Ranger Station for a quick but mandatory check-in, a speech on how to keep the local wildlife happy, and our last look at a modern toilet and shower.

Exiting the protective harbor of the Ranger Station, Ron cruised along the island's north shore for another four hours until we finally reached our destination, the wreck site of the *Kamloops*. Two buoys marked the location of the wreck, one on the ship's stern and the other on the bow. What I found particularly impressive was that the stern buoy was located less than 150 feet from the 30-foot rocky cliffs and jagged rocks of the island. Impressive, because the depth on the stern (closest to shore) of the *Kamloops* is over 200 feet deep and slopes downward, away from shore, to a depth at the bow of 265 feet.

Since this would be my first cold water dive in the northwest of Lake Superior, Ron thought it would be best to break me in by doing a somewhat shallow dive on the *Kamloops* stern. Suiting up in my extra warm Weezle Extreme Plus undergarment, Dive Rite's 905 drysuit, extra thick hood and a pair of wet gloves, I donned my KISS classic rebreather, a 40 cubic foot stage of oxygen, and an aluminum 80 air for emergency bailout. Standing on the dive platform with Mel Clark, Ron handed me my underwater camera housing and strobes; and with a giant stride step backwards, we entered the water. Brisk, was my first thought about the 50 degree water. But not so bad, I said to myself as we swam to the descent line. Dumping the air from my wings, I followed the 1-inch polypropylene stern ascent line as it dropped straight into the darkness below.

At a shallow depth of around 25 feet, I met face to face with the true beast of Lake Superior's ice water chambers: water temperature a

mere six degrees above freezing, 365 days a year. The 50-degree heated top water was just a warm disguise. Ron assured me that this balmy surface water has in past reached all the way down to 50 feet, but not today.

Dropping down the line, we reached the stern of the *Kamloops*. Lying on her port side, the starboard stern cabins came into view first. Immersed in the constantly frigid waters of the lake, the wood of the cabin doors appeared to be in amazingly good shape. Slipping over the top of the cabins and towards the stern, we encountered a large wooden ship's wheel and binnacle. From this point, we penetrated through the skylight windows and into the engine room. The engine room contained a multitude of catwalks, large boilers, and some human remains that are believed to be those of the ship's engineer. Exiting the engine room, we explored the stern deck that contained a large winch and stern telegraph. I noticed that the telegraph was truly in the "Finished with Engines" position. Over the stern railing and under the ship's rudder, I noted that the ship did not receive any damage to the stern rudder or prop. This lack of damage would indicate that the stern section of the ship never struck the shore during the sinking. Twenty-two minutes of bottom time had passed, and it was time to pay the piper with 45 minutes of decompression. Not much decompression, unless you're immersed in 38 degree water! By the time I reached the balmy 50-degree water at 25 feet, my hands were frozen and screaming in pain as I tried to grasp the ascent line. A lesson learned for a Florida boy: use dry gloves in such harsh conditions. It just so happens that Ron had brought a pair for me on the boat. I wondered why he was smiling when I was putting on my wet gloves....

Additional dives by the team over the next few days revealed the contents of many of the cargo holds. Items such as crates of leather shoes, boxes of matches, rolls of roofing paper, wheelbarrows, tractor parts, plow disks, boxes of toothpaste, wooden barrels, coal, and crates of candy Life Savers. What is believed to be the starboard lifeboat can be located on the lake bottom, just below the stern cabins. The lake bottom is covered with the pipes and mesh wire that were strapped onto the ship's deck, and that were probably one of the main factors in the ship's sinking.

One of the mysteries behind the sinking of the *Kamloops* is the lack of any major damage ever discovered to its haul. To date, only minor damage could be discovered along the ship's starboard bottom. One of our team's goals was to explore the bottom of the wreck, in the hope of finding added clues to its sinking.

CCR divers Mel Clark and Erik Foremen descended onto the ship's

bow, which is buried halfway into the lake bottom. Examining the bottom of the ship at the lake floor level, they searched for any telltale signs of collision with the rocky shoal. At first, only small amounts of minimal damage could be seen as they made their way towards the stern. Suddenly, the lake floor dropped down another ten feet creating a swim-through all the way under the ship. Entering this small, dark tunnel and going under the ship, the team discovered a three-foot by six-foot long hole in the port, folded forwards like a ripped piece of paper. Exiting on the deck side of the wreck, they noted the location of the damage just below the port rub rail, under just aft the second cargo hold. This damage would indicate where the ship had struck the shallow shoal towards the northeast of its current position, and the speed with which it would have filled with water and sank.

The Captain was correct with his order to abandon ship. Sadly, though, as with hundreds of ships before the *Kamloops*, the gales of Lake Superior and its icy waters came alive and reached out for prey like a starving sea monster, stealing the life from all hands.

## **Wrecks of the *Congdon*, *Emperor*, and *America***

### **America**

The 182-foot, 937-ton passenger and package freight vessel *America* was originally built in 1898 by the Detroit Dry Dock Company. She served as a main passenger carrier for over 30 years before her accidental sinking on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1928.

Entering Washington Harbor, located on the southwestern tip of Isle Royale, the *America* dropped off several passengers before leaving in the early morning hours of June 7<sup>th</sup>. Not more than half a mile from the dock, the *America* struck shallow rocks as she rounded the tip. Taking on water into the engine room, the captain ordered the vessel to be beached in an attempt to save the cargo, and for possible salvage operations.

Luck would have it that as the captain attempted to beach the vessel, she struck another set of shallow rocks 30 meters from shore. With her stern still in deeper water, the vessel slowly sank as all the crew and passengers safely abandoned ship.

Today, the ship's bow sits in less than two feet of water while her rudder and prop are in 85 feet. She is considered Isle Royale's easiest — and most frequently dived — shipwreck because of her shallow

depths and protective cover from most storms. Almost all of her artifacts have been taken, but her wooden decks, cabins, and stern section are interesting to visit.

If the weather is rough on Lake Superior, the *America* is an excellent dive for what would be an otherwise wasted no-dive day.

### **Chester A. Congdon**

A massive 532-foot, 6371-ton steel bulk freighter, the *Chester A. Congdon* was built in 1907 by the Holmes Steamship Company.

On November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1918, the *Congdon* was headed out of Fort William with over 400,000 bushels of wheat when she ran aground on the shallow shoal in thick fog. Attempts to salvage the ship were hindered by several weeks of bad weather. Before a crew could arrive, the ship had split just aft of the bow and the stern lay in deep water.

Today, none of the wreckage can be seen on the lake's surface. The bow sits upright in 50 feet of water, while the stern is on a very steep slope with depths ranging from 185 feet at her stern up to 80 feet where she had split apart on the rocks.

The stern cabins are in remarkably good condition. The engine room can be explored by dropping down through the skylight. Inside, you will find a massive boiler, steam engine, and miscellaneous equipment.

### **Emperor**

The second largest Isle Royale shipwreck, the 525-foot, 7031-ton steel bulk iron ore freighter *Emperor* was built in 1910 by the Collingwood Company.

On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1947, the *Emperor* was loaded with 10,429 tons of bulk iron ore when she cleared Port Arthur and headed for Ashtabula, Ohio. Weather was calm, with a light wind and excellent visibility.

Captain Eldon Walkinshaw had the watch until midnight when the first mate, James Morrey, took over. Morrey had coordinated the previous day's activities of unloading and loading the vessel. Tired from a whole day's work, he accidentally fell asleep at the helm.

Shortly after 4:15 a.m. on June 4<sup>th</sup>, the *Emperor* slammed full speed into Canoe Rocks, just a few hundred yards from the wreck of the *Congdon*. As the ship began to sink, the captain gave the order to



abandon ship.

Two lifeboats were launched from the sides of the ship. The starboard lifeboat was able to hold 10 sailors; but as the port lifeboat attempted to make its escape, it was pulled under by the suction of the sinking ship. When released from the ship's suction, it surfaced upside down. Only a few of the sailors who had been inside the lifeboat were still clinging to its sides.

Twenty one sailors were rescued from the freezing water by a U.S. Coast Guard vessel that was in the vicinity repairing navigation lights. Twelve sailors perished, either by drowning as the ship sank or by freezing to death in the icy waters.

Today, the wreck sits on a steep rocky shoal with the stern section as the main point of interest in 185 feet of water. Descending the mooring buoy, the midship of the wreck comes into view around 80 feet. Swimming towards the stern, you will pass several cargo holds with missing hatch covers. At a depth of 150 feet, the stern cabins and engine room come into view. Exploring the starboard cabins, you will first see the firemen's bunk cabin. More towards the stern, the cabins are crushed downwards like an accordion. Rounding the stern rail, you will find a large winch and a large anchor still strapped to the decking. Descending over the rail and down towards the floor, the large rudder comes into view. Examining the prop, you can see the immense force that the *Emperor* must have endured — all the prop blades have been sheared off at the hub.

Swimming along the rocky bottom, away from the starboard stern, at 185 feet you can locate the evidence of loss of life on the wreckage. Human long bones and a lone shoe lie silent on the lake floor.

Returning to the wreck, the engine room makes an enjoyable excursion along with the port cabins and ship's galley.

## **Diving Lake Superior**

Known as one of the coldest freshwater lakes in the world, diving Lake Superior can be both exciting due to the pristine condition of the shipwrecks and their remarkable maritime history, and extremely challenging because of the near-freezing water temperatures and extreme depths. Just beyond the reach of open circuit scuba, hundreds of shipwrecks are held captive by the great lake they call Gitchigumi, eluding our discovery and ability to visit.

Introducing the advantages of minimum gas volumes, warm breathing gas, and reduced weight that closed circuit rebreathers offer, we will no doubt extend our ability to explore — not only in the ice water chambers of Lake Superior but across the whole planet.

Going Under Dive Center's owner, and one of the world's leading CCR instructors, Ron Benson offers specialized rebreather expeditions and resort travel to a multitude of remote world dive locations. For a complete list of dive destinations and how you can become involved, visit Going Under Dive Center's web site at **[www.goingunder.net](http://www.goingunder.net)**. Without a doubt, it will be one of the most exciting and memorable dive trips of a lifetime.