

CHAPTER 3

For Harvey

If you weren't steering, the best place to be was up front. This practice came to a quick halt. If we hit a wave that was over 6 inches we would start to plough water that is we would actually start to dive under water. The breakers that were on the front of the barrels would fill with water making the front too heavy and we would have to run to the back of the raft to bring it back to level. This was scary the first few times that it happened and any thing that was on the floor got wet. It took a while but after a few good soakings we learned how to keep the ol' raft trim. The reason we did not sink was that motors were lifted out of the water when that happened and they could not push us any further into the drink, river that is. Only the lookouts were permitted to be up front and we had a message runner. The message runner could be up front if he were on business. This business included relaying messages as to where we were and delivering food to the lookouts.

Waves on the river could reach 7 feet or more. We had to learn how to ride them, that is to pass over them without getting wet or breaking anything. We were on a part of the river called Pigs Eye; this is just below St. Paul, when we spotted a tow with several barges going up stream. What fun it would be to ride the waves that were created by its wake. Just about a mile or so behind such barges a large wave called a "King" wave follows. The bigger the barges, the bigger the king wave. This was a big one. Perhaps 12 or more barges tie together. We spotted the king wave and decided to ride it. The raft, much to our surprise did not even raise 1 inch, instead the king wave hit us like a tidal wave. It was all of six feet high and it went over us like we weren't even there. The raft wobbled like a flour tortilla. I was sure we were all as good as dead. It tore off the entire front railing and ruined some other parts. This included the screen on the front of the cabin and broke the steering cable, the first time of many. We were lucky we didn't end up in the water. We had an instant learning experience and from then on we never went behind any barges. We also gained a healthy respect for the river and it's powers.

You may be interested to know a little more about tows and barges. First, a towboat does not tow anything, it pushes. It pushes barges. It pushes from one to 24 barges at a time. The barges haul items like grain, gravel, and coal, up and down the river. The barges are tied or lashed together with wire ropes, these ropes are held together with huge clasps much like a very large clasp on a necklace. To unhitch these clasps a deck hand uses a heavy hammer. This is a very dangerous occupation and the men and women are trained and use much skill on the job. They live on the towboats all summer long and they really love the river life. We made many friends with these people, some of them even helped to save our lives. It was awesome to watch these barges pass our camp cite at night with their engines roaring and the powerful spot lights. Sometimes we could get the Captain to shine the spotlight on us as we ran up and down the sand bars and waved at the crew on board. What fun.

Well, now we had our first repairs to make. We also had to dry out. How about that we weren't even underway for more than an hour and we were wet, broken, and scared. I think some of us wished we were at the home school. First thing was to get the steering cable back in order.

While some of us worked on that, others worked on the broken railing and replacing the screen in the cabin. The rest of us hung up our clothes and sleeping bags to dry out. Boy did we look funny floating down the river on a broken raft with all that laundry hanging on the rails and from rope that we tied from the roof to the railings.

We passed our first test and learned our first lessons as sailors. But, we weren't able-bodied seamen yet.

Dean Felsing, Crew member of the Unsinkable

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CHAPTER 4

For Eddie, Molly, Mary E., and Dennis

Not only did we look funny we looked pathetic. We looked like a floating laundromat that had had an explosion in it. Here we were on our brand new raft and we were a mess. The repairs were made to the steering cable and we would have to wait to get parts for the railing and the screens and chicken wire. The clothes and sleeping bags would dry sooner or later in their own time.

Remember the channel I mentioned earlier? The channel is like a road in the water and it is marked by buoys and lights. The channel is maintained at nine feet deep by the Corps of Engineers. It is several hundred feet wide. All you had to do was stay between the buoys and you would be safe. This is called navigating. The navigator would look at the charts and tell the driver which way to go, and the lookouts would make sure we stayed between the buoys.

In the daytime you could see the buoys very easily. At night there were blinking lights call oscillating lights. In the dark it was difficult to see the buoys so you would head for the blinking light until another one came into view, then you would head for the new light. This would keep you in the channel. On each light there was a sign with the miles on it, much like the numbers you see on the freeway when you travel. The number was the number of miles that you were from the mouth of the Ohio River. After the Ohio River the mile number was your distance from the mouth of the Mississippi River or the Golf of Mexico.

Now with all this help you would think we would have little trouble getting to our destination. Well, guess again. Our next lock was lock and dam #2 at Hastings, MN. Just a few miles from where we hit the king wave. The river was just over a mile across and we could see a wide-open river ahead, so we decided to take our first short cut. After all if you could see where you wanted to be way off to your right and the channel went to the left, why not head right for the lock? Our short cut took us right through an underwater stump field. This was created many years ago when the dam was built and the river backed up over a wooded area. The trees were all gone now and all that was left was the stumps. We were just a few hundred feet into this submerged forest and all of a sudden the bottom of the raft started to shake and we heard the first cry of "Shear pin". Then we broke the steering cable again. It was like being in a minefield except that the stumps did not blow up. It took us several hours and more shear pins to work our way back into the channel. Ah yes another lesson on the river. Can you guess what this one was?

We couldn't really blame any one but our selves for this blunder. Most of the time we tried to pin the blame for things that went wrong on someone else even if it was your fault you would

try to blame the next guy. Remember most of us had been together for over a year by now and we pretty well knew who was responsible for what.

For the most part I got along with the majority of the other boys. In fact some of us lived near enough to each other that we would play after school. We did things like swat pigeons under the Broadway Ave. bridge over the Mississippi River in north Minneapolis. If we caught a pigeon we would put it in a paper bag and get on a city bus and let it go. Now you know one of the reasons that I got into trouble. It wasn't very nice with all the feathers and poop flying around the bus but it sure was a lot of fun.

Lock and dam #2. Jack our leader went ashore and got his car. He mostly followed us in the car so he could go ahead and make arrangements for publicity, food and other things we may need. I some times think he needed to get away for a while especially now that we got him soaked and all the hubbub over steering. Jack was an excellent scrounge. By that I mean he could find anything, even if it wasn't there. Yes, he was a magician. In fact most of the things that our raft was made out of were "found" by this man. He scoured the Twin City area hi and low and asked for donations from the most unusual sources. I think some people gave him things, like the oil drums and lumber and nuts and bolts just so he would go away. By go away I mean because his story about a raft and the river and all was too much for some people. How he got the folks at the out board motor company to donate two motors is still a mystery to me. These people ended up giving us a total of five engines. More about this down the river. He also got a major oil company to donate all of our gas and oil. This remarkable fellow became one of my best friends for many years after the raft trip we would sit at his house and tell stories of our adventures. I learned many things from the river and Jack and hope that some day you may have as good a friend as I found in this man. I still visit with his wife and children and grand children, they have all encouraged me to write this story for you.

Dean Felsing, Crew member of the Unsinkable

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