

MORE TALES OF THE TWENTIES

Cape Fear sank like the stone

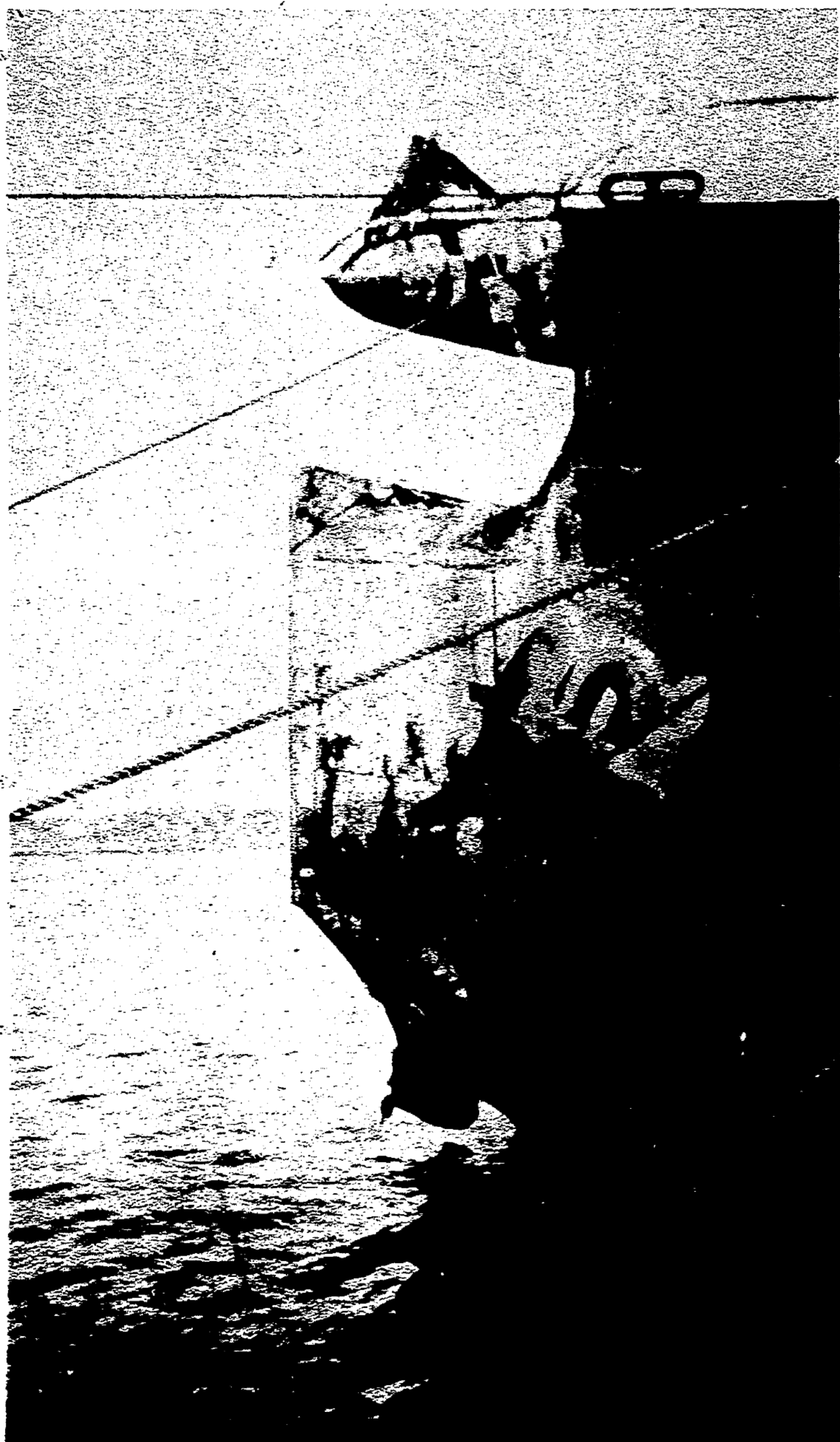


Photo courtesy John M. Canavan

ATLANTA'S BOW after she chewed into the stone boat Cape Fear.

By GARRETT D. BYRNES

UNCLE SAM after World War I was embarrassed with lots of leftovers. One was a freighter of 1,693 tons named the *Cape Fear*. Her death was one of the persistent legends around Narragansett Bay in The Twenties and whenever the story was retold, you were sure to hear that "she went down so fast the engine room gang couldn't keep ahead of the water."

Cape Fear was no ordinary vessel; she was built of concrete, one of several experimental ships the United States Shipping Board ordained as a way of saving steel needed elsewhere in the war. Like hundreds of other ships, notably many of the Hog Islanders, she was launched too late or the war ended too soon. At any rate, she had carried only a couple of cargoes when the shipping board sent her to Providence in the summer of 1920 for repairs.

She was certainly the first concrete vessel ever seen in Narragansett Bay and, according to John M. Canavan, the Washington Park provisions broker, she was the first concrete ship ever hauled out on a marine railway. Mr. Canavan in the early Twenties worked for the Lord Ship and Drydock Company which did work on engines and boilers at Fields Point and had its drydock off Allens Avenue, about where the Pennsylvania Petroleum Company is today. Mr. Canavan thinks another marine first of some sort was established when he was working in the Lord yard because all at one time, the company was working on a wooden ship (*Boonesborough*), a steel ship

(*Plainfield*), an iron ship (*Northern Light*), and a concrete ship (*Cape Fear*).

Impetuously, the shipping board broke up this unusual combination of hulls by deciding, after *Cape Fear* had been here for three months with a skipper and skeleton crew, that she should hasten to the James River in Virginia to be laid up with a couple of hundred other ships left over from the war.

So great was the bureaucratic desire to move the freighter quickly that the shipping board sent two crews of 15 men each to Providence, one from New York, the other from Boston, and this resulted in a prolonged argument which was settled only when Capt. Harry A. Biggins agreed to pay the men from Boston \$10 each, enough to cover two days' pay plus rail and taxi fares.

The shipping commissioner for Providence signed on the *Cape Fear's* company on Friday, October 29, 1920. There were Irishmen, a Greek, a

34 men set sail; 17 came back

Russian, some down east Yankees, a southerner, and quite a few from the New York City area, in all 34 men including the skipper.

The concrete vessel sailed in ballast from Providence at 4:30 p.m. On the bridge with Captain Biggins was the veteran bay pilot Gustave (Gus) Bihan who was to be lost at sea seven years later off the Vineyard.

TWO HOURS later, *Cape Fear* was between Rose Island and the

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When the chicken and rice has to be just right, use the rice that can't go wrong.



You got small, sweet onions at that other store across the street.

You squeezed all the tomatoes to get the plump, juicy ones.

You got out that special dish you've only used three or four times since you've been married.

You made the butcher go in back cause the chickens out front weren't meaty enough.

You got the one pepper in the rack that looked perfect to you.

she was

Dumplings. It was a crystal clear night with visibility unlimited. Captain Biggins told Gus Bihan he could leave the ship although it was customary to drop the pilot out at the Brenton Reef light vessel. Gus went over the side.

Out of Savannah, Georgia, with a cargo of pig iron, came *City of Atlanta*, bound for Providence. At the light ship, she had taken aboard Tal Dodge, a Block Islander and the most colorful of Rhode Island pilots.

In the East Passage south of the Dumplings on Jamestown and Castle Hill light on the Newport shore, the two vessels sighted and signalled each other. The running lights of the two ships were perfectly clear and, at first, it was a classic example of that old sea rhyme:

*Green to green and red to red,
 Perfect safety, go ahead.*

But then *Cape Fear* altered course and it was red to green and Capt. Bertram H. Garfield of *Atlanta* ordered full astern. But there was *Cape Fear* dead ahead. It was too late. The bow of the incoming ship sliced into the concrete hull of *Cape Fear* like an axe into a watermelon and three minutes later, the cement boat went down in deep water, bow first.

In those three minutes, much happened.

At first, Captain Garfield kept *Atlanta* firmly wedged into *Cape Fear's* hull. Lines were thrown across from *Atlanta* to *Cape Fear* and some of the men from that ship went over the bow of *Atlanta* to safety. The impact carried away *Cape Fear's* funnel and as it crashed down on the bridge, it hit Captain Biggins, giving him a severe head wound.

In the engine room, Chief Engineer Wilson told his gang to get out because there would be an explosion. The chief

►17

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SPECIAL CHICKEN & RICE

- 2 cups Minute® Rice
 - 1½ cups coarsely chopped green pepper
 - ¾ cup thinly sliced onions
 - 3 tablespoons salad oil
 - ¼ cup cornstarch
 - 2 cups chicken stock
 - 3 tablespoons soy sauce
 - 2 cups slivered cooked chicken
 - 3 ripe tomatoes, cut in thin wedges
- Prepare rice as directed on package. Keep warm. Meanwhile, cook green pepper and onions in oil in covered skillet over low heat until tender but not browned. Blend cornstarch with a small amount of chicken stock; add remaining stock and soy sauce. Gently stir chicken and stock into vegetables. Cook and stir until sauce is clear and thickened. Add tomatoes and cook just until heated. Serve over rice. Serves 6.

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CAPE FEAR

A very busy few minutes

didn't make it but Sabino Pasquall, who later said *Cape Fear* was practically sheared in two, started up the ladder and, for reasons he never understood clearly, found himself swimming clear.

On *Atlanta*, the bow compartments were flooded but the bulkheads held. Realizing that his ship couldn't keep *Cape Fear* afloat, Captain Garfield backed away and put over boats which picked up survivors including Captain Biggins and Pasquall.

AFTER the boats had completed their search, *Atlanta* steamed north and anchored just west of the Torpedo Station on Goat Island. Her distress signals were heard by Harry Champlin of Newport who was taking his launch over to Jamestown to pick up a former Newport mayor, Patrick J. Boyle, who had been speaking at a political rally.

Captain Champlin went back to Newport, picked up doctors and some policemen, and returned to *City of Atlanta* where the injured men were given aid.

On the morning after the collision, *Atlanta* came up the bay under her own steam, docked at Fields Point and began discharging her pig iron.

She brought with her, also, 17 men from *Cape Fear*, just half of the crew which had sailed in the stone boat from Providence the day before. A few bodies were recovered in the days following and the others, presumably, are still in that concrete, ship-shaped coffin at the bottom of the East Passage.

Then it was a matter for the federal steamboat inspectors in Providence who conducted hearings on the fourth floor of the Federal Building. When all testimony was in, Capt. Robert B. Clark, inspector of hulls, and Richard F. Bailey, inspector of boilers, found Captain Biggins guilty on charges of violating the pilot rules, unskillful ship handling, and criminal negligence and revoked his papers as master and pilot.

For years after that collision, the story of the *Cape Fear* disaster was an oft-told tale around the bay and inevitably the telling included the line, "Why, she sank like a stone." □



Hot Get-Together Offer!

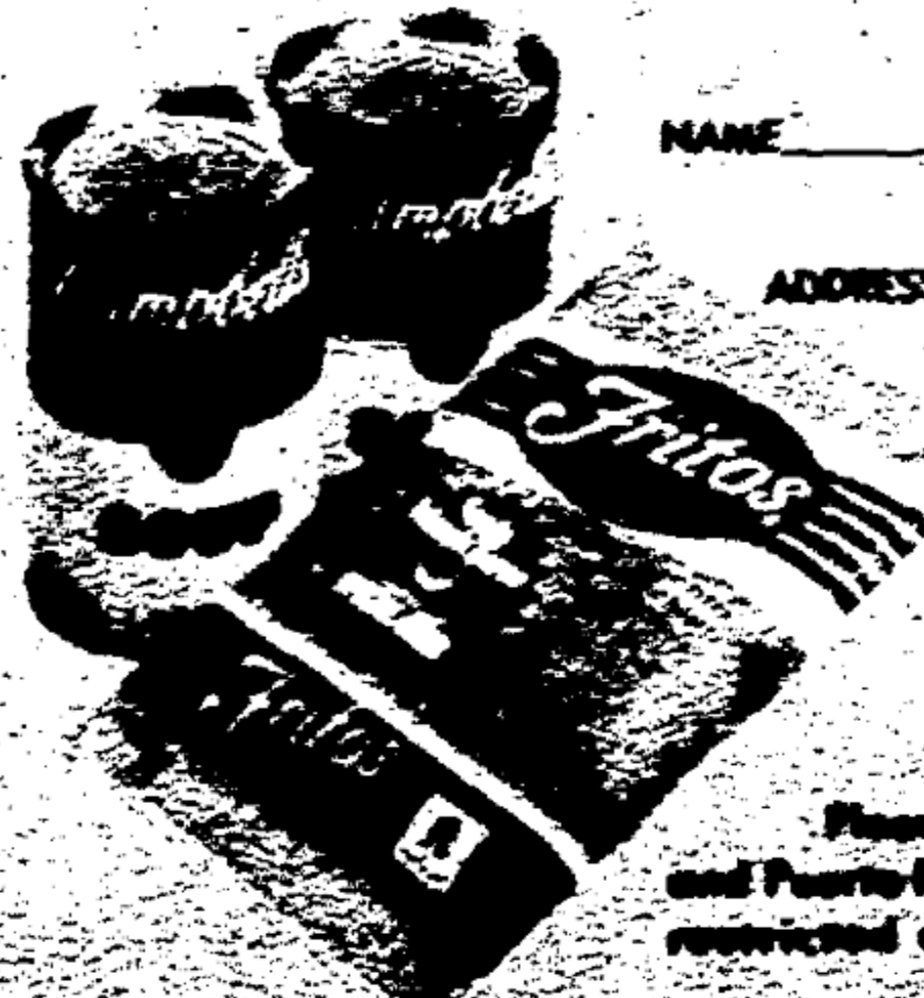
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