

All but Forgotten: Early Measures for Maritime Safety on Canada's West Coast

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The exponential population growth and expansion of shipping from 1867 to 1914 in both British Columbia and the American Pacific Northwest led to marine disasters along the area known as "The Graveyard of the Pacific." Despite repeated calls for improved marine safety measures from concerned Canadians and Americans, by the early twentieth century, this burgeoning Pacific Gateway remained completely devoid of any of the direct life-saving measures that were then common-place on the shores of both the Atlantic coasts and Great Lakes. This paper will examine the development of local life-saving measures on Canada's Pacific Gateway and Ottawa's response to calls for greater support.

La croissance exponentielle de la population et l'expansion du transport maritime de 1867 à 1914 en Colombie-Britannique et dans le Nord-Ouest du Pacifique américain ont entraîné des catastrophes maritimes le long de la zone connue comme le « cimetière du Pacifique ». Bien que des Canadiens et des Américains inquiets se soient succéder à lancer des appels en faveur de l'amélioration des mesures de sécurité maritime, au début du 20^e siècle, cette porte d'entrée du Pacifique en plein essor était complètement dépourvue des mesures directes nécessaires à la survie qui étaient alors communes sur la côte de l'Atlantique et le long des rives des Grands Lacs. Cet article étudie l'élaboration de mesures régionales visant à sauver des vies dans la porte d'entrée canadienne du Pacifique et la réaction d'Ottawa aux demandes d'un meilleur appui.

On a foggy evening in late January 1906, the Pacific Coast Steamship Line's *Valencia*, 1598 tons burden, was feeling her way through the swirling vapours of a

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fogbound coast in search of the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Bound from San Francisco to Victoria and Seattle with freight and 164 passengers and crew, the master had miscalculated his dead reckoning having severely underestimated the set of the current, and believed that he was still much farther south, off the coast of Washington State. Just after midnight a sounding of 30 fathoms was passed to the wheelhouse and within seconds an ominous outline of rock, cliff, and forest appeared out of the gloom. The forefoot of the *Valencia* sliced into a rock southeast of present day Pachena Point on the southwest coast of Vancouver Island – over 40 nautical miles to the north of the master's estimated position. The initial collision was not that severe, for the ship had been traveling at a relatively slow speed given the foggy conditions and the lack of a verified fix. In the ensuing attempts to free the ship, however, its bottom was ripped open on another rock and the engine room began to flood rapidly – the damage was done. *Valencia* was an old ship, built in 1882, prior to the enforcement of safety rules and construction standards regarding watertight bulkheads and the separation of compartments. In a desperate bid to save his rapidly foundering ship, the master made an order for full speed astern and proceeded to back the vessel onto a pinnacle, close to shore but at the base of sheer cliffs. From this point on the fate of those onboard the hapless ship was permanently sealed; it was in the breakers now.

The events that followed were shocking to say the least. Against the orders of *Valencia*'s master to just lower the boats to the gunwales, several life-boats were launched in a state of complete chaos and confusion. Anarchy reigned paramount, none of the six boats launched made it to shore in one piece. Two capsized immediately spilling men, women, and children into the icy seas and certain death. One was launched without a plug, the remainder either capsized in the surf or disappeared altogether. One was not located for another seven months, complete with a skeleton crew, while another mysteriously reappeared almost thirty years later, in 1933. Only the very fortunate made it to shore. For almost three days, the agony of those left onboard increased as several vain attempts were made from both shore and sea, but to no avail. Simply put, there were no means in place to initiate and affect any form of viable rescue given the remote and exposed position of the wreck. In the end, only thirty-eight survived the disaster, none of them women or children.

The tragic loss of *Valencia* is well known amongst those with roots in coastal British Columbia and is recognized as an unfortunate event that raised the profile of the long-standing demands for more maritime safety measures on Canada's West Coast and became an impetus for change. This paper sets out to analyse the local events and activism of the period and how this movement evolved and eventually broke the long-standing deadlock of inaction.

Although the death toll from the *Valencia* incident was large at 126, this was by no means the worst maritime disaster along the coast of British Columbia up to this point. Calls from both sides of the border for more maritime safety measures had been loud and clear for several decades and the carnage of ships, cargoes, and souls was never ending. In 1875, the steamer *Pacific* was lost nearby in a collision

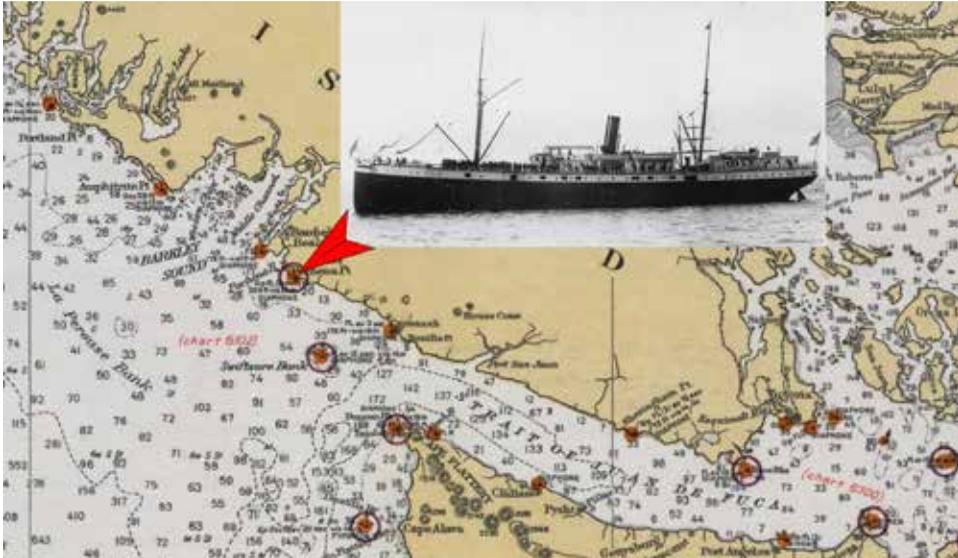


Chart is a section of *Cape Flattery to Dixon entrance*, (US Coast and Geodetic Survey, Jan. 1934). Inset is the S.S. *Valencia* circa 1900 (Wikimedia Commons)

off Cape Flattery, taking with her approximately 250 souls. In that case, however, the demise of those onboard had been comparatively quick, with any hope of rescue being a remote afterthought. Hundreds of vessels had met a similar fate since the dawn of European contact along these shores. Giant fully-rigged ships, barques, sealing and lumber schooners, paddle steamers, colliers, naval vessels, and innumerable fishing craft had all become casualties of this area, well known to mariners in the Pacific Northwest as part of the “Graveyard of the Pacific.” In the days of sail the stretch of Vancouver Island coastline from Port San Juan to Estevan Point was a notorious lee shore, where strong winds could suddenly veer from the south and combine with the same prevailing currents which had tricked *Valencia*’s master, rendering any wind-powered vessel helpless as she was set, at the whim of the elements, towards this exposed and rocky expanse.¹

Following *Valencia*’s loss in 1906, the long-standing cries for the establishment of enhanced life-saving measures at the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca and up the west coast of Vancouver Island reached a crescendo amongst the press and the populace – from San Francisco north to the ports of Victoria, Seattle, and Port Townsend. At the time, aside from three remote lighthouses – one at Tatoosh Island (1854) on the American side at the southern entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca and two on the Canadian side at Cape Beale (1874) and Carmanah Point (1891) on the southwest coast of Vancouver Island – as well as a very primitive

¹ For more reading on wreck and rescue along the coast of British Columbia during its formative years there are many volumes, but the most comprehensive include: Fred Rogers, *Shipwrecks of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1973); R. Bruce Scott, *Breakers Ahead!* (Sidney: Review Publishing House, 1970); and T.W. Paterson, *British Columbia Shipwrecks* (Langley: Stagecoach Publishing, 1983).

telegraph trail, there were no other safety measures proximate to this strategic shipping choke point.² Not even a year after the *Valencia* incident, the Canadian Department of Marine and Fisheries (the pre-cursor to the Canadian Coast Guard) proudly stated in its Thirty-Ninth Annual Report that the organization had “98 life-saving stations in the Dominion of Canada.” In reality, however, only about 30 of these were actual life-boat stations with the remainder being lighthouses. Further, not one of the purpose-built life-boat stations had been established on the entire Pacific coast of the nation.³

In order to fully understand the contemporary frustrations of the inhabitants of coastal British Columbia regarding the lack of action on this issue it is worth looking back at the efforts – or lack thereof – that had been undertaken up until the loss of *Valencia*. Since colonization of the Pacific Northwest began, the local settler populace recognized the inherent risks that humans took while travelling by sea to and from these remote and often inhospitable shores. No more so, however, than the Indigenous Peoples who had resided in these waters for thousands of years and who looked to the coast and ocean for their very survival. They were very much aware of the local perils of the seas, well before the first non-Indigenous shipwreck occurred. These original mariners of the coast were adept at beach landings with their dugout canoes as this was their primary means of transport and the early records of the colonial press are rife with stories of their rescues. In fact, one of the earliest recorded wrecks was the loss of the ship *William* on Vancouver Island’s west coast on New Year’s Day in 1854, at almost the same location where *Valencia* met its fate five decades later. In this case the local Indigenous people sheltered the 14 survivors – the captain and cook having been lost – and then paddled them over 50 nautical miles to Sooke, near present day Victoria.⁴ Another fine example of Indigenous succour occurred in January 1880 following the wreck of the American barque *General Cobb* in Florencia Bay, near present day Tofino. In this case the United States Government awarded their gold life-saving medal to “*Schewish, Chief of the Clayoquots*” who, after dispatching a large whaling canoe with 14 paddlers, saved all those onboard the ship as it was being pounded and broken apart in the surf.⁵ As the late Don Graham, relates in his excellent book, *Keepers of the Light*:

This scenario would be repeated again and again. The finest sailing vessels afloat were salvaged and the best crews to be mustered were pulled from the shoals ... in dugout canoes. Expecting no reward for their effort, the Pacheedahts, Nitinahts, Ohiahts, and other tribes were the pioneer search

² The United States Life-Saving Service had established a lifeboat station at Waadah Island (Neah Bay) in 1876, but it was discontinued in 1890. See Ralph Shanks and Wick York, *The U.S. Life-Saving Service, Heroes, Rescues and Architecture of the Early Coast Guard* (Petaluma: Costano Books, 1996), 204.

³ See Michael Neitzel, *The Valencia Tragedy* (Surrey: Heritage House Publishing, 1995), 100.

⁴ Don Graham, *Keepers of the Light* (Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 1986), 7.

⁵ George Nicholson, *Vancouver Island’s West Coast, 1762-1962* (Victoria: Morris Printing Company, 1962): 219-220.

and rescue teams, venturing with a nonchalance born of a millennium's experience into waters which proved too much for the sophisticated technology of sail and steam.⁶

As colonization moved on, the business of life-saving on Canada's West Coast would get much busier. Following the discovery of gold on the lower reaches of the Fraser River in 1857 a massive migration of 30,000 souls, primarily from the depleted gold fields of California, swarmed northward from San Francisco and other points. Travelling primarily by sea, almost in an instant this human surge aggressively transformed the British colony of Vancouver Island and its sleepy Hudson's Bay Company Trading Outpost at Fort Victoria into the second busiest port on the Pacific Coast of North America. This, of course meant more ships, and more ships meant more wrecks.

In 1859, Captain G.H. Richards of the Royal Navy was stationed adjacent to Victoria at the Royal Naval base in Esquimalt. His principal assignment was to conduct extensive hydrographic surveys on the coast for the British Admiralty. He wrote at the time to his superiors about the burgeoning development of this part of the world and provided a vision of the future of this new Pacific Gateway, stating that, "The various and differing resources ... which have so strangely been concealed for ages, which are now so suddenly brought to light" will likely result in "a marked and permanent change in the commerce and navigation of the known world."⁷ In fact, by 1860 over 1,000 foreign-flagged ships from all over the world had sailed into the fledgling port of Victoria. At this point, Canada as a nation was still almost a decade away and the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia's entry into that confederation would not occur until 1871. Thus, any calls for the provision of maritime safety measures for this far-flung post of Empire had to go through the Governor and the Colonial Office in London.

The earliest efforts at providing some form of maritime safety measures for Canada's West Coast were preventative in nature and involved lights. In 1858, Captain Richards provided a report to Governor James Douglas regarding the need for lighthouses in the vicinity of Victoria, particularly given that the Americans had already constructed lights at Tattoosh Island as well as at New Dungeness across the strait and opposite Victoria. This report, which recommended that lighthouses be constructed at Race Rocks south of Victoria as well as on Fisgard Islet at the entrance to the harbour and Royal Naval base at Esquimalt, was forwarded to James Booth of the British Board of Trade in London, which was the office responsible at the time for the provision of Colonial Lights. Likely wondering where Victoria and British Columbia actually were, his response to the proposal and recommendation to the board was that these lights not be considered to "belong to the Class of Imperial Lights," saying ostensibly that the Crown would not cover the costs of construction

⁶ Graham, *Keepers of the Light*, 8.

⁷ Graham, *Keepers of the Light*; and Richards, Report to Governor Douglas, with letter, 23 October 1858, CO 60/1, The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

or operation.⁸ Fortunately for the fledgling colony and in spite of his intransigence, Booth forwarded Captain Richard's report to the Marine and Harbour Department, where a fellow career naval officer named Sullivan recognized the merits of the request, from a mariner's perspective, and recommended the construction of light stations with revolving lights.⁹ Following the construction of both Race Rocks and Fisgard Lights, one other Imperial Light, in the form of a light-ship, was placed at Sand Heads in 1859 at the entrance to the main arm of the Fraser River, which was the primary route to the mainland colony of British Columbia's capital at New Westminster and the Fraser River gold fields beyond.¹⁰

In this case colonial officials had listened and helped to establish the foundation of a very basic maritime safety service, but the provision of lighthouses, albeit of extreme importance to the promotion of the safety of ships and navigation, remained at most preventive rather than responsive in nature. Even with these new lights at the entrance to Canada's primary Pacific gateway and the addition of even more light stations farther north up the west coast of Vancouver Island – at Cape Beale in 1874 and at Carmanah Point in 1891 – the vagaries of wind, weather, fog, and human error, as well as luck, continued to wreak havoc.¹¹ Although the tales of the early light stations are rife with daring do and individual acts of heroism from the keepers themselves, when maritime mishaps occurred within the narrow geographic confines of these tiny outposts, the reality was that these brave keepers also had their own survival to consider as they too faced the same hostile elements on a daily basis. Their existence, although a much-needed and very important beginning, still did not constitute an extended maritime safety net, inclusive of life-saving stations, equipped with dedicated life-boats and other measures, similar to that which had been established by many coastal states in Europe as well as in the rest of the populated quarters of the Dominion of Canada.

For the next several decades, calls for the establishment of some form of life-saving measures went out following every major nautical disaster, even if it was simply to assign a naval gunboat or a "steamer" to patrol the waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the west coast of Vancouver Island during the stormy winter months. But the blame for intransigence could not be put entirely on those outside the colony. As early as 1860, following the tragic loss of several vessels in and around the approaches to the Strait, including the ship *John Marshall*, lost with all hands, petitions were made to then colonial governor Sir James Douglas to send a naval gunboat to the area to look for survivors. After several ships were unreported and a great deal of flotsam was discovered, he responded that he did not feel that

⁸ Graham, *Keepers of the Light*, 9.

⁹ Graham, *Keepers of the Light*, 9.

¹⁰ It should be noted that Captain Nagle, Victoria's Harbour Master, placed a locally managed and funded light at MacLaughlin Pt, at the entrance to Victoria Harbour in November 1859. By April, the light had apparently "melted down."

¹¹ Many more light-stations would be established along the British Columbia coast throughout the remainder of the nineteenth Century, primarily under the auspices of the Canadian Department of Marine and Fisheries.

it was necessary to task any resources “until positive information reached him.”¹² About a year later, the Victoria newspaper the *British Colonist* printed an editorial calling for a rescue steamer – likely targeting the governor’s reluctance to provide any means of rescue. The editorial defined the situation as follows:

we are fully convinced (as are nine-tenths of the community) that the presence of a staunch steam vessel is urgently required near the mouth of the Straits of Juan de Fuca.... Our coast is subject during the winter months, to heavy gales, and although of short duration, they are none the less dangerous or destructive in character than those often encountered on the Atlantic side. Of this fact we have, unfortunately, had too much proof recently, in the large number of melancholy shipwrecks we have chronicled.... The presence of a Steamer on our coast, well supplied with provisions etc., would be productive of much good, in saving lives and property, and tend greatly to lessen the dangerous navigation on our coast. Without protection of some kind, we very much fear that our coast will enjoy but an indifferent reputation in other countries...¹³

Unfortunately, despite this plea, no lasting life-saving measures were taken during the colonial period other than the establishment of the lights.

To make matter worse, by 1865, a life-boat attached for a short-time to the Race Rocks Lights had been removed. On 28 December 1865, several people heading to the light for a visit on Christmas Day were lost. In response, the *Colonist* published the following:

At Race Rocks where human lives maybe in peril any hour of the day or night, complacent officialdom with an ostentatious affectation of retrenchment decides there shall be no boat, not even a canoe, in the event of an emergency.... From all we can learn there would have been no loss of life if the keepers of the lighthouse had been granted a boat in response to their reiterated representations to the official authorities. The life-boat originally used was withdrawn by the Surveyor-General for some reason and never replaced.¹⁴

The situation remained dire and many realized that there was a serious need not only on the remote West Coast, but also on the coasts of the rest of Canada for the development of a Canadian life-saving service – a public humanitarian entity that operated rescue apparatus, such as surfboats, life-boats and line-throwing guns and rockets. By the 1880s similar organizations were being established in Europe and elsewhere, with two in particular being very prominent. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, the Royal National Life-boat Institution (RNLI) had roots stretching back to 1824 and was an all-volunteer organization as well as one of the first true charities in Great Britain outside of religious entities. South of the border, the United States Life-Saving Service (USLSS) had been officially

¹² “The Reported Shipwrecks,” *British Colonist* (Victoria), 11 December 1860, 1.

¹³ “The Gunboats,” *British Colonist* (Victoria), 17 January 1861, 1.

¹⁴ “Fatal Accident – Loss of Five Lives,” *British Colonist* (Victoria), 28 December 1865, 2.

established in 1871 as a branch of the Revenue Cutter Service and, unlike its British counterpart, was a paid government service. Both organizations boasted hundreds of stations and thousands of lives saved per annum with the latter organisation quickly establishing stations on the outer Pacific coast of the United States.¹⁵ It is not a coincidence, therefore, when one considers that the bulk of the immigrant population in British Columbia had connections to these two nations, that calls would be made to establish similar measures here.

As early as 1877 the former Premier of British Columbia and then Member of Parliament for Victoria, B.C., Amor De Cosmos, petitioned Ottawa to establish a life-saving network from Victoria to the Queen Charlotte Islands, only to have his pleas quickly swept aside.¹⁶ His resolution in the Canadian House of Commons “declaring it desirable to establish life-saving stations on the west coast of Vancouver Island, on Queen Charlotte’s Island, and on the mainland of British Columbia” was withdrawn after a short debate. It should be noted that as the owner of the *British Colonist* in 1861, and a vocal critic of then Colonial Governor Douglas, De Cosmos may have been the author of the earlier editorial regarding the need for a steamer.

The carnage continued. Papers and journals of the day were rife with horrific tales of hapless souls either being pounded to death on the rocky shores or, if having made it ashore, attempting to survive in the wilds of the coastal rain forests. Countless hundreds succumbed to the elements ashore while as many, if not more, were lost at sea or simply disappeared. Bodies, pieces of unknown vessels, and various flotsam were continually washing ashore on the island’s west coast, so much so that the local inhabitants, both Indigenous and settler, had become somewhat reliant on these spoils of the contest between man and mother nature.¹⁷ By 1887, twenty years after the founding of Canada and 16 years after the entry of British Columbia into the new Dominion, the Provincial Legislature had become tired of waiting for action from Ottawa and its Department of Marine and Fisheries and, after a rash of recent shipwrecks, another petition was forwarded to the national capital with the Lieutenant Governor’s signature stating that consideration should be given to “the great and urgent importance of having a life-saving station established on the West Coast of Vancouver Island ... which was ... entirely destitute of life-saving appliances.”¹⁸

In Ottawa, the far-flung Pacific coast was barely on the map and despite frequent appeals from British Columbia, Colonel W.P. Anderson, the man in charge of Lighthouses and Life-saving Stations in the Dominion of Canada, still saw little need for the Crown to fund such measures. This, regardless of the fact

¹⁵ See Clay Evans, *Rescue at Sea; An International History of Coastal Life-saving, Rescue Craft & Organizations* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press: 2003).

¹⁶ “Life-Saving Stations,” *British Colonist* (Victoria), 22 April 1877, 1.

¹⁷ Graham, *Keepers of the Light*, 134.

¹⁸ Report of a Committee of the Executive Council, 10 May 1887, RG 12, vol. 1500, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

that, by the same year as the provincial legislature's appeal in 1887, there were already over twenty life-saving stations being operated by his department from the Maritimes to the Great Lakes.¹⁹ Colonel Anderson's response was in keeping with the perspectives of other "gentlemen" of his time and his central government perspective, stating that it was "inexpedient to establish a life-boat at least until the danger becomes more urgent or the white population denser." In a rather hypocritical vein he then went on to suggest that the Indigenous Peoples of the West Coast be drafted into rescue teams due to their expertise in handling canoes in the surf and that remuneration be paid to them accordingly.²⁰ Anderson did, however, recommend and approve the establishment of more lighthouses and the construction of a primitive life-saving trail, complete with a telegraph-wire, connecting the lighthouses from Carmanah Point to Cape Beale, this being the origins of the famed West Coast or Dominion Life-saving Trail.

In terms of the efficacy of these early measures, the value of the new lighthouse at Carmanah Point and the telegraph system was proven soon thereafter. In November 1891, the Canadian barque *Sarah* was wrecked southeast of the station and her surviving crew barely made it ashore in a life-boat, where two more lives were unfortunately lost. With the new safety measures in place, the news of the wreck was transmitted by the light-keeper that very day to Victoria and a rescue steamer was dispatched.²¹ This was proof of what was needed and what could be done but there was still a long way to go as far as the local populace was concerned.

Appeals from the public and industry continued and by 1894, the West Coast Marine Agent for the department, Captain James Gaudin, recommended to Colonel Anderson that seasonal life-saving stations with pulling life-boats should be placed between Port San Juan and Cape Beale and more importantly, that "shelter shacks," or houses of refuge, be placed approximately every five miles along the telegraph trail and the coast "in which would be found printed instructions in different languages stating the direction and distance of the telegraph wire and how to communicate through it to the nearest station."²² Even with the ever-increasing coastal carnage the federal minister of marine and fisheries, Sir Louis Davies, only endorsed the construction of the houses of refuge, stating in a letter published in the *Colonist* that, "Under the circumstances ... establishing life-boats may be postponed without leaving the Department open to the charge of cruelty."²³

It is worth noting that Captain Gaudin is a standout in this story of bureaucratic lethargy as a man who made progress, when he was free to do so. Gaudin was a master mariner and shipowner who sailed deep sea for many years, including

¹⁹ Thomas E. Appleton, *Usque ad Mare; A History of the Canadian Coast Guard and Marine Services*, (Ottawa: Department of Transportation, 1968), 141.

²⁰ Graham, *Keepers of the Light*, 136.

²¹ "Two Lives Were Lost," *British Colonist* (Victoria), 14 November 1891.

²² Graham, *Keepers of the Light*, 137.

²³ Graham, *Keepers of the Light*; see also *Life-Saving stations on Vancouver Island*; memorandum to Sir Louis Davies, published in *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 17 April 1894.

service with the Hudson's Bay Company, before dropping anchor in Victoria where he settled down and started a family. He was also master of the original "Canadian Government Ship (CGS)" on Canada's West Coast, the lighthouse tender *Sir James Douglas* as well as her successor the CGS *Quadra*. Being a mariner and possessing a well-honed knowledge of this coast, he was a perfect fit for the position of marine agent in Victoria, which he assumed in 1892 and where he was in charge of all things maritime including lights, life-saving, pilotage, beacons, licensing, and ship safety. He was, essentially, in charge of the Canadian Coast Guard of the time. He was also, by all accounts, a man of great integrity and compassion who had no issues speaking what he felt was the truth to those above him, particularly when it came to the topic of the need for greater life-saving measures on Canada's West Coast. He would remain in the position until his retirement in 1911 and his name would become synonymous with the call for greater life-saving services.

Even with Captain Gaudin, the local populace, and marine community constantly pushing for more lights and some form of life-saving facilities, more than ten years past before effective measures were taken to establish permanent life-boat stations on Canada's West Coast – and only after scores of ships and hundreds of more lives were lost. Around 1904, following the tragic loss of many lives on the Steamer *Clallam* in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, there was a considerable effort amongst the concerned citizens of Victoria to establish a British-style volunteer life-boat service out of the capital. Similar efforts to maintain a more "seaworthy" steamer in the winter months along the west coast of Vancouver Island were also put forward in 1905 immediately preceding the *Valencia* disaster, led by Captain John Walbran the well-known and respected master (and author/historian) of the CGS *Quadra*. Walbran recommended that a recently arrived whaling steamer "was a suitable vessel for the life-saving service" and that it should be placed under government charter and that a telegraph wire be established between Alberni and the vessel's whaling station in Clayoquot to raise the alarm in the event of a shipwreck.²⁴ Unfortunately, as is often the case with spurring politicians and governments to action, no action was taken. It would take the tragic events of that foggy January evening in 1906 and the resultant massive public backlash from both sides of the border to finally embarrass the Dominion Government to act.

In the case of the *Valencia* disaster, the thriving cities of Victoria, Vancouver, and Seattle nestled nearby and were within but a few hours' steam. For almost three days, however, the hapless survivors had clung to the rigging while rescue ships cruised just offshore and well-intentioned but ill-equipped shore parties watched helplessly from the high bluffs overhead. Nothing was done, nothing really could be done. There was no rescue plan and there were no rescue facilities in the area, other than the two distant lighthouses and a primitive life-saving trail, not much larger than a deer path, with a telegraph wire strung from tree to tree and a few ramshackle huts spread along its length. Reporters from the Seattle newspapers

²⁴ "The Steamer Orion," *British Colonist* (Victoria), 28 April 1905.

steamed back and forth offshore on ships sent on a fruitless life-saving mission, and they watched those aboard the *Valencia* fade away, one by one. This is what led to the large public outcry in the adjacent cities and indeed across the United States and Canada as news of the horrific disaster made its way out.

As usual, fingers of blame pointed in all directions, from the ship's master, to those on the so-called rescue ships, to the poor light-keepers and linesmen who had clambered down the deer path in the dark of night to the scene of the wreck, only to find that the ship was lying at the base of a 100 foot sheer cliff and on a ledge too far offshore to provide any direct assistance from land. In addition to the politicians and shipping interests there were many private citizens, on both sides of the border, who had also been calling for the provision of more effective life-saving measures along both the American and Canadian coasts, on either side of the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, with its busy shipping traffic and burgeoning trade in coal, lumber, and passengers.

In Victoria, only two days after the disaster and following a meeting of many prominent citizens led by the Mayor of the City, A.J. Morley, including those integral to the local marine trade, the *Colonist* published the following plea which was sent to the federal and provincial governments, including the governor-general and the minister of marine and fisheries in Ottawa:

I have the honor, by direction of a mass meeting of citizens of Victoria, held last evening, to transmit to you the resolutions passed unanimously at said meeting and in doing so permit me to say that suggestions made are the result of full and careful consideration by the most experienced nautical men of the district, including Captain Parry of the Royal Navy, whose services have been most valuable.²⁵

After requesting that an official board of enquiry be held, the letter noted that the Department of Marine and Fisheries had been very much remiss in its efforts to both provide steamship inspections as well as life-saving measures. The letter argued that the minister should "investigate laxness of the department of marine and fisheries here. I have no hesitation in saying that had we been prepared to render ready assistance the majority of lives lost in the wreck of S.S. Valencia would have been saved and I would add that people of this section of the province are sorely wrought up in that since the former wreck of the Clallam no measure of relief has been given by the government."²⁶

It is worth citing the resolutions adopted at the Victoria meeting in their entirety given that, ultimately, almost all these recommendations would be adopted and implemented by the Canadian government, which recognized that it was facing a groundswell of negative repercussions from both sides of the border in the Pacific Northwest and that the time had finally come to react and implement. The resolutions were as follows:

(1) That the Dominion government construct roads along or near the edge

²⁵ "Scheme for Saving Life on the Coast," *British Colonist* (Victoria), 26 January 1906.

²⁶ "Scheme for Saving Life on the Coast," *British Colonist* (Victoria), 26 January 1906.

of the cliff or sea wall, with bridges or the streams and ravines, the roads to extend from Port San Juan to Cape Beale and from Amphitrite Point to Clayoquot Sound with seven stations, to be manned by seafaring men, and with shore patrol between the respective points where mortar and rocket apparatus will be kept, the road being for the purpose of moving the apparatus up and down the coast to the scene of the wreck wherever it may be, such stations to be equipped with telephone instruments.

(2) That the Dominion government construct or procure two life-boats, similar to those in use at San Francisco, having one stationed at Port San Juan and the other at Bamfield Creek. The life-boats referred to, to have gasoline engines enclosed in watertight compartments.

(3) That the government put in commission a small powerful steamer constructed somewhat in the tugboat type, equipped with searchlights, to patrol the coast and having wireless apparatus onboard so that she can be communicated with at all times from Cape Beale or any other place where it may be deemed suitable to erect a wireless station.

(4) That the telegraph system be extended further north on Vancouver Island and connecting stations and Sechart (Barkley Sound) ... also a powerful steam fog whistle be placed at Cape Beale.

(5) That a light be established between Carmanah and Cape Beale.²⁷

In Seattle a "Presidential Commission of Enquiry" was convened on 27 January 1906, less than a week after the disaster. Survivors and eyewitnesses described their terrifying ordeals in great detail and although this commission could only deal with issues relevant to American interests, it was very clear that the Canadian Government was becoming the target of much frustration and anger. Many Canadians attended the enquiry, one of them being Captain J.W. Troup, superintendent of the Canadian Pacific Railway's Coast Steamship Service, who had also witnessed much of the tragedy from the decks of *SS Salvor*. In his opinion, "a self-righting, self-bailing life-boat might have done some good that day."²⁸ His American counterpart, Captain J.B. Patterson, of the Pacific Steamship Company, owners of *Valencia*, was even more specific, adding that the Canadian Government needed "some thoroughly good life-boats ... and a properly equipped station and a crew of paid men, not volunteer. They have an excellent place on the British side, Port San Juan, to have a station there, they have another place inside of Bamfield."²⁹

The Canadian Commission of Enquiry was a much smaller and less public affair, being established on February 6 with Captain Gaudin as its chair. So small and less public in fact, that once the draft recommendations were completed and forwarded to Colonel Anderson and the minister in Ottawa, it was never seen again. It was quite likely that Captain Gaudin's truth to power recommendations, given that he was at the forefront of the Dominion government's response and

²⁷ "Scheme for Saving Life on the Coast," *British Colonist* (Victoria), 26 January 1906.

²⁸ Graham, *Keepers of the Light*, 174.

²⁹ Graham, *Keepers of the Light*, 174.

bearing the brunt for the Department's own intransigence, were not repeatable in the bastions of authority in far-away central Canada.

We do know, however, that the Canadian commission recommended several measures – most of which had been brought forward by Captain Gaudin and many others over 12 years previously – as they were subsequently published in the *Vancouver Province*. Unbelievably, the commission stated that they were unable to determine “whether the present aids to navigation on the west coast [were] sufficient to prevent a recurrence of other accidents under similar circumstances.”³⁰ The reason given for this lack of acceptance of the facts of the tragedy was that none of the officers of the *Valencia* had survived – which in itself was not true – and that no verifiable first hand accounts could be provided as to what type of assistance might have helped. This was a ridiculous assumption and statement given all the survivor and eye-witness accounts which were provided to the American inquiry, including that of the ship's second officer. Regardless, in the end, the Canadian commission agreed with and called for many of the recommendations put forward in the resolutions sent to Ottawa by Mayor Morley following the earlier meeting of concerned citizens in Victoria.

The measures that were accepted by the commission would include the construction of a new lighthouse at Pachena Point (complete with Marconi's new wireless) near the scene of the *Valencia* wreck. The extension of the life-saving trail from Carmanah Point to Cape Beale including a “life-saving road” from Pachena Bay to the new Pachena Lighthouse on which line-throwing apparatus could be “communicated” to the wreck-site, and the provision of dedicated life-boats along this notorious stretch of coastline at Port San Juan, Clo-oose (Nitinat), Pachena Bay, and Clayoquot (Tofino). Almost all of the new stations were to receive pulling surfboats, described as Doherty's Improved Beebe-McLellan type, a 25-foot self-righting version of the popular American rescue craft design then in service with the USLSS.³¹ In addition, stations for new “motorized” life-boats would be constructed at Bamfield and Ucluelet (Spring Cove).³²

Incredibly, even after the international embarrassment to Canada caused by *Valencia*'s loss, the Department of Marine and Fisheries continued to drag its heels in providing funding for its own plans and recommendations. This despite the inquiries, the decades of lobbying from all corners, and even the constant solicitation from their own marine agent, Captain Gaudin, for effective action. On 14 February 1906 the *Colonist* reported that William Templeman, the member of parliament for Victoria, who was also a minister without portfolio in the government of Prime Minister Sir Wilfred Laurier, had “secured the consent of the Hon. Mr. Brodeur to immediately transfer a life-boat from the Great Lakes to Vancouver Island and

³⁰ *Vancouver Province*, 27 February 1907.

³¹ The contract for these original surfboats would eventually be awarded to Vancouver Shipyard Ltd. at the price of \$575 per vessel.

³² Marine & Fisheries, Life-Saving Stations, 8-9 Edward VII., 1909 Sessional Paper No.29, “Life-Saving Stations Maintained by the Dominion Government,” 196.

another will be built at Victoria. One boat will be carried on the wrecking steamer and the other will be sustained at Bamfield.”³³ Even though on his return to Victoria later that month Minister Templeman advised a local audience that the “west coast would be looked after, and these aids and equipments would be installed as rapidly as possible” five months after the loss of the *Valencia* there was still no tangible evidence of the department actually implementing these recommendations and the fall and winter storm season were fast approaching.

The original west coast life-boat promised by Templeman and Brodeur finally arrived in the city on 21 June 1906 and was provided for the use of the newly organized volunteer Victoria Life-boat Society. The first west coast life-boat was of the previously mentioned Doherty’s type, 25-feet, 4-inches in length which pulled ten oars, double-banked with 5 men per side. The Victoria boat had a paid coxswain and a crew of volunteers, including members of the local YMCA, in a similar manner to the system in Great Britain with the Royal National Life-boat Institution. The idea was that this life-boat could also be used up the coast if needed, by transporting it to the scene of the wreck onboard the “wrecking steamer” or one of Her Majesty’s Royal Navy ships, then stationed at Esquimalt. As it happened, one of the Victoria life-boat’s first coxswains was none other than Captain John Voss, famed oceanic navigator of the dugout canoe *Tillikum*.³⁴ He did not last long, however, when the promised monthly salary of \$100 turned out to be only \$5. In addition to the Victoria venture, the department also offered to construct the previously proposed eight miles of additional telegraph cable from Ucluelet to the Sechart Whaling Station in Barkley Sound where large whaling vessels could be tasked to maritime emergencies.³⁵ Again, this was far less than the large expansion of the West Coast Life-Saving trail that had been promised several months previously.

It was obvious to most that these initial efforts were just a stop-gap reaction to the recent tragedy and remained almost symbolic in nature and that a proper, government life-saving service was still required. The final step in breaking this long-lasting deadlock of inaction would be the appointment of none other than Captain Troup to the Lighthouse Board of Canada – the body that oversaw the management and provision of all navigational safety and life-saving measures in the Dominion – in October 1906. Mariners on Canada’s West Coast now had an educated and insightful lobbying interest directly involved in the bastions of power – the time for talk was over.

In an editorial in the *Colonist* on 3 October 1906 the level of local frustration and the hopes that Captain Troup would be able to solidify action once and for all were evident:

Captain Troup is thoroughly conversant with the requirements of the coast

³³ *British Colonist* (Victoria), 14 February 1907.

³⁴ R. Bruce Scott, *Barkley Sound; A History of the Pacific Rim National Park Area* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1972), 111.

³⁵ Scott, *Barkley Sound*, 112.

in the matter of protection to navigation, and he will be able to present the case in a manner that will command attention. There is just cause of complaint in the manner in which the representations made in this behalf have been met. One of the prominent officials of the department [Colonel Anderson], who came here to look over the situation, is said to have remarked that ‘we were a good deal carried away by sentiment in making our demands for appropriations.’ Whether he said so or not the Department has acted very much as if it thought we were; for a summer has been allowed to pass and very little has been accomplished. . . . Whether [Captain Troup] will be able to arouse the Department out of its lethargy is another matter. It is about time that the representatives of the constituencies directly interested in this question gave some explanation of the reason why the well-considered plans, pressed with so much earnestness upon the attention of the government and proved necessary by more than one tragedy of the sea, have been delayed in execution, if not temporarily defeated, by officials who seem to set public opinion at defiance with impunity.

As a final coup de grâce, the editor closed with what was likely another dig at Colonel Anderson following his recent site visit to the West Coast:

It is no answer to say that this, that or the other official reported so and so. Official inspections on a fine summer day from the comfortable deck of a government vessel, which dodges into port whenever the breezes blow, give a very poor idea of the conditions to be encountered by mariners during winter storms and of the sufferings certain to overwhelm those who escape the merciless sea only to be cast upon a merciless shore. We look to our representatives to protect our interests and to remove the reproach arising from insufficient coast protection and they will not be allowed to take shelter behind official indifference.³⁶

In the end, Captain Troup, with the support of an entire coast behind him, would prevail and construction would begin on the new life-saving stations, the lighthouses, and the much-expanded life-saving trail and telegraph system. Once finally given the green light, Captain Gaudin wasted no time constructing life-saving facilities on the southwest coast of Vancouver Island at the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The *Colonist* reported on 4 May 1907 that “Progress is being made with the boathouses . . . at Bamfield Creek a boathouse is being built for a self-propelling life-boat and accommodation is being built for the crew.”³⁷

Unfortunately, completion would take another winter with further wreck and loss of life, including the rescue of the survivors of the barquentine *Skagit* near Clooose as well as the miraculous rescue of the entire crew of the barque *Coloma* off of Cape Beale, all of whom were saved and assisted by government light-keepers, life-saving trail linesmen, and the CGS ship’s crew. It was not until the fall of

³⁶ “Coast Protection,” *British Colonist* (Victoria), 3 October 1906, 4.

³⁷ “Man the Lifeboat,” *British Colonist* (Victoria), 4 May 1907, 9.

1907 that the nucleus of a dedicated life-saving service was put in place. Finally, on 28 September 1907, the *Colonist* reported that the coastal steamer *Maude* had departed Victoria:

Taking three surf life-boats for Port San Juan, Clo-oose and Bamfield on the west coast of Vancouver Island.... The three surfboats, which were built at Vancouver to the order of the Marine Department, are self-righting buoyant boats with accommodation for ten men and the coxswain, Capt. D. Jones of the Marine Department outfitted them altogether yesterday morning, placing in each boat, oars, pumps, lifebuoys and belts, caulking tools, lamps, axes, sea-anchors, etc., and they were taken in tow by the 'Maude.' The boat stations for the accommodation of the boats with slips etc. have been constructed at the three stations named, but no crews have yet been appointed.³⁸

It is quite probable that these original pulling life-boat stations, which were essentially just the life-boat and a small boathouse with a wooden slipway, were placed at these locations not only because they were proximate to where many wrecks had previously occurred but also because they were along the original telegraph trail. Both Port San Juan and Pachena Bay (Bamfield) were located at either end of what would become a much enhanced life-saving trail, with Clo-oose being located about midway, close to the infamous Nitinat Bar. It is also quite likely that the significant amount of construction work required for the expanding trail, including workers and materials would have made these new stations, as well as their boats and crews, into critical access points and resources for this work. None of these stations would survive beyond a decade, given the difficulties of launching pulling boats in these locations, the limitations of the pulling boats themselves, and the difficulty in maintaining a large-paid and seasonal crew in such remote and often hostile environs. Although little is known of the Port San Juan facility and its exact location, there is record and photographic evidence of a life-boat house at Clo-oose, as well as the one placed in Pachena Bay proximate to Bamfield. The station at Pachena Bay was short-lived, however, much of this due to its poor location and inaccessibility as described by local Bamfield historian, C.B. Whaley:

the government had built, at considerable expense, a stoutly constructed life-boat house on high rocks just south of Pachena Bay. This building was to house an eight-oared surfboat. In the event of a call for assistance 'the horse' was to be cajoled, prodded and shoved on to a small scow (sic-from the life-boat station) together with eight life-boatmen. On arrival at the cable dock the crew and horse were required to proceed at their highest speed over five miles of hilly road until they arrived at the Pachena boat house. There the horse was to be harnessed to the surfboat and commanded to pull the whole outfit of boat and crew into deep water.

³⁸ For a good synopsis of both these rescues, refer to Bruce Scott, *Breakers Ahead*.

Imagination boggles at the thought of what could be happening to shipwrecked survivors battling for life among the reefs and breakers of the west coast while this maneuver was taking place. Fortunately the defects in this project soon came to be realized.³⁹

Eventually these pulling life-boat stations would also be eclipsed by the life-saving advantages of the much-promised “motorized” life-boat (MLB).⁴⁰

As it turned out, the loss of *Valencia* not only precipitated the establishment of these long-overdue life-saving facilities on Canada’s West Coast (as well as in the United States at Neah Bay, Washington) but the tragic event’s timing also coincided with monumental developments in life-boat design and technology which were taking place south of the border, namely the introduction of mechanized propulsion into life-saving craft. For more than a century, life-boats, that is vessels which had been designed and built for the express purpose of launching from shore (ship’s life-boats did not come into common use until the late nineteenth century) to assist vessels and mariners in distress in adverse conditions, and then rescue and return them safely to shore, had been powered only by the brawn of men and/or with the wind on their sails. Beginning in the late 1890s various life-saving organizations around the world began to experiment with the installation of internal combustion engines into existing pulling and sailing life-boats. The USLSS was at the forefront of this research. Having an extensive coastline – over 200 life-saving stations and paid, rather than volunteer crews – the visionary leadership within the organization saw the introduction of motors into rescue craft as a means to simplify the daunting workload on the service’s crews and a way to cover larger coastal areas with fewer resources. Up until this point life-saving crews would either have to pull their lighter surfboats on a carriage as close to the scene of a wreck as possible and then launch and recover those in peril. The crews of the larger, heavier life-boats, which were generally self-righting vessels in the 30 to 35-foot range with iron keels, would have to row and sail to and from their station to the scene of a wreck in horrendous conditions, sometimes many miles away. Countless lives were lost amongst both lifesavers and the rescued due to the sheer physical and mental fatigue of the crew on the return voyage, so much effort having been spent just getting to the wreck in the first place.

At the forefront of these mechanical developments was a man by the name of C.H. McLellan, a captain in the United States Revenue Cutter Service who, as per practice, also worked as a superintendent in the USLSS. McLellan also had a keen interest in surfboat and life-boat development and was instrumental in experimenting with motorized life-boats in the United States. He began installing

³⁹ C.B. Whaley, “The Telegraph Trail, Part III,” *The Bamfielder* 23 (June-July 1977), 6.

⁴⁰ “Take Life-boats to the West Coast,” *British Colonist* (Victoria), 28 September 1907. This article also passed on the news that unfortunately as of that date, “Nothing is known locally with regard to the motor propelled (life) boat reported ordered from a New Jersey firm last winter. There is no information as to when it is likely to reach this city.”

motors in the service's smaller surfboats and larger life-boats in 1899 and, after a period at sea with the Revenue Service, returned to the USLSS in 1904 to continue this important work. At this time, he had motors installed in the service's 34-foot pulling and sailing, self-righting, and self-bailing (SR-SB) life-boats with more than satisfactory results. The life-boats themselves were derivatives of the British RNLI's pulling and sailing SR-SB life-boat, one of which had been purchased by the USLSS as far back as 1873. The 1873 boat was, itself, a direct descendent of the original British self-righting life-boat which was produced as a result of the Duke of Northumberland's competition in 1851 for a design of a life-boat that could not be "overset by sea" and could operate in the worst of conditions – in other words, the world's first self-righting life-boat.⁴¹

In 1906, around the time of *Valencia's* loss, McLellan, who had retired from active service and become the USLSS Superintendent of the Construction of Life-boats and had laid out plans for what would be the world's first "purpose-built" motorized life-boat, or MLB. The new boat would be somewhat larger at 36 feet overall to make room for heavier scantlings and the space in the after whaleback required for the extremely heavy gasoline internal combustion engine. A contract for construction of the first boat was awarded to the Electric Launch Company (ELCO) of Bayonne, N.J., forerunner of today's Electric Boat Corporation, future builder of the US Navy's nuclear submarines. This boat would not, however, be delivered to the USLSS as originally intended, but would instead be supplied to the Canadian Department of Marine and Fisheries for use at the new Bamfield Life-saving Station. Obviously, the outcomes and recommendations of the two boards of enquiry and the real urgency of the need for the life-boats along this treacherous shore had ignited interest in Ottawa. It was there that officials from marine and fisheries read an article by McLellan in the January 1906 edition of *Marine Engineering*, describing his experiments and successes with motorized life-boats. Soon the lines of communication between both Ottawa and Washington were burning and none other than Colonel Anderson was on his way to New York to inspect the new motorized life-boats personally.⁴² In the end, the US service, true to its core values of saving those in peril on the sea, would allow the Canadians to procure and receive the first of the new "36 Footers" (as they would later be known) off the ELCO assembly line. Not surprisingly, one of the next 36 footers to be built (albeit by the Holmes Manufacturing Company) would be sent to the new USLSS station at Waddah Island (Neah Bay, Washington) located southeast of Bamfield at the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca – another recommendation of the American commission of enquiry. This is how Canada, and in particular Bamfield, would receive the world's first purpose-built motorized life-boat – a rescue craft revolutionary for its time due to its means of propulsion.

On 28 December 1907, the *Victoria Times* reported that the "Banfield Creek" life-boat had arrived in the harbour.⁴³ The arrival of the new MLB on the West

⁴¹ For more detail see Evans, *Rescue at Sea*.

⁴² *Shipping Illustrated* (New York), 11 May 1907.

⁴³ "Motor Life-boat Reaches Port," *Victoria Times*, 28 December 1907.

Coast was a significant milestone when one considers that this was the largest vessel in the marine and fisheries life-boat fleet, that up until this point all of the nation's life-saving resources had been sent to the Maritimes, the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River, and that this new rescue craft, constructed for a price of \$10,900, cost more than every other life-boat in Canada combined. It was obvious that the politicians, both provincial and federal, had finally heeded the call for life-saving measures initiated by the *Valencia* tragedy, with much of the credit likely owing to the face-to-face solicitations of Captain Troup.

The new motor life-boat, named the *Assistance* by the department, did not remain in Victoria very long. In early January 1908, *Assistance* departed the Marine and Fisheries Depot for her new home, but not without mishap. The first life-boat coxswain, Captain W.H. Gillen, wrote the following in the vessel's log for 4 January 1908:

Left wharf in Victoria, B.C. at 4 am en route to Bamfield. The weather being fine and clear with light easterly wind. At 7 am ran over a (object) bending one of the blades of the propeller so that the rudder had to be tied up in order to use the engine, the boat running at a little more than half speed. Wind gradually increasing and becoming overcast – 1130 am a moderate gale of S.E. with continuous rain, headed for Port San Juan – 12:30 anchored at San Juan went on shore and procured in an unused house. Keeping a constant watch on a moderate S.E. gale with constant rain continuing until the end of the day.⁴⁴

Gillen and his crew effected repairs and carried on to Bamfield, where the new life-boat station had been constructed along the shores of Mills Peninsula at the entrance to Bamfield Creek (or Bamfield Inlet as we now know it). The new station, complete with a boathouse and slipway for the MLB and living accommodations for the crew, was located directly across from the recently constructed Bamfield Cable Station. The Department of Marine and Fisheries announced in its annual report for 1908 that, "A motor boat has been built under contract and sent to Bamfield and the service begun on January 10th."⁴⁵

Photographic records of the early months of the station show a coxswain and crew extremely proud of their vessel and their role as west coast lifesavers. There is no doubt that this beautiful new craft with its varnished mahogany hull and white sails and the brave men who sailed on her would have caught the eye of all onlookers. The life-boat and her crew immediately became part of the fabric of this small coastal community.

The coxswain and crew of the Bamfield Life-boat were all paid employees of the Life-Saving Service of the Canadian Department of Marine and Fisheries, an organization that had its own code of conduct. Originally, a staffing system similar to the one established for the Victoria boat was recommended. The vast majority of the life-saving stations in the rest of Canada (by 1908, there were 35 stations

⁴⁴ Wm H Gillen, *Log of the Bamfield Life-boat Station*, 4 January 1908, Alberni Valley Museum.

⁴⁵ Thomas E. Appleton, *Canada's First Motor Life-boat*, *The Bulletin (MMBC)* 32 (Spring 1976), 2.

across the country) operated with a paid coxswain and a semi-volunteer crew who were paid for practices and call-outs, albeit not very much, the crew receiving “40 cents an hour for periodic drills (and) if called out on life-saving service, the crew to receive \$2.50 per day with subsistence and double pay while actually engaged in life-saving.” Given these rather parsimonious rewards, plus the very real chance of dying (as an example of the dangers, seaman Thorald Wingen, of the Ucluelet life-boat was knocked unconscious and drowned during a capsized on 16 February 1912) it was not surprising that efforts to keep a crew were practically hopeless.



Ucluelet Life Saving Station circa 1935. (Maritime Museum British Columbia Archives P985.14.2)

This was not an uncommon problem, not only in Canada but also in the United States in the early twentieth century the vast distances and plethora of opportunities contributed to a highly transitory population.⁴⁶ Due to the difficulties experienced in maintaining a crew in Victoria as well as for the new stations at Clo-oose and Ucluelet, the Department

decided that at Bamfield “the coxswain was to receive a salary of \$65 and the crew \$40 each month plus 60 cents a day mess allowance.”⁴⁷

The station was also equipped with a “Lyle Gun.” This gun was part of what was known as the “life-saving apparatus” and was essentially a small cannon which could be transported on a carriage by horse or hand, complete with multiple ropes, tackle, and anchors. The idea was that a projectile attached to a messenger line could be launched from the cannon and “communicated” to a wreck, whereby stronger lines could be sent out and a connection established to those onshore. Survivors would be placed in a breeches-buoy, a life-ring with a pair of breeches attached and pulled along the connection to shore. Practice with the Lyle Gun would also have been a noisy and somewhat risky affair.⁴⁸

The new Life-boat Station’s value would be proven during a howling gale on the evening of 22 January 1909 when Captain Gillen and his crew, in extremely perilous circumstances, rescued all the survivors from the wreck of the American four-masted schooner *Soquel*, which had struck nearby Seabird Rocks. Having sadly wrecked the new motor life-boat only days previously, the captain and his crew were taken to the scene of the calamity in a chartered government steamer, the *Leebro*. There they crewed a pulling life-boat and, in conjunction with surfboats from the CPR Steamship *Tees*, over the course of two days they were able to get close enough to the rocks to recover all of the survivors from the wreck – despite

⁴⁶ “Lifeboat Left; One Drowned,” *British Colonist* (Victoria), 17 February 1912, 14.

⁴⁷ Scott, *Barkley Sound*, 112.

⁴⁸ For more on various forms of life-saving apparatus, including the Lyle Gun, refer to; Evans, *Rescue at Sea*, in particular Chapter 12, Wreck Guns and Rockets.

having been swamped on one occasion and only saved by being dragged by a rope, life-boat and all, back to the steamship.⁴⁹ There is no doubt that without this very basic service having been established the outcome of this tragedy would likely have been much worse. Thus began the lifesaving legacy of Canada's West Coast life-boat stations, including Bamfield, which continues to this very day.

Bamfield would not be the only location where a motorized life-boat would be stationed. In 1908, another life-saving station was under construction farther north at the northwestern entrance to Barkley Sound in Spring Cove, adjacent to the village of Ucluelet.

Again, given the limitations of the pulling boats, the idea was that a second MLB, then under construction in Vancouver (along with another MLB to replace the one at Bamfield that had been wrecked only one year after being placed in service) would be stationed at this strategic location,



The wreck of Bamfield's motized lifeboat, Jan. 1909

given the number of wrecks which were occurring northwest of the entrance to the straits. This would be in addition to the pulling boat station which would be established even farther north at Clayoquot in the present-day community of Tofino. The Ucluelet station would be short-lived, however, and was abandoned in favour of the Clayoquot station where, in 1915, the MLB was moved following the loss of the *Carelmapu*.⁵⁰

One other major technical improvement of note during this initial establishment phase of the fledgling West Coast life-saving network was the coincidental development of the new wireless technology and its implementation into the new safety net. A recommendation for the establishment of this new technology on Canada's West Coast precedes the loss of the *Valencia*, in a letter to the *Colonist* published in October of 1905, only three months before the tragedy:

With all our meetings and good intentions is it not a remarkable fact that wireless telegraphy has been left practically out of our list of propositions?
... Yet if we look back and endeavour to sum up even within the last

⁴⁹ The original Bamfield MLB was wrecked on Robbers (Tszartus) Island in January of 1909, after she broke off her mooring during a gale. This followed a long and arduous overnight call that the station crew had responded to. Fatigue was likely a factor. The Dominion Government immediately contracted a local builder, William Dafoe Ltd., in Vancouver to build a replacement 36-foot MLB, as they were already building one for the new Ucluelet Station. Capt. Gillen and his crew, in spite of their heroics during the *Soquel* rescue, were immediately "let go" by the department upon their arrival in Victoria on *Leebro*.

⁵⁰ Again, for excellent tales of daring rescues and the consequences on the early life-saving crews, please refer to both Scott's *Barkley Sound* and *Breakers Ahead* as well as Nicholson's *Vancouver Island's West Coast*, and in particular the stories of the wrecks of *Soquel* (1909) and *Carelmapu* (1915).

few years the number of vessels on which the wireless apparatus would have been extremely useful, and of whose fates we can only guess, it is astonishing why we could have been so indifferent to one of the greatest life-saving conveniences science may ever discover. Of course it must gradually, like all other great and good things, forge surely ahead, but the long death list could be substantially reduced which is likely to intervene through man's slowness and obstinacy.⁵¹

There was and is no doubt that the author of this letter was thinking far ahead of his time, but the reality was that even if the ships actually had wireless apparatus onboard, you still needed other ships and, in particular, shore-based stations, to also have wireless to receive any distress message. As of 1905, there were already 13 wireless telegraph stations on Canada's East Coast. By 1908, five new wireless stations had been established in British Columbia, including at Victoria and at the Pachena and Estevan Point light-stations.⁵²

The Canadian Pacific was coming into its own with the recognition that the western fringe of one of the world's largest countries required federal resources equivalent, or at least close to, those of the rest of the populated regions of the nation. This recognition had not come easily. Unfortunately, the effects of the Great War would douse many of the efforts to develop a dedicated life-saving service across Canada – only four of the forty or so life-saving stations with dedicated life-boats that had been in existence in 1914 remained in operation in 1918. Still, on the remote shores of British Columbia, the two motor life-boat stations at Bamfield and Tofino (Clayoquot) would remain to carry on in continuous operation to the present day, over 113 years later. The light-stations up the west coast of Vancouver Island also remain staffed. The wireless stations of yesteryear have evolved into the modern marine communication and vessel traffic stations of today and the Canadian Coast Guard, which itself evolved out of the Department of Marine and Fisheries back in 1963, continues to ensure that patrolling ships are available in select search and rescue zones, particularly in the winter months. There is no doubt that all of these services, in the ensuing years, saved countless vessels and lives as the annals of wreck and rescue, well chronicled in contemporary newspapers and books on the subject, can attest.

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⁵¹ "Wireless and Life-boats," *British Colonist* (Victoria), 17 October 1905.

⁵² Appleton, *Usque ad Mare*, 86.