

# The Old Man and the Inland Sea

By Marlin Bree

A tale of extraordinary courage and resourcefulness on Lake Superior

Lake Superior's chill waters were an ominous slate gray and steaming with 40-foot-high fog banks as Carl Hammer slipped into his 17-foot wooden fishing skiff and started his outboard engine. It was 0700 on 26 Nov. 1958, the day before Thanksgiving. The 26-year-old North Shore fisherman figured he'd check his offshore nets, pick up his catch and hurry back before a storm came up, as he'd done hundreds of times before.

At 0830, his fishing partner, Helmer Aakvik, known as "the Old Man," peered out the window of his cabin on the bluffs overlooking Superior and made his decision: He would not go out to the nets this morning.

The 62-year-old Aakvik settled down to enjoy a second cup of coffee when his cabin door opened with a blast of wind, and his neighbor, Elmer Jackson, charged in.

"The young fellow is still out on his boat," Jackson

said, worried.

Aakvik looked up, troubled. A storm was coming on—one of the worst kinds—an offshore wind from the north-northwest.

"Call the Coast Guard," he said, abruptly putting down his coffee cup.

As Jackson turned to leave, he looked at the Old Man carefully. "Just don't you go out," he warned.

Grabbing a jacket and pulling his cap down tightly, the Old Man walked down the winding path to the bluff's edge. The northwest winds were steady, and the temperature was dropping. Soon there'd be ice and snow.

On a near-vertical rock ledge jutting above the lake, he came to the ramshackle wooden fish house he and Hammer shared. Hammer's boat was gone.

He ducked inside the wooden shack to look around.

Sure enough, the young fisherman had helped himself to Aakvik's gas. Borrowing was OK—they shared supplies all the time in this close-knit Norwegian community—but Hammer's new Johnson outboard used a different oil-to-gas ratio than Aakvik's old Lockport and elderly Johnson, which required twice as much oil. An oil-heavy mixture would gum up his friend's carburetor and foul his spark plugs, stalling the engine.

He peered into the can and swirled it around. He could see water on the surface. Normally, the Old Man would filter the water out so it didn't freeze the lines and kill the engine.

Hammer hadn't filtered his gas.

The Old Man hurriedly dressed himself in layers of wool. The key to survival on Superior, wool would keep him warm even when he was wet. Over his wool, he put on his heavy rubber fisherman's suit, rubber boots, wool mitts and a sheep-skin helmet. He waddled when he walked, but he wore a proven North Shore outfit.

Aakvik never went out on that lake, winter or summer, without a good set of oilskins. Oilies were necessary survival equipment on Superior, especially late in the season when the famed "Witches of November" came calling.

As Aakvik told everyone in his broken English, "they saved your life."

**A** little past 0900, the Old Man stood atop the rock outcropping over the slide where his 17-foot boat was tied 30 feet above the water. Starting high above the rocky shoreline, the slide consisted of three trimmed tree trunks, 8 to 10 inches in diameter and more than 40 feet long.

With the wind coming off the land, the Old Man would have no problem launching the skiff today.

**H**e attached a wire cable to the skiff's bow, thought for a moment, reached down and threw a hatchet into the boat. Next he added 50 fathoms of rope and an old wooden fish box that weighed almost 50 pounds.

Ready for battle, the Old Man lowered his skiff down the slide into Superior's dark waters. As he hefted himself aboard, the little skiff bobbed a little, as if to welcome his familiar weight. The Old Man felt at home. He had built his North Shore skiff along the lines of a North Atlantic dory with a raked bow, slab sides and a flat transom but much more heavily constructed. The boat had a heavy wooden V-shaped chine bottom, strong sawn ribs, a 5-foot beam and nearly 2 feet of freeboard.

A really good skiff reminded the Hovland, Minn., fisherman of boats from the Old Country—a high compliment. Like the Norwegian small boats operating on icy fjords, a Superior boat had to split the big waves and have enough flare in the bow to lift the boat so it didn't founder.

More than 20 years old, the Old Man's skiff was well beyond the useful years of a North Shore fishing boat. The tired boat had punched through countless waves, survived many storms and been dragged untold times up the slide with a hold full of fish. Some of the bottom planks had rot, and the screws

holding them felt loose.

But his home-built skiff had taken him out and brought him back every time. He had faith that it could do it once more.

The first blasts of offshore wind hit the Old Man as soon as his open boat left the protection of the shore. He felt its bite even in his oilskins.

The wind was coming up sharply, and the temperature was 6 degrees and dropping.

Atop a wave, he saw the first marker buoy flag. Moments later, he made out a line of bobbing buoys bending with the wind and waves but saw no sign of Hammer or his skiff. Aakvik ran alongside the line, careful not to foul his propeller on the nets.

At the end marker buoy, Aakvik scanned the horizon. The big lake was alive, and his small boat bobbed on the building waves. He cupped a hand to his eyes for a better view—still no sign of Hammer or his skiff.

One thing was certain: Hammer hadn't tied his boat to an anchored marker buoy to await rescue—standard practice for a fishing boat with engine trouble.

The Old Man pulled his boat alongside a buoy, grabbed it for a moment, turned off his engine and waited.

**A**long the bluffs, watchers scanned the broken seas through binoculars. Superior's heavy rollers were high and mean.

Visibility was poor, but the wind blew the fog around in patches. Someone shouted. He'd seen someone moving alongside the nets.

Word spread. The village knew the Old Man had gone out to bring in the Kid.

Someone recognized Aakvik's boat in the waves. He appeared to be hanging onto a buoy.

Minutes passed, and they saw his boat drift away from the nets.

**A**akvik deliberately moved with the waves and wind, figuring the Kid must have had engine trouble and the wind and waves would carry him in the same direction. Wind speed was about 38 mph.

His boat went down into a trough and then perched high atop a big breaker. Moving walls of water surrounded him, and they were growing. He tried to figure the speed and direction his partner was drifting.

Once he got his bearings, he started the engine, running downwind and steering clear of the crests. He had to hurry.

Seven or eight miles out, he let his boat idle atop a wave, taking one last look around for his missing partner. At this height, he should be able to see for miles, but there was no sign of Hammer.

The waves whistled. He'd never heard them that bad. It was time to head back to shore. Although he couldn't see the tall headlands of home in the fog, he knew which way to go: upwind. He'd have to turn his boat around and head back into the mounting wind and waves.

Suddenly, the outboard spluttered and then died. In the

erie silence, the Old Man turned and saw his outboard white with ice. He had been using the elderly Lockport without its cover, and frozen spray covered the engine.

He wound up the starting cord, pulled out the choke, turned the throttle to start and gave it a hard pull. The old engine wheezed. Again and again, he ran through the drill. But the ice-encrusted engine wouldn't start.

He sat back for a moment, weary but thankful he'd had the foresight to bring his spare engine, a 14-horsepower Johnson, which lay on the floorboards.

He'd have to wrestle the heavy Lockport off the transom in a bouncing boat on storm-filled seas.

Timing his movements between waves, he unscrewed the clamps holding the Lockport to the transom and grunted; it was frozen to the boat. He hefted his weight against the hundred-pound engine and felt the ice break. He leaned over to grasp the power head and pulled hard. The old outboard came out of the water. He wrestled it to one side and onto the boat's bottom.

Watching his weight, he slid forward and pulled the

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Johnson toward him. He lifted it carefully in his arms, cradling it like a baby. His boat and his salvation would depend on this engine.

Slowly, he slid the Johnson prop-first over the stern. There could be no mistakes.

Bracing himself, he lowered the power head onto its clamps. With a final slide, the outboard was on the transom. Reacting to the extra weight and drag, the small boat cocked broadside to the wind. He tightened the clamps.

Wiping his face, he discovered his perspiration had turned to ice.

He snicked the gear into neutral, pulled the choke, twisted the throttle to start and yanked hard on the starter cord. There wasn't even an encouraging whuff or slight backfire.

Despite all his efforts, his second engine wouldn't start.

In his T-35 jet trainer, Maj. Leo Tighe anxiously scanned Superior's wind-churned surface. It would be almost impossible to pick out a small boat from the whitecaps. A hit-and-run snowstorm had come up from nowhere, racing with unusual speed out of the west and dumping 13 inches of snow on the ground. Cold rain and sleet turning to ice had blanketed the Duluth, Minn., airport and the rest of the Midwest.

He had been lucky to get in the air.

Riding in the backseat was Lt. Gerald Buster. Flying in a

north-south search pattern, they were buffeted with strong winds. More than once they came closer than they cared to Superior's outstretched fingers.

"There!"

Spotting something in the waves below, Maj. Tighe circled.

At 1400, they saw a small white boat about 20 miles from shore.

On their first pass, it looked like it was under power, the man in the boat's rear seat paying no attention to the low-flying jet.

They circled again, lower this time. The boat wasn't putting out any wake or making progress in the waves. It was rolling broadside to the waves—a dangerous position—but the man wouldn't look up or signal.

The man and his boat were both white. Suddenly, it dawned on Maj. Tighe: They were covered in ice.

He circled the small craft again and again until a radar station onshore got a fix on the site and relayed the information to the Coast Guard. Low on fuel, he returned to the Duluth air base. There wasn't anything else he could do from the air.

Silently, he said a small prayer.

All that long afternoon, the skiff drifted with the wind and waves, while the old man labored over the balky engine. The waves and wind grew higher and louder, and the boat moved farther from shore.

A rogue wave reared over the small boat, swamping it. The Old Man bailed desperately, but the boat rode too low in the water. With a twinge of regret, he laid a hand on his old Lockport. It had been his fishing partner for many years. He'd taken it to the Hovland blacksmith many times to have it welded up. A bond had been forged between the outboard and the Old Man.

With reluctance, he threw it overboard. The motor hit the water and sank instantly, without even a ripple.

Now more than a hundred pounds lighter, the skiff gained an inch or two of freeboard in the bow. He began bailing again, trying to keep pace with the spray and spume coming aboard. When the water was down to the floorboards, he turned his attention to his remaining engine.

Somchow, he had to fix it. He didn't have any tools—just an ax. He took off his gloves, baring his skin to the frozen metal, and twisted the gas line off. No gas was coming out; the line had frozen. There had been too much water in his gas as well.

The old fisherman thought a moment and then stuck the line in his mouth to melt it. He kept it in his mouth, checking from time to time. The raw, gasoline-soaked rubber made him gag.

After about half an hour, he blew hard on one end. The ice

block popped out. The line was free.

He had been working on the boat and outboard all afternoon, and as he looked around, the short November day was growing dark.

He reattached the open gas line to the engine and hauled hard on the starter cord.

With a roar, the two-cylinder Johnson came to life, and the Old Man headed for a shore he couldn't see. He knew if he steered into the waves and wind, he'd end up somewhere along the North Shore. But the oncoming waves were running hard, the 20-foot seas dwarfing his boat. The old skiff was taking a terrible pounding. The planks were flexing and looked like they were separating. The screws holding them to the frames were pulling out.

He had no choice but to turn off the engine. When the motor stopped pounding, he noticed the awful noise of the sea once more. The wind howled across his open boat, and the white-crested growlers reared in front of him.

Without power, his boat was cocking sideways to the waves, breakers coming in over the side. Reaching forward, he picked the rope out of the half-frozen slurry in the skiff's bilge and tied it to the sturdy wooden fishing crate. Grunting, he hefted the 50-pound crate over the side. With a splash, it sank part-way into the waves, receding from the drifting boat.

Feeling a tug on the rope, he tied the line off the bow, which swung around to the waves.

His improvised sea anchor was holding. The boat was riding with its bow at a slight angle to the waves—its best sea-keeping position. As the temperature dropped, ice continued to build on the skiff and the Old Man.

He had done all he could. Now he could only bow his head at the storm's growing fury.

**B**ack in Hovland, snow and high winds kept the sheriff from searching the storm-filled lake in his floatplane. And the small Coast Guard boat from Grand Marais, Minn., had to turn back after losing engine power when its gas line froze.

About 20 miles away near Isle Royale, the steel Coast Guard cutter, *Woodrush*, got an emergency call. It responded by steaming toward Hovland, into the teeth of the storm.

In the meantime, the Coast Guard sent out another, more seaworthy lifeboat. When the 36-footer arrived in Hovland, the ice-covered boat rode 6 to 8 inches lower in the water.

The crew chopped off the ice and started searching the shoreline, trying to estimate where the lost fishermen might have drifted. The lifeboat had no radar, so the men had to search visually—an almost impossible job in the spray, ice and high waves. When they called off their search that evening, the wind was howling at nearly 50 miles per hour.

*Woodrush* kept on station, but temperatures neared the zero mark. The winds and seas increased. Ice buildup on the ship's topsides made it dangerously heavy, and the crew had to return to harbor several times to chop it off.

Darkness came early.

In the little fishing community along the shore, people prayed that the Old Man and the Kid, each huddled alone in their open boats, would survive the night.

**T**he Old Man had been out more than 16 hours with nothing to eat or drink. His face and hands were painfully cold. Water from a cut in his boot numbed his foot, and his mind grew slack with fatigue.

Waves coming like dark walls out of the night crashed into the old boat; the Old Man could feel its agony. The spray continuously washing over its bow froze. The boat was icing up. He knew when too much ice built up, the boat would become top-heavy and roll over in the waves. Thankful for his hatchet, the Old Man began chopping ice off his boat.

His mind drifted during the long night. He wondered what had happened to the Kid. In his rush to check the nets that morning, he probably wore his usual work clothes, so he didn't have his oilskins to protect him from the spray. He also wouldn't have carried a hatchet for a quick dash to the nets and back. The Old Man thought of Carl with nothing to chop away the ice; his boat getting lower in the water with the weight of the frozen spray.

The Old Man bent his head into the wind. His partner's end was probably quick—or so he prayed. Carl probably slumped down with the cold and fatigue and went to sleep. His boat, top-heavy with ice, probably turned sideways and rolled over.

The Old Man dared not sleep. It would be so easy to bend his head to his chest as if in prayer and let the little skiff rock him into slumber.

To sleep was to die.

He roused himself. Off in the distance, flashes of light bounced off the headlands of Hovland and Chicago Bay. That would be his rescuers, he thought, but he had no way of telling them he was farther from shore. A lot farther.

Ice covered his skiff, and looking down, he saw a layer coating his oilskins. His feet were encased in ice, and icicles hung from his fingertips. His ice-sealed oilskins had kept out the wind and spray and had provided some insulation.

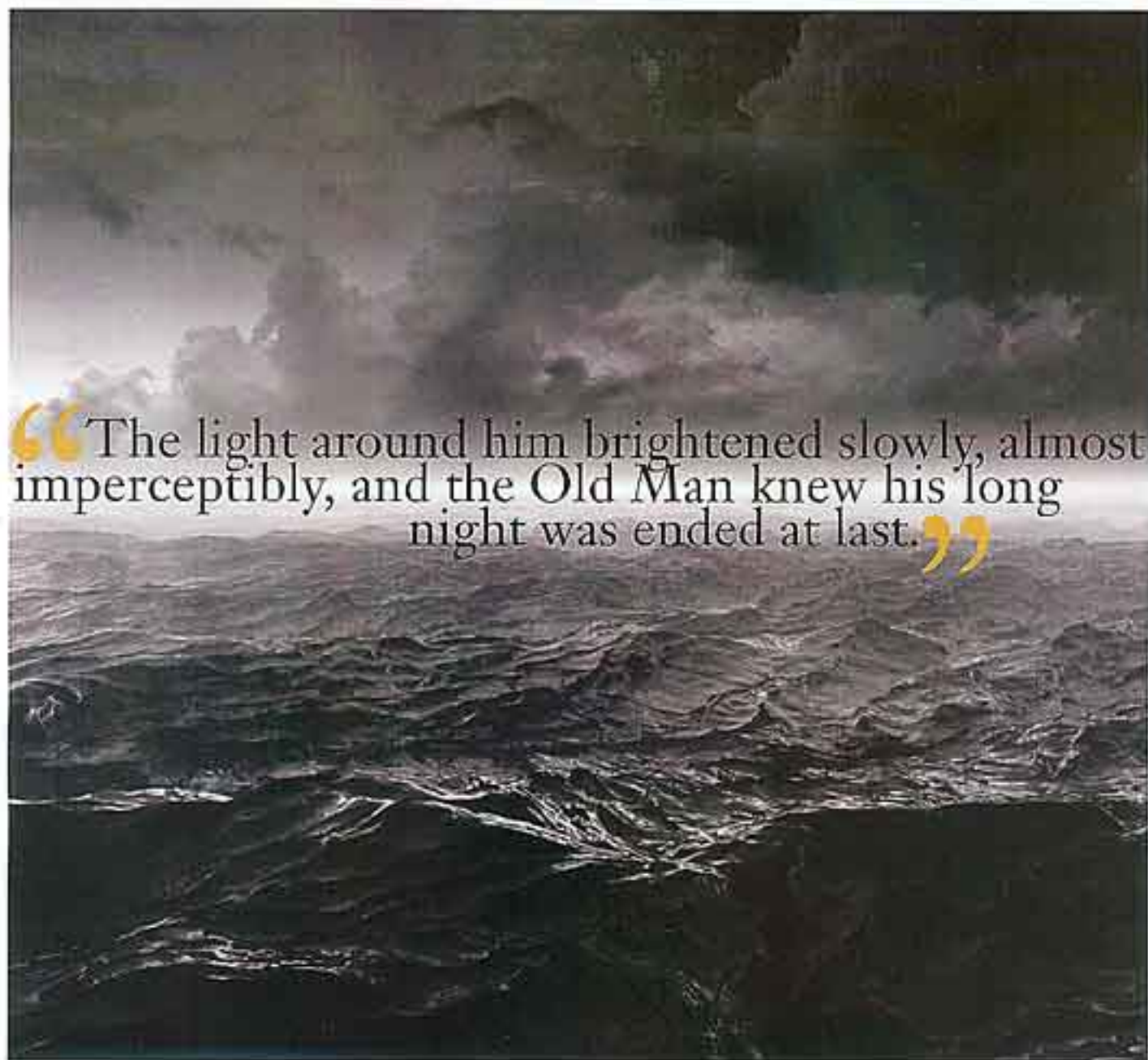
During the night, the moon came out. The Old Man admired the beauty of the spray glistening white and ethereal around him.

He saw something else gleaming in the water. Ice had begun to surround his boat.

**T**he light around him brightened slowly, almost imperceptibly, and the Old Man knew his long night was ended at last. At dawn, heavy steam covered the lake—the light gray haze hiding what was below. The Old Man scanned the horizon but couldn't catch a glimpse of the high, dark hills above Hovland or get a bearing on which way to head home.

The wind and seas had calmed somewhat.

He waited patiently. When the weak sun began to rise out of the water in the east, he'd have his bearing. Then, he'd



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swing north toward home.

With his boots frozen to the bottom, he couldn't move forward to chop the foot of ice that had grown on the bow.

Cracking ice chunks off his oilies, he managed to turn to the transom.

Ice coated his outboard and flywheel. The rope wouldn't fit in the motor's starting pulley, and the starter rope was frozen hard.

Knocking his hands together, he dislodged the thick coat of ice and took off his mitts. He cautiously hammered ice off the outboard and worked a starter rope strand into flexibility with his hands. Carefully, he wound two strands around the metal starting pulley, moving his fingers so they wouldn't freeze to the metal. They just fit.

He put his mitts back on his numb hands, waited a moment,

said a silent prayer and yanked. The old engine chuffed into life with a puff of blue smoke.

The Old Man turned his boat toward shore—and home.

The skiff plowed sluggishly into the oncoming waves. Heavy with ice, the bow lifted slowly and, at times, barely kept buoyancy. The ice's weight caused the skiff to ride 8 inches lower in the water.

He managed to keep the engine running for about six hours. His hopes lifted when he was within sight of land, but six or seven miles from shore, the engine stalled and quit.

He checked his fuel supply—out of gas.

For a moment, he thought he was out of luck, too. His feet were frozen to the floorboards, so he couldn't stand or reach forward with his ax to chop ice. Full of ice, the boat rode too

low in the water.

Swallowing his pride, the Old Man turned to his faithful outboard.

He loosened the setscrews holding it to the transom, hefted the engine and watched the Johnson slip overboard.

Although he still had oars, he couldn't use them because his mitts had stiffened into icy claws. The water, amazingly close to where he sat, wasn't gray anymore but a bluish white. Waves moved past, so it wasn't frozen, but chunks of ice surrounded and bumped into the boat.

He thought about his problem. He could drag the mitts in the water until they thawed, then put them on and carefully fold them around his oars until they froze in place.

Then he could row. The shoreline, he thought, was tantalizingly close.

**I**t was Thanksgiving Day. *Woodruff* widened its search, crisscrossing the area, but as the Coast Guard cutter plowed through one bank of fog into another, the crew grew increasingly worried. The temperature hovered around zero, and there was ice in the water. Even if the two men had survived the cold and ice, the rough lake could have taken down their small boats.

The cutter's motor grumbled on, its bow parting the waves and ice, while the shivering crew scanned the hungry seas.

"There!" someone yelled.

Above the layer of lake steam, a head had bobbed up, ice-covered and bowed.

His face and beard were glistening with frost; his hat was coated with white; and his ice-encased oilskin suit was frozen to his boat.

It was the Old Man.

**H**e had not heard them approach. Suddenly, he saw the looming bow of the big steel Coast Guard cutter heading toward him. He blinked, thinking it might be a delusion until the bow nudged his boat with a bump.

The crew came over the side in a rope ladder and stood ankle-deep in the nearly swamped skiff. He tried to get up, but he was stiff with cold, covered with ice from head to toe and frozen to the boat.

With care, the crew managed to chop him free and lift him out of the skiff. When he was aboard, they fed him hot coffee—his first drink in 29 hours.

Tying a rope around the skiff's eyebolt, they tried to tow it. But the old boat, so weak and heavy with ice, could only lift its bow a little before going under. They cut the rope, and the little boat sank quickly.

As they came into harbor, cheers rolled across the waves.

The Old Man looked around, amazed. "There must have been a hundred people there," he recalled later.

Though he had trouble moving, he shrugged off offers of help. "I can still walk," he said. "I'm no cripple."

He protested when he was placed on a stretcher and given a preliminary examination by a doctor. He did gulp an egg

sandwich and drink a pint of hot coffee. The doctor wanted to rush him to the hospital in Two Harbors. "As if I needed a hospital," the Old Man snorted. "I only froze two toes."

He declined a helicopter ride to the hospital, insisting on sitting up in the ambulance. He was treated for frozen toes and frostbite. His hands were swollen from exposure. A doctor pronounced him as being in excellent shape with normal blood pressure. From his hospital bed, he said he knew he'd make it to shore, "even if I had to paddle to Grand Portage."

Many reporters interviewed him, and one asked if he'd prayed to his God for help during the long night.

"No," he said, "there's some things a man has to do for himself."

Few words were as sweet to the Old Man as those of his neighbor, Elmer Jackson. Before Aakvik went out on his long search, he'd told Jackson, "Don't you worry, the Old Man will be back."

When Jackson visited the Old Man in the hospital, he respectfully replied: "You are a man of your word."

## Epilogue

I headed off Highway 61 North, climbing into third gear on the hills overlooking Superior. The practically unmarked cemetery sits in a grassy meadow surrounded by tall pines. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows onto the grass and small granite tombstones.

I found the Old Man's final resting place near the pine trees at the northern edge. A light wind sweeping through the foliage rustled the boughs.

His simple, carved granite headstone recorded his birth on 18 Aug. 1896 and his death on 11 Jan. 1987. At the upper left was a ship's wheel, and carved at the bottom was this:

*Home from the cruel sea and  
in a peaceful harbor.*

Helmer Aakvik rested at last in a plain wooden coffin fitted with rope handles. Nothing fancy. His name had been carved on the lid along with a compass rose.

He had requested one small addition: Like a proper boat, his coffin was fitted with a keel. So he could, as he put it, "steer a straight course to the stars."

Before his death, Aakvik's courageous rescue attempt and survival against great odds won him a Carnegie Medal and national recognition. His friend and fishing partner, Carl Hammer, was never found. ©

Marlin Bree, an honorary member of St. Paul Sail & Power Squadron who boats on Lake Superior, won the 2004 West Marine Writer's Award, the highest honor Boating Writers International bestows upon a writer, for his writing in *The Ensign*. Read Aakvik's full story in Broc's book *Broken Seas: True Tales of Extraordinary Seafaring Adventures* (Marlor Press, \$15.95, [www.marlinbree.com](http://www.marlinbree.com).) Condensed here with permission.