

# The Armistice Day Blizzard

## Story Recalls How Men Died 14 Years Ago

On Nov. 13, 1940, The Winona Republican-Herald's banner was this tragic line: "THE DUCKS CAME AND MEN DIED — TRAGEDY OF RIVER BOT-TOMS."

The story which followed, written by Gordon McQuarrie of the Milwaukee Journal, told of the blizzard that came with the ducks and how some hunters were rescued and how others died.

The Daily News, on the 14th anniversary of the great storm, reprints McQuarrie's story as a memorial to the heroism of Nov. 11, 1940, and also to familiarize those who were not here then with the events of that day.

McQuarrie's story:

The winds of Hell were loose on the Mississippi Armistice Day and night.

They came across the prairie, from the south and west, a mighty freezing, invisible force. They charged down from the river bluffs to the placid stream below and reached with deathly fingers for the life that beat beneath the canvas jackets of thousands of duck hunters.

They will tell of this for years to come. They will recall how Dad and Mother were saved, and men who came through it alive together will look at each other with new understanding, as is the way with those who have seen death brush them close.

### Year of 'Big Wind'

And eventually they will look back upon it as "The Year of the Big Wind." To such a futile phrase will come what now seems to be the greatest hunting season disaster in Northwest history—and perhaps the greatest in the country's history.

"The dead in this area, 50 miles up and down the river, will likely come to 20 and we know of 16 men," say Winona newspapermen. So much for the statistics, which will be tallied for days, as more of the missing are found and more upturned skiffs are located.

The winds of Hell it was that were abroad that frightful Monday and Tuesday and the winds of Hell in high gear with the throttle wide open.

They came, those winds, with little warning of their intensity. After a poor duck hunting season along the Mississippi, duck hunters welcomed the wrath from the west. They liked it in its early stages. They tossed out their decoys and said, "let 'er blow, that's what we've been waiting for."

### The Ducks Came

They stationed themselves on tiny sand spits and boggy islands and the ducks came. The ducks came with the blast, riding it bewildered and headlong, so many a man, in those first mad hours, took his limit of birds easily. "Bushels of ducks we could have killed," said one survivor. "But we forgot about the ducks . . ."

Tuesday night on Louis Stantz' boat livery dock, a few miles out of town, 50 skiffs lay at anchor. The dock was snow-covered and deserted. Seven dead ducks, frozen stiff, lay there, forgotten. The people who crowded to the dock all day Tuesday had other things to think of. Up the bank from that dock Tuesday came five dead men. The ducks lay there on the dock where the river goes by.

The wind did it. The furious wind that pierced any clothing, that locked outboard engines in sheaths of ice, that froze on faces and hands and clothing, so that even survivors cracked when they got to safety and said their prayers.

### 'Murderous Mistress'

The wind did it. The cold was its ally. Mother Nature, sometimes a blue-eyed girl with corn-colored hair, was a murderous mistress Tuesday night on the Mississippi.

She caught thousands of duck hunters on Armistice Day—a holiday. She teased them out to the river and the marshes with her fine, whooping wind and then when she got them there, she froze them like muskrats in traps. She promised ducks in the wind. They came all right. The survivors tell that grimly, but by that time the duck

hunters of the Mississippi were playing a bigger game—with their lives at stake.

By that time, men along the Mississippi were drowning and freezing.

The ducks came and men died. They died underneath upturned skiffs as the blast sought them out on boggy, unprotected islands. They died trying to light fires and jumping and sparring to keep warm. They died sitting in skiffs.

They died standing in river water to their hips, awaiting help.

They died trying to help each other and a hundred tales of heroism will be told, long after the funerals are over.

### Saw Three Die

Over in Winona General Hospital tonight lies Gerald Tarras, 17, a survivor. He is a big boy, nearly six feet and strong. He had to be, to live. He saw his father, his brother and his friend die. He has not yet come to a full realization of what has happened, for grief is sometimes far in the wake of catastrophe.

Gerald Tarras, his head buried in a hospital pillow, his frost-blistered hands clutching nervously at the bedspread, tells part of it. Just a part. No need to ask him exactly where he was. Just out there on the river. Out on that hideous gut of water between the high bluffs near Winona where the furies came on endlessly. Gerald tells it, hazily in a sort of open-eyed trance.

"We went out about 10 in the morning, the four of us. It was raining and warm. The wind came at noon. We began to worry. My father (Carl Tarras, 43, Winona) said we'd better go back. It got fierce. Then Bill Wernecke (his friend) died. He was cold. We boxed each other to keep warm. Bill died. I was holding him. He went 'O-h-h-h. . . ' and he was gone.

### Standing in Water

"We were standing in water. We had a black Labrador dog with us. My brother, (Ray, 16) died next. Yes, he died. I knew he was dead. He was cold. An airplane flew over and I moved my arm. It saw us. Then my Dad died. They took me off in the government tug and gave me some coffee. They gave me some whisky."

In a Winona restaurant sits Max Conrad, aviator, sipping coffee with Bobby Bean, his assistant. He tells his story very badly for he is a modest man.

Conrad took a Cub training plane with a top speed of 75 miles an hour and led the government tug Throckmorton and other rescue boats to marooned hunters on the

river. He flew all day, sometimes with Bean, sometimes alone.

He would fly his plane repeatedly over a spot where hunters were caught and the rescue boats would know where to go. He would toss out packages containing sandwiches, whisky, cigarettes and matches. He would open the door of his plane and with the motor cut, shout down to the men below to "Hang on, help is coming." He would route the little plane time after time through channels over which marooned hunters could follow in skiffs.

Conrad tells a poor story, for he is modest. Harold Eastman, of Winona, meter superintendent for the Mississippi Valley Public Service Co., tells Conrad's story—and his own—better.

Part 1



"I was hunting with R. J. Rice and Richard Guelzer. The wind caught us on a bog. The oarlock broke. Dick said 'We camp here.' We turned up the skiff for a wind-break. We tried to light a fire but everything was wet and it was too windy. At 9:30 a.m. Tuesday we heard a plane. We fired our guns. The plane did not see us. At noon the plane saw us. It was Conrad. I know him. He saved our lives.

#### Kept Flying Overhead

"Conrad yelled down at us from the open door of the plane: 'Sit tight! We'll get you out of here!' In five minutes he was back with a tin of food and cigarettes and dropped it. He kept flying over us, then hollered down 'Start out and go in the direction I am!'

"We took our shotguns and started. Conrad said 'Leave your guns and take the skiff.' We did. We broke through ice several times, then we would hang onto the skiff and work it along to new ice. The Throckmorton picked us up. Conrad saved our lives. I feel all right except for the smoke in my eyes from the fire."

Over at the Conrad home, four small daughters, Judy, Jane, Betty and Molly and their mother waited for their dad. He came home all right. His wife says he is a fine flier. Then he slept hard, for today he took up the patrol again—looking for three skiffs and men, dead or alive.

Conrad says the river shambles was bad because pan ice piled up on banks and islands, so skiffs could not get through. He says he saw dogs alone on boggy islands. He says "the guys who used their heads built windbreaks with their skiffs and then built fires." He says a lot of fellows "lost their heads." He is a kind man. He will not even guess at how many

are dead. It will take days to find out, he says.

Some of the dead brought in, like those at the Louis Stantz river landing and boat livery, had their faces and hands blue and bruised. It was not possible to park a car at this spot for the cars of anxious relatives—waiting. The bruises, they said, were from the men in the bitter night beating each other to keep warm—shadow boxing and sparring, likely, even when their hands were frozen clubs and were without feeling.

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Thus they died on the Mississippi on the night following Armistice Day.

Out of town a way is Calvin Volkel. He helped bring in 17. Likely saved their lives. He was sleeping Tuesday night, in the back of his tavern. He awakened and talked:

"At 9 Monday night it began to look bad to me. I needed a good big fast boat to save those fellows out on the river. I was looking especially for Eddie Whitten. I went to town and got Al Squires. We got a 12-horse outboard and started out. It swamped. Then we rowed, each with a pair of oars, shouting to each other one-two, one-two to keep the stroke.

#### Good Oarsmen Needed

"Our backs became ice coated. I had put on an aviator's suit. We got to the place I knew Eddie was hunting. There were 16 others there! We got Eddie back ashore and called the police for help. We needed good oarsmen. The men on the island were lying on top of the fire. Not beside it. On top of it. They lay on top of it!

"They had been shooting off boughs for fuel with shotgun shells. Two men would shoot at once and knock off a bough. I came back and brought off a fellow named Anderson. I brought a hatchet for wood and whisky. Then we worked it this way. Every man who got ashore in the rowboat went back and took off another and the one he took off went back and took the next.

"It was in what we call Dark Slough . . ."

Also in the hospital is 14-year-old Ray Sherin, whose father, Torge Sherin, was in the rescue party that saved him from the bottomlands death after an all-night search.

The boy has a frozen purplish foot, encased in a special tent. He is not coherent. His eyes stare wildly at the ceiling and sweat stands on his smooth, boyish forehead. He will be all right. His foot may be all right, doctors say. He is very lucky.

#### Wind, Cold, Fear

Next to him in the room is Bob Stephen, Winona, with a frozen hand. He will be all right. Older, he tells the story that will be told up and down this river for years to come—"the river, the wind, the cold, the fear—and rescue."

Hundreds made it ashore under their own steam and men stood, white and shaking on solid ground and looked back on a river running four-foot waves. They came ashore and home and put down their guns and looked about them, hardly believing there was a safe, warm world and they were in it.

There were long prayers by the Mississippi's banks, Tuesday, the day after Armistice, when the ducks came and men died.

Blizzard Pt. 2