

# the Ensign®

BOATING EDUCATION, FUN AND SAFETY

May/June 2009  
www.theensign.org

## Adrift on Superior

*Grampa Woo's*  
last adventure



**PLUS**

Splicing secrets  
Photo contest winners  
26-foot Tollycraft





# The Last Battle of the *Grampa Woo*

A Lake Superior captain wages a mighty struggle to rescue his disabled vessel, adrift in storm-battered seas.

By Marlin Bree

**O**n 30 Oct. 1996, Capt. Dana Kollars awoke before dawn with an uneasy premonition: Something bad was about to happen.

With Lake Superior's dreaded gales of November not far off, his beloved *Grampa Woo* should have headed south long ago. Instead, the ship was moored in Minnesota's Grand Portage Bay, its bare shafts awaiting new propellers.

At his home 150 miles away in Beaver Bay, Capt. Dana heard the wind begin to moan. Half-asleep and fighting exhaustion, he got in his car and drove north on Highway 61.

In the headlights' glare, fall leaves skittered nervously across the road. The wind howled and gusts rocked the car. On the lake, black hills topped with streaks of white signaled an onshore wind—a bad one.

A weather system had moved in earlier than predicted, driving the barometer down to a record low for the area. Capt. Dana pushed the speeding car harder.

**I**n the grim bleakness of daybreak, Capt. Dana shivered on the end of the dock at Voyageur's Marina. Waves chopped at the pier, and the wind-driven spray flew horizontal.

Less than a mile away, his beautiful, 110-foot-long aluminum vessel *Grampa Woo* rode the gusts with aplomb, its sleek bow cocked bravely to windward. A hundred feet of heavy chain and 120 feet of 1½-inch-thick line tethered the *Woo* to a massive 4,000-pound steel mooring that local sailors had jokingly called over-engineered.

From its mooring inside the harbor and behind Grand

Portage Island, the *Woo* was protected from the northeast winds that sweep the length of Lake Superior, piling up huge waves.

Designed for ocean use, the sturdy 16-year-old vessel had originally hauled workers and equipment on stormy waters to oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. Capt. Dana had converted it to take passengers on pleasure cruises along Lake Superior's North Shore. He and his wife, ChunAe, named the vessel for her much-loved Korean father.

After *Grampa Woo's* first season, Capt. Dana had ordered a new set of wheels to replace the *Woo's* three mismatched propellers. Matching props would allow the engines to pull an equal load, giving the *Woo* better speed and fuel economy with less vibration on the 2,400-mile trip south to the gulf.

The props had been scheduled to arrive on 1 Sept. Nearly two months later, Capt. Dana finally received written confirmation of the props' impending delivery and sent divers into the chilly bay to remove the *Woo's* old props.

Turning to deckhand Robin Sivill, Capt. Dana told him to gas up the 35-horsepower outboard on *Grampa Woo's* inflatable Zodiac, while he strolled off to talk with Kek Melby, the marina's owner-operator.

A little while later, Robin ran up looking alarmed. "Captain," he yelled, "*Grampa Woo* is moving!"

**W**hen the men got back to the dock, the strong winds, now blowing straight out of the west, were shoving half-filled 55-gallon oil drums off the pier.

As Capt. Dana squinted into the wind, the *Woo* slipped 50 feet. Capt. Dana and Robin threw off the inflatable's lines, gunned

the engine and sped out into the shallow bay, which was alive with 3-foot waves. A knife-like wind hit their starboard beam, and stinging spray doused the men.

Halfway to the *Woo*, the outboard started to sputter and miss.

If the engine stalled or quit, they'd be swept out the harbor's entryway into the raging lake without protective clothing or a radio, which they'd forgotten in their haste. Faltering but still running, the inflatable bumped alongside the *Woo*, and the two men clambered on board.

Relieved to be on the big ship, they fired up the engines.

Although the *Woo* had no propellers, the power gave them the ship's electronics, including depth sounder, knot meter, global positioning system and the all-important VHF—their radio lifeline.

They threw the ship's 80-pound Danforth and a smaller anchor overboard and increased the scope on the mooring. On the bow, they could see the anchors and mooring line grow taut—and hold.

The *Woo* had slipped 300 yards into 38 feet of water. With 200 feet of line out, they did not have enough scope on the anchors or the mooring.

Hit by a wall of wind, the *Grampa Woo* broke loose. Dragging its heavy mooring and two large anchors across the bottom, the *Woo* headed through the harbor and out into Superior's deep waters and building seas.

In a matter of minutes, the bottom under the *Woo* became 80, then 120 feet, until finally the depth was too great for the sounder to register.

They threw out a sea anchor, and the parachute-like device held the bow into the wind. In the pilothouse, Capt. Dana checked the GPS and did some quick calculations. Incredibly, the *Woo* was moving backward at 4½ knots (about 5 mph under wind power alone) toward the reefs of Isle Royale.

At this rate, they'd hit in several hours.

On the VHF radio, Capt. Dana put in a distress call to Voyager's Marina, alerting his friend Kek that they had blown out to sea. Kek bravely offered to launch his 28-footer.

"You should stay," Dana said. "The seas are too high and the wind is too strong. You'll accomplish nothing except endangering your own life."

No other boats at Grand Portage could help. The nearest U.S. Coast Guard station with a big enough boat was in Duluth, Minn., more than 150 miles away—an eternity under these conditions.

In the distance, Capt. Dana could see an ore boat plowing through the heavy seas about 8 to 10 miles away. It was the 1,000-foot *Walter J. McCarthy*, out of Duluth.

To Capt. Dana, a retired U.S. Army officer who had once trained for the priesthood, the ore boat was a blessing from God.

When Capt. Dana hailed the boat on the VHF, it altered course toward the drifting *Woo*. The big ore boat had difficulty maneuvering in the heavy seas, but on the second pass, the *McCarthy* put its mass between the high seas and the *Woo*.

The *McCarthy's* captain requested that Capt. Dana and

Robin leave the *Grampa Woo* and board the ore boat. Both sailors elected to stay with their boat.

The *McCarthy* sent down a 3-inch-thick cable. By the time the towline was secured, the *Woo* had slipped to the *McCarthy's* stern, pitching and pounding on 10-foot bobs.

Capt. Dana and Robin tried to retrieve the anchors. But the lines were frozen, so they had to cut off all three anchors. Half-frozen themselves, they scrambled back to the *Woo's* pilothouse. The rolling and bumping between the ships had battered the *Woo's* side and torn up its bowsprit, but the captain and crew were secure in their ship.

As darkness fell, conditions worsened. A swirling snowstorm hampered visibility. The ships passed the international border and entered Canadian waters, nearing the line of islands that guarded the stormy entrance to Thunder Bay.

On his cell phone, Capt. Dana called Thunder Bay Marine Services to have a tugboat meet the *Woo* by Pie Island, tow them into the marina and tuck them into a dock.

He also called the Thunder Bay Coast Guard, who said they would come out and assist if they could.

For the first time in hours, Capt. Dana felt a flush of success. He was under tow, he had a tug coming out to finish the voyage, and the Coast Guard was standing by.

He took time to call and reassure ChunAe, who was frightfully worried, as well as his son in Duluth, who had heard about the accident on television.

Abruptly, the *Woo* lost speed.

Putting down his cell phone, Capt. Dana peered out the partially iced-over pilothouse window and saw new trouble. After being stretched in hammering seas and frayed against the broken bowsprit, the 3-inch towline had snapped.

Capt. Dana stared helplessly into the growing darkness as the *McCarthy's* brightly lit 10-story superstructure grew smaller and smaller in the distance.

In 20-foot seas, the helpless *Woo* drifted alone and without power. Without its sea anchor, it was cocking broadside to the waves, a dangerous position for any vessel. Rolling in the troughs, the *Woo* presented its vulnerable sides to the onrushing waves.

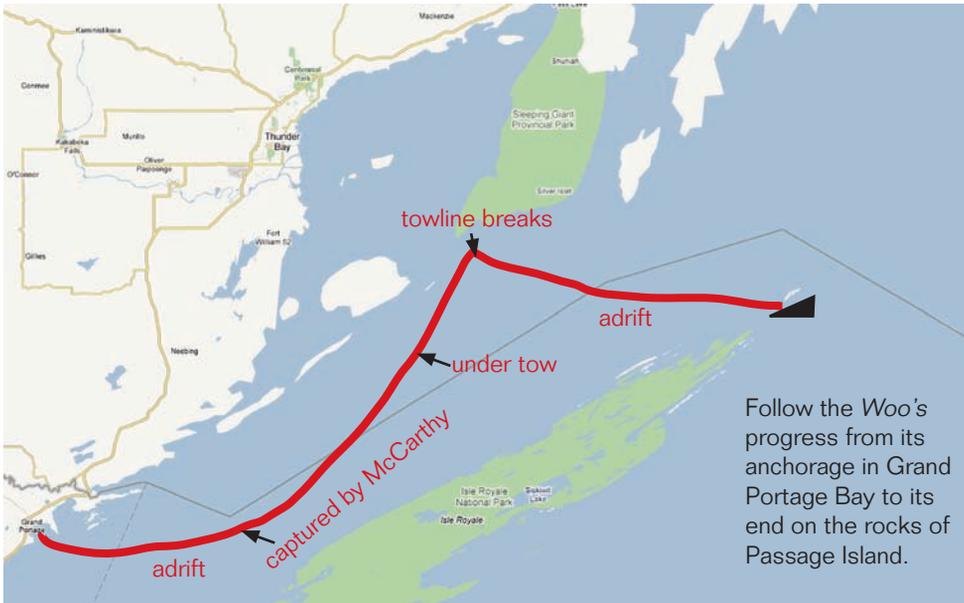
Time and options were running out. The *Woo* could drift in the heavy seas until a rogue wave caught it beam-to and pulled it down, or it could drift until it slammed against the sharp reefs and rocky shoreline of Isle Royale.

Snow was coming down hard in the darkness, and heavy ice was forming on deck.

The Canadian Coast Guard's 44-foot *Wesfort* fought its way to the south, taking westerly winds on its starboard beam. It was a rough night on Thunder Bay, and the veteran patrol-and-rescue vessel had some unexpected problems.

Chief Coxswain Bob King and crew members Inga Thorsteinson and Willie Trognitz saw ice building on their ship's mast and topsides.

The *Wesfort* was becoming top-heavy, and if it iced up



enough, it might not be able to right itself. It wasn't designed for these seas or this weather.

Aboard the *Glenada*, Capt. Gerry Dawson was also having problems. The 76-foot Canadian tug was more suited for the harbor than the open waters. As it pushed across Thunder Bay's treacherous, reef-strewn waters to meet the *Woo*, its low stern was awash with waves and its bow scooped up heavy water.

Belowdecks, Jack Olson, a four-decade veteran of Superior, was manning the engine room despite diesel fumes and the vessel's pitching and rolling. For the first time in his life, he was seasick.

At 1900, the *Glenada* reached the northeast tip of Pie Island and waited in the storm-tossed darkness. After about a half-hour, through swirls of snow, Capt. Gerry could barely make out the lights of the big ore boat turning into Thunder Bay.

Off the *McCarthy's* stern, the *Woo's* lights came into view. Then the Canadian tug captain stared in disbelief as the two dim lights separated.

With the distance between the *McCarthy* and the *Woo* increasing, Capt. Gerry realized the towline had snapped. The *Woo* was adrift, beam-to in 22-foot seas off notorious Thunder Cape.

Heedless of danger, the *Glenada* charged out to the rescue.

With crew member Inga Thorsteinson at the helm, the *Wesfort* continued to fight its way to the *Woo*. The Coast Guard vessel's decks, superstructure and mast were so heavily coated with ice that it was rolling down to nearly 90 degrees, practically on its side. Although they knew their vessel was exceeding its roll capacity, the Canadian crew pressed on.

Aboard the tug *Glenada*, deckhand Jim Harding donned a survival suit and struggled out into the spray. Beneath his running shoes, the deck was so thick with wet ice that he

couldn't stand. He looked around. Ice coated everything: the railings, rigging and wheelhouse. Even the windows were iced up.

Dropping to his hands and knees, Jim crawled forward to the towing lines. But he couldn't uncoil a single one. All were frozen to the deck.

Capt. Dana saw the *Glenada*, ice-covered and fighting the beam seas, come into range and inexplicably pass him by.

It circled him several times but never came close enough for a rescue attempt.

The tug's crew couldn't find a towline that wasn't frozen. Sheltered inside the *Woo's* main salon was a large spool of three-quarter-

inch floating polypropylene line.

Capt. Dana and Robin dragged it onto the ice-covered bow, and after the tug made three more passes, they tossed one end into the churning water. It floated downwind. On the *Glenada*, deckhand Jim caught the line, wrestled it up to the tug's bit and secured it.

But the stormy seas soon tore the heavy line.

The *Woo* was again adrift.

With the *Glenada's* wheelhouse iced over, Capt. Gerry's only view was through a 3-inch-wide hole blasted open with a defroster. He anxiously scanned the iced-over bow but couldn't see his deckhand.

He grew worried. If Jim slipped into the high seas, he would have little chance of survival.

Unbeknownst to the captain, Jim was just outside the wheelhouse, hanging onto the icy tow bollards, his legs afloat in the cascading seas on deck.

When the *Glenada* began to turn, Jim felt the position of wind and the waves change. He pulled himself along a hand rail to the wheelhouse and reached up, tapping the glass with his wedding ring.

Hearing the tapping, Capt. Gerry saw a hand waving outside the defrosted hole and yanked open the pilothouse door.

Jim Harding, half-frozen and rimmed with spray ice, tumbled in.

Winds clocked out of the west at 90 mph, and the seas were the worst they'd been.

The sturdy tug carved through the waves, its decks constantly awash, its topsides iced up. At a little past 1900, Capt. Gerry spun the wheel. The *Glenada* turned for one desperate—and final—rescue attempt.

In the 22-foot seas, Capt. Gerry took a bearing through his peephole, aimed his tugboat's massive bow at the *Woo* and gave it power.

This would be difficult. He would have to maneuver the *Glenada* so that both tug and tow were in the troughs, rising and falling at the same frequency.

When he was close enough, the captain gunned the engine to pinion it against the *Woo*. With a bang, the *Glenada's* bow shoved against the *Woo's* stern hard enough to push in the aft deck railings. The two boats were held together by the tug's power until Capt. Dana and Robin could make it to the *Glenada's* bow, about three or four feet above the *Woo's* railing.

Capt. Dana and Robin balanced on the bouncing rail while above them, the *Glenada's* bow lunged up and down. Timing the tug's motions, Capt. Dana jumped. On the *Glenada's* bow, deckhand Jim Harding reached down and pulled Capt. Dana, and then Robin, on board.

The men slid down the iced-over deck toward the wheelhouse door, grabbed it and crawled inside. The *Grampa Woo* was now alone and adrift.

The *Glenada* and the *Wesfort* fought their way eastward, past giant Thunder Cape, and swung into the protection of a low, flat island.

Without bothering to anchor, Capt. Gerry ran the *Glenada's* bow directly onto Tee Harbour's gravel beach. Shortly, the Canadian Coast Guard vessel *Wesfort* came alongside.

They waited out the storm with both engines running. On board the rescue tug, Capt. Dana and Robin borrowed dry clothes from the *Glenada's* crew.

As they stripped out of their wet clothing, Capt. Dana made a curious discovery: He saw Robin pull a damp, brown-colored object from inside his jacket.

"What's that?" Capt. Dana asked. Robin grinned. "Oatmeal."

Capt. Dana laughed. Before abandoning ship, Robin had made a quick stop below to scoop up the teddy bear, a memento of a former girlfriend.

Oatmeal became the *Woo's* third survivor.

It was days before the Big Lake calmed enough for them to sail back to Thunder Bay. When they arrived, the old port city gave them a hearty welcome and lavished praise on the heroic work of the crew of the tug and the Coast Guard vessel.

The *Glenada's* crew received the Governor General's Medal of Bravery, one of Canada's highest accolades. The Thunder Bay Coast Guard crew received commendations for seamanship and bravery in what was described as "one of the most harrowing at-sea rescues in recent Great Lakes History."

But what had become of the *Woo*?

Days later, the Coast Guard took Capt. Dana out to see his beloved ship. It had run aground on the rocks to the north and west of Passage Island, off Isle Royale.

"Just 400 yards, just 400 yards to the south, and *Grampa*

*Woo* would have missed Passage Island," Capt. Dana said. "She would have been afloat the next day or two. We could have gone out and taken her back ashore."

From the sea, the *Woo* looked salvageable, as though it just needed a tow off the rocks. But closer inspection showed that it had been impaled on the rocks, its port side ripped open. The Big Lake had claimed yet another victim.

A few days later, another storm finished the job.

The once-proud ship was in pieces, battered and stripped bare as it lay on the bottom. Half-inch aluminum was shredded as if it were paper. Heavy diesels had been ripped from the vessel, and everything was torn off them: pumps, valve covers and belts.

The largest piece, the wheelhouse, was carried 150 feet from the rest of the wreck. Nearly intact, it sat upright on bottom as if waiting for its captain to come aboard and sail away.

Several days after the wreck of the *Grampa Woo*, ChunAe received a telephone call from the shipping company. They had a large package for her.

It was COD for \$4,200—the three propellers, ready at last. The shipper wanted to know when to deliver them.

ChunAe dispatched the call with some briskness.

The following year, Capt. Dana, ChunAe and Robin traveled more than 2,000 miles to bring the new boat from the Gulf of Mexico, up the rivers and waterways linking the middle of the continent, and across Superior, back to their beloved North Shore.

On board, in a special place of honor, was the ship's mascot, Oatmeal.

Like the *Woo* before it, the new *Woo* was a heavy-weather boat designed to service offshore oil rigs. Although slightly longer at 115 feet, the aluminum-hulled boat was powered by three big diesel engines. With an enclosed dining area, private suites and lots of seating, the beautiful ship also would go into service along the North Shore.

In the morning light, Capt. Dana slowed the powerful engines as he neared the four-mile gap between Isle Royale and Passage Island. The white ship followed the rocky coastline 400 feet and paused offshore, engines beating.

Beyond them was where the *Grampa Woo* had met its end on the rocks of Passage Island. With tears in her eyes, ChunAe bowed her head slightly and dropped a single white flower into the water.

Then they sailed slowly away. ☼

Marlin Bree is an unrepentant small-boat skipper from Minnesota and the author of numerous books about small craft, usually set on tempestuous Lake Superior. His books include *Broken Seas*, *In the Teeth of the Northeaster*, and *Wake of the Green Storm*. You can read his two grand prizewinning articles from *The Ensign* at [www.marlinbree.com](http://www.marlinbree.com).