

Chapter One

The Wreck of the *Phoenix*

But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship's direst jeopardy she must fly all hospitality, one touch of land, though if but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through.

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

Of all the orders a sailor could obey, the last many of them have heard before their deaths was: *cut away the masts*. There's a finality to that order *in extremis*, a surrender of the one thing that could carry the ship home again, her rig and her sails. It meant the ship was going ashore, to meet the hard-unyielding mass of a coral reef or a nest of sharp boulders hidden under foaming seas. It meant the only thing left to do was to ease her torment and get rid of the tall spars and web of ropes and sails that would whip wildly as the hull smashed against the rocks and pry her planks open to admit the sea.

For the crew and mates of the Nantucket whaling ship *Phoenix*, the order to cut away the masts was shouted over the shrieking wind of a Siberian blizzard at six bells, or three a.m. on the morning of October 12, 1858 when she started to drag backwards before the gale on her last anchor. She slid backwards, slowly, every new wave boiling out of the darkness lifting her bows and the heavy anchor chain up in the air, the anchor bouncing uselessly on the bottom, unable to bit in and hold her off of the black mass of a deserted island a half-mile behind them.

That island lay seven miles off the coast of the Chinese and Russian border in the Sea of Okhotsk. It looked like an arm, so the sailors called it Elbow Island. No one lived there and the

crew didn't know the Russians called it Ostrov Medvizhy or "Bear Island." They also didn't know that a sailor from another ship had been devoured by a grizzly bear three months previously.

For the superstitious sailors – and most sailors were very superstitious -- there had been a few premonitions of impending disaster in the weeks leading up to the storm. The first was the previous spring when the *Phoenix* first threaded her way between the volcanoes of the Kurile Islands and Kamchatka Peninsula. That was about the time a great comet was first discovered in the skies of the northern hemisphere by the Italian astronomer Giovanni Battista Donati, who spotted a faint speck of a new object in the skies through his telescope in the Florence Observatory. That spring the comet was a mere moving mote in the heavens near the head of the constellation Leo. But as is the custom among astronomers, Donati named the speck after himself, and by August the glowing approach of Donati's comet was visible to the naked eye across the northern hemisphere. Comet aficionados said the Donati was one of the most beautiful comets ever seen, but others saw it as a sign of calamities to follow, a dire sign associated with the London plague of 1666. For a few months in 1858, the comet was a popular sensation. It was the first comet ever photographed. Abraham Lincoln went outside to see it the night before debating Stephen Douglas. Thomas Hardy was inspired by the sight to write a poem to its celestial wanderings -- *The Comet at Yell'ham* -- and artists painted it hanging perpendicular like an illuminated pendulum hanging over the northern horizon in the twilight.

The comet came closest to the planet on October 10, 1859.

That morning, on a deserted beach on the shores of Lebyazhya Bay on the south coast of Feklistoff Island, in the Shantar Archipelago in the southern reaches of the Sea of Okhotsk, the

29-year-old captain of the Nantucket whaling ship *Phoenix*, buried the first sailor to die under his command, a sailor who died from dropsy¹ the night before. That captain was Bethuel Gifford Handy and he never mentioned seeing the comet in the ship's log, even though he was one of the few men aboard the ship who could name the stars and planets. The ship's log is usually kept by a ship's first mate, and had been Bethuel's responsibility when he was the *Phoenix's* first mate – which is why first mates are sometimes referred to as the “ship's keeper.” He continued to keep the log updated daily after the first captain of the ship, Joseph Hinckley, took ill in Hawaii six months before and abandoned the voyage to find his way home to Cape Cod, leaving Handy behind to command the 40-year old ship that had been built a decade before his birth in the shipbuilding town of Mattapoiset, where his ancestors had become shipwrights and learned the trade before starting their own ship yard on Cape Cod in the village of Cotuit Port.

Few first mates ever wrote anything superfluous or speculative in a logbook. It wasn't for lack of imagination, but for the prudence of being laconic in the belief that the less said the better. The battered books were only for recording the facts about how every day at sea began and ended with terse, telegraphic notes of compass courses steered, the direction and velocity of the winds, comments about all work done to the ship, the sighting and capture of whales (events marked by wooden stamps that were inked and pressed into the margins. News of sickness or death among the crew were noted, but never a word was put down about ephemera

¹ “Dropsy” was the 19th century term for the edema associated with congestive heart failure

like glowing comets hanging suspended over the horizon like a ball of light dangling from a string.

Bethuel Handy should have remained at anchor in Lebyazhya Bay for a few more days after burying the dead man. The middle cove of the bay was the best of the three protected anchorages on the southern coast of Feklistoff Island, the second largest of the uninhabited Shantar archipelago. There was plenty of timber for spars— mostly larch – and fresh water flowed down the steep mountains and bubbled through the gravel berm of the beach. Most ships congregated at Lebyazhya in September, the end of the whaling season at that sub-arctic latitude, sending their whaleboats off to scout for swimming whales or the floating carcasses of dead ones lost by one of the other three hundred or so whalers that were crowding the Sea of Okhotsk every season. Bethuel had fished the Okhotsk once before, as a harpooner aboard the *Massachusetts*, an Edgartown whaler under the command of his uncle, Captain Horace Nickerson. Bethuel knew, from everything he learned from other captains cruising the Okhotsk and the advice of his brother-in-law, Thomas Chatfield, master of the *Massachusetts*, that a gale from the southeast in late September would be the signal that it was time to leave the Sea of Okhotsk and sail directly for Lahaina on Maui to refit, re-provision, and sell the season’s haul of whale oil and “bone” (baleen) to empty the ship’s hold so she could return for another season hunting whales off the east coast of Russia.

It had been an unlucky summer for the crew of the *Phoenix*. The Sea of Okhotsk was one of the last remaining bonanzas of what whalers called the “right whale”, fifty feet and 100 tons of one of the largest animals on the planet. They were “right” because they floated when they died, a boon to whalers who often had to tow their catch behind the small whaleboats to get them

aside the ship for cutting up and rendering into oil. They were “right” because they were valuable. A successful 3-year whaling voyage (or “voige” as Handy spelled the word in the log) could be worth \$60,000 by its conclusion, nearly \$1.5 million in contemporary value. A typical whaler could hold 2,500 thirty-two-gallon wooden barrels in her hold. A good whale could yield eighty barrels, meaning over the course of the cruise from Nantucket to the northern Pacific, a ship would have to catch forty whales to make that kind of money.

Bethuel lingered in the Shantars because his sour luck was sweetening, due in large part to his boats coming back to the ship at anchor at Feklistoff with “stinkers” – the dead whales other ships had harpooned but had lost when the iron pulled out or the whale ran for the edge of the pack ice. A stinker delivered as much oil as a live whale, so the crew of the *Phoenix* ranged around the shorelines of the archipelago searching for the tell-tale black backs of the whales, alive or dead, then rowing them back to the ship for butchering and cooking in iron kettles set into the ship’s brick tryworks. They worked all night to get the whales aboard. One crew worked from a scaffold suspended over the starboard side, wielding razor-sharp iron spades on long handles to slice off wide blankets of whale skin and the subcutaneous layer of foot-thick white blubber off of the bobbing corpses. Another team of sailors unwinding that “blanket” of blubber and black skin with a block and tackle fixed to the main mast, an iron hook in the tag end of the blanket, hoisting tons of rotten whale fat up and onto the deck. More sailors were busy cutting the blankets down into thin slices called “Bible Leaves” which were tossed into the kettles and rendered down to pure oil poured off hot into new 32-gallon barrels built on the spot by the ship’s cooper.

If the wind blew into the bay, then the ship would have to move, or risk being trapped with her stern against the beach. Any whales waiting to be cut would be marked with a unique flag on a pointed pole called a waif and set adrift to wait the ship's return to harbor. Any blubber on deck waiting to be boiled down would be pushed through the wide hatch between the main and the foremast into the blubber room, the large open hold that separated the captain and mates and boatsteerers (as harpooners were known) from the sailors who lived together in the curve of the bow in the ship's forecastle.

The ship then could raise her anchor, set her sails, and look for a good anchorage in the lee of another island to ride out the coming gale.

Siberia's coastal weather in early October marks an abrupt transition between a short summer and a long winter, a glimpse of autumn that lasts only a few weeks at most. The winds begin to veer around and blow from all points of the compass, sometimes carrying a bracing blast of arctic air from the north where the comet hung down and threatened to touch the mountains that lay between the Sea of Okhotsk and limitless wilderness of the Siberian taiga. Those cold winds were urgent reminders it was time for the *Phoenix* to leave the Okhotsk, to end her season and run for Hawaii, to refit, re-provision and cruise the western Pacific for a few months near Japan before returning to the Russian coast in the spring.

Handy knew he was pushing his luck throughout the first week of October. Nearly all the huge fleet was gone by then, but the company of a few stragglers such as the *Phoenix* may have lulled him into complacency. His new brother-in-law, Thomas Chatfield, captain of the *Massachusetts*, had left three weeks earlier in mid-September, bound for San Francisco to sell his summer's harvest of bone and baleen. He, and other veterans of the Siberian seas told Handy to

watch for the signal of a southeasterly blow offshore from the wilderness of northernmost China as the sign it was time to go.

Handy felt safe in the company of two other ships working the leftovers around the Shantars. The *Ocean Wave* and the *Rajah* were usually within sight, and like the *Phoenix*, sought shelter from the occasional blow in the lee of the towering cliffs of Felikstova Island. The currents between the cluster of forested islands sluiced through the straits and guts at speeds up to eight knots from east to west on the ebb, then reversing to flow west to east on the flood, churning up rips and whirlpools that no ship could steer through, especially one without an engine. Keeping the *Phoenix* at anchor was far safer than taking a ponderous whaling ship burdened with hundreds of barrels of oil out into the currents and immense tides around the Shantar Islands. If the breeze was light and fluky, the ship would drift aimlessly, sails hanging slack, and go wherever the currents took her. There was no diesel engine to fire up to give the ship enough speed to steer in those conditions. The only ways to move her 106-foot hull were with her sails and masts, or by lowering the boats and towing her laboriously around by oar.

A prudent Captain, predicting the weather by watching the glass, the wind, and the clouds, was always weighing his options and risks as conditions changed. A sudden wind shift could turn a sheltered anchorage into an exposed lee shore, leaving no hope of tacking the ship out under sail into open water. The extreme tides around the Shantars, with their 30-foot range between their highest and lowest levels, meant the depths under the ship's keel – 13 feet below the water line -- varied accordingly, changing the scope, or angle of the anchor chain every six hours. Too short a chain and a rising tide could pop the anchor free from the bottom. Too long and a sudden wind shift could swing her stern into shallow water. Every anchor had its limits and

were crucial to the preservation of the ship. Lose one of the two anchors carried in the bows and the ship's options were greatly reduced. Even with both anchors down, they had their limits. There was no way to know if the flukes, or points of the anchor were embedded in mud, sand, gravel, or dragging ineffectively over solid rock. Sometime the flukes would get irretrievably locked into a crevice on the bottom and refuse to break free. Any sailor who has anchored in a foreign anchorage knows the anxiety that builds during the night when the wind shifts and freshens and an ocean swell begins to sweep across a once placid cove. Sleep is impossible. Bearings are measured against fixed objects on the shoreline, then checked and rechecked all night to see if the anchors are dragging and threatening to put the ship ashore. For Bethuel Handy, in command of a crew of 32 tired men, there was no mentor to turn to, no weather radio to listen to, so he kept his lonely counsel by himself, isolated by the omnipotence of a sea captain, never daring to show the slightest sign of doubt or anxiety to the mates or the crew.

It was getting colder that October. The summer weather on the Okhotsk is foggy most days because of the difference in temperature between the air and water, but can occasionally get balmy in August with temperatures reaching as high as the upper eighties and low nineties, but more typically hovering just under 60 degrees – comfortable weather ashore, but chilly for a sailor working all day in an open whaleboat on the colder sea. In the high latitudes (above 50° North) of the sub-Arctic there is no real spring or fall to speak of. When summer ended in mid-September most whalers hurried to boil down any remaining whales they had aboard and seek the coves of the Shantars to replenish their fresh water supply and chop wood for spare spars and firewood. By October, the mean daily temperature plummets nearly 20 degrees Fahrenheit from September's average of 49.1 degrees to 33.4 degrees – not enough to lock a ship in solid ice,

but low enough to remind the whalers that it was time to get sailing for their winter ports in San Francisco or Lahaina.

The fall of 1858 came to an end in the third week of September when the prevailing light southeasterly summer breeze suddenly veered to the east-northeast, carrying cold arctic air down to the Shantars from the northern corner of the Sea behind the Kamchatka Peninsula. Captain Bethuel Handy, dutifully noting every day's weather and wind, wrote on Thursday, September 23rd that the day began:

“...with a light breeze from SE. Standing by the wind towards Elbow Isle. At 4 pm the wind came out suddenly from ENE and blowed hard and rained. Wore ship and took in sail to dubble reefed topsails. At 5 moderated. Turned the reefs out again and worked up towards Felistoff until dark. Anchored in 17 fathoms water. At 8 cleared off. At 4 am the wind came out of W and breezed on. Took the anchor and went into Feklistoff harbor. Blowing heavy. 7 Ships laying in harbor.”²

The wind blew a strong force 9 gale³ out of the north on the 24th of September according to Handy's log. The *Phoenix* rode out the gale at anchor in Soboleva Bay, kept company by nine other whaling ships preparing for their departure. The crew used the idle time to mend a torn foresail, waiting and hoping the high winds would fade and shift back to the south to give them one last opportunity to launch the five boats and set out in search of stinkers or a cooperative pod of live whales to chase down and harpoon. Handy was very concerned one of his crew, William Thomas, would die, and wrote in the log on Saturday, September 25th that the sailor was

² Bethuel G. Handy, *How I Found My Wife*, collection of James Russell

³ Mariners tried to be precise when noting conditions such as wind speed. Without an anemometer to measure the wind speed Handy uses “strong gale” to classify the conditions as force 9 out of 12 on the Beaufort scale, defined by that measure as winds blowing steady between 47 and 54 mph forming “moderately high waves of greater length; edges of crests break into spindrift; foam is blown in well-marked streaks along the direction of the wind.”

“very sick do not think he will live.” As the northerly gale faded late that morning he weighed anchor and ordered the *Phoenix* back out to sea, leaving sheltered cover on Feklistoff Island’s south coast to sail out into the thirty-mile wide sound between the second largest of the Shantars, and the long, low island large island lying parallel to the mainland. At 4 a.m. the *Phoenix* anchored again as the wind died and began to shift, not turning 180 degrees to blow from the south offshore from the mainland, but settling only a few compass points to the west to begin blowing from the northwest, the prevailing direction for winter winds along the Siberian coast. With the wind now blowing unimpeded across the Uda Gulf (referred to by the whalers as “Southwest Bay”) Handy ordered the anchor up and set sail the rest of the way across the broad channel towards the mainland in a strong breeze.



The ship searched for whales along the deserted coast of Uda Gulf, sailing west towards the delta of the Uda River, but staying well away from the shoreline because of the shallow tide flats that reached three miles offshore. On Tuesday the 28th of September, the ship was sailing along the west coast of the gulf, finding some precarious shelter behind one of the cape's that jut out from the shoreline, a familiar landmark the whalers called "Striped Bluff" that was a rock face streaked with bright white striations that could be seen from a long distance at sea. There the *Phoenix* dropped her anchor at sunset and rode for the rest of the night until Handy ordered her underway again and turned around to run before southeast back towards the Shantars before the strong NW breeze. His perseverance paid off. The crew spotted and retrieved a dead whale floating in the waves. It was a good whale, ultimately filling 88 barrels, and all of Wednesday morning on the 29th of September the crew was kept busy cutting the carcass and getting the blubber below decks into the blubber room. At 2 that afternoon the ship finished cutting the whale and set sail on a southerly course. At sunset the wind began to fade, but a live whale was spotted swimming nearby, and a boat was lowered to chase it. Handy wrote in the *Phoenix's* log, "*Did not see him again. Came on board and came to anchor NE from South Head, distance 10 miles.*"

At 5 am the next morning the tryworks were lit and the boiling of the blubber from the previous day's whale commenced. The last two days of September gave hope to the captain and crew that the wind had decided to return to its summer routine and give them some more time to fill the hold with oil and bone. It shifted out of the northwest and blew lightly out of the east through the Shantars. With September finished, so was the season, and every morning there were

fewer and fewer ships on the horizon as the bulk of the fleet made haste to exit the Okhotsk through the Pelouse Strait between Sakhalin Island and Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido.

Handy's laconic log entries for the first few days of October describe calm, clement days with light breezes. The *Phoenix* meandered in the straits south of Felikstova Island, lingering there so Handy and crew could search for one more whale to salvage a mediocre season. The pickings had been very lean that summer, and with only a few hundred barrels stowed below, Bethuel was anxious to finish his first season in command with a cargo worth bragging about in the shipping news. The calm conditions lulled him into complacency while the *Phoenix* drifted with the tide, content to remain in the bountiful archipelago as long as whales were about. On the third of October, a Sunday, the ship drifted with the tide and a light wind from the southwest. *"Saw a few whales. Lowered and got one. Got him alongside and anchored at 6 [pm]. At 5 am [Monday, October 4] began to cut. At 7 saw whales lowered and got one. Anchored him and left one boat with the whale. The rest came on board and finished cutting."*

The ship's luck was improving. Every dead whale meant about 75 more barrels of oil would make their way to the hold. The decision to delay their departure was paying off. All summer the *Phoenix* had competed with other ships for what some veterans of the Okhotsk fishery said were exceptionally "shy whales." Every morning confirmed that fewer and fewer ships were still fishing the Shantars during the good weather. Handy doubtlessly counted the sails he could see and took some comfort from their companionship, but time was short. The official sailing instructions for the region, published a century later by the United States Navy, carries an ominous note about the waters south of the Shantar Islands around Elbow Island: *"The*

anchorage is protected from NE gales, but is not safe later in the year than the middle of September. Local knowledge is necessary.”⁴

“Local knowledge” is a point of pride for any sailor who knows their home waters well. A sailor who regularly sails in and out of the same port will eventually learn where known shoals are changing and new ones forming while the channels between them shift from one year to the next. Yet take that same sailor far from their homeport, into uncharted waters that have never been surveyed and sounded, and “local knowledge is necessary” should inspire some fear and respect for the unknown. Handy had sailed the waters only once before, in his previous voyage as a boatsteerer (harpooner) aboard the *Massachusetts*. He had little experience commanding a whaling ship, it was his first time sailing with the *Phoenix* and her crew. The Okhotsk Sea was, 18 years after the first American whalers fished there, very familiar waters to some of the most experienced captains who sailed in the fleet of 1858, but whatever local knowledge there was to be had was gleaned from conversations with other New England sailors. There were no Russian whalers sailing in Russian waters. There was no shipping to speak of, and it seemed even the Russians were unfamiliar with the waters, due in large part to the fact that most of the Okhotsk freezes solid from coast to coast across its entire expanse eight months out of the year. The Russians were not a nautical power. Their only warm water port was high inside of the Black Sea, and they desperately wanted a port on the Pacific coast that would be ice free throughout the year. Russia’s priority in the 1850s was its fur trade and its settlements on the North American coast from Novo-Arkhangelsk (Sitka, Alaska) to Fort Ross near modern

⁴ Sailing Directions for the East Coast of Siberia; Mys Otto Shmidta to Sakhalinsky Zaiiv Including Ostrov Vrangelya, United States Naval Oceanographic Office, 1952

Sonoma County, California. Russian locals were occupied ashore with the fur trade and not eking out a livelihood at sea. Although the whalers were in regular contact with a few of the Russian settlers, fur traders, and government bureaucrats who lived in the sparse settlements at Ayan and Okhotsk, the language barrier was a steep one, compounded by the American's ignorance of the Cyrillic alphabet. In lieu of any published charts to teach them the Russian names, the whalers gave every landmark an English nickname. Islands were given a nickname and it stuck. Ostrov Medivizhiy, or "Bear Isle", was called "Elbow Isle" by American sailors. When Russian place names were used -- as they were in regard to the westernmost of the Shantar Islands, the favored whaling station at Ostrov Feklistoff -- were phonetically misspelled, often with multiple variations in the same log written by the same log keeper, who did their best to spell the strange names in their accounts. No nautical charts were available for the Sea of Okhotsk in the 1850s, meaning every ship that entered the sea from the North Pacific was guided by pure experience and the memory of their captains. The Russians didn't get around to completely surveying the sea until 1942. They ignored it because its impassable winter ice frustrated their need for a sea route to their outmost settlements on Kamchatka. So instead of struggling against the inevitable uselessness of the Sea of Okhotsk to its maritime ambitions, Russia instead turned its focus to its settlements along the Amur River -- the eventual border with China, and to Vladivostok, its best year-round deep water port facing the Sea of Japan.

Handy, and the rest of the crew of the *Phoenix*, sailed by memory and chance alone, avoiding the shore and the shallows and whatever surprises lurked concealed below the surface, steering well clear of any promontory or cape that could be counted on to be guarded by a ring of uncharted rocks. And, like any good fisherman, they followed the example set by other ships,

noting which were able to work close in shore between the ice pack and the beach, and which were getting into trouble, running aground and losing their copper sheathing to the grinding ice and semi-submerged bits of ice known as “growlers.”

On Tuesday, October 5th the fortunes of the *Phoenix* began to decline. The day began with a light westerly breeze and the ship was at anchor off the southeastern side of Ostrov Feklistova, the crew cutting up a whale. But by sunset conditions changed for the worse as the wind “veered suddenly to the N and blowed up strong.” By midnight the *Phoenix* was riding out a “fresh gale, ship pitching some.” She lay on a single anchor – she still had both at the time – and was riding uneasily in the building swell two miles northwest of “Stinker Isle.” At 10 p.m. the tide turned, and the choppy sea began to calm a bit as the current started to flow in the same direction as the wind and not against it. Handy decided to ride with the current on the new tide to help the ship find a more protected anchorage, but when he attempted to heave up the anchor it became stuck with 45 fathoms (270 feet) of chain over the side. Then “*came a heavy sea and broke the chain*” wrote Handy in the log. “Kept off and anchored under the lee of Stinker Isle.”

The anchor probably got wedged between some unyielding rocks or a crack in the bedrock on the ocean floor. When the crew tried to muscle it free with the capstan located on the ship’s foredeck, a wave lifted the bows and strained the ground tackle, causing one of the forged iron links in the anchor chain to snap. That unfortunate accident left the *Phoenix* with a single anchor to hold her ground in a blow. The ship’s options dwindled with the loss of the anchor. A ship with no engine must rely on its anchors to hold it in place to wait for a favorable tide. There was nothing that could be done to retrieve the lost anchor, so the crew was ordered to go about their business as usual, and light the tryworks and start boiling down the blubber from their

recent catches. There they lay in the lee of Stinker Isle all of Tuesday, October 5, giving the crew an opportunity to continue boiling blubber in the relative calm of the wind shadow the lee side of the island afforded the ship. While the crew tended the tryworks, Handy brought some spare anchor chain up from the hold and had it coiled in the bows “*ready to use in place of anchor.*”⁵

For the next two days – Wednesday and Thursday the 6th and 7th of October – the *Phoenix* remained in the lee of Stinker Isle, riding out what Handy described as a “strong gale” from the northwest, the crew continuing to boil blubber and stowing the barrels below decks in the hold. Handy’s log makes no mention of planning to depart the Shantars. His decision to remain there was driven by the need to boil down the catch from the previous week and to hold the ship on its one anchor while the next gale blew itself out over the open waters of the broad Uda Gulf. It was the second northwest gale in a week, and if ever there was a sign it was time to go, it would have been then during that storm, yet on the afternoon of the 7th the gale abated and eased from a “strong blow” to a “light breeze.”

Handy got the ship underway and began to sail her towards the west, back into the Sea of Okhotsk, away from safety and the possible escape routes through the Shantars. The *Phoenix* slowly sailed west across Feklistoff’s southern shore to an open anchorage between the southwestern headland that island, a point the American sailors called “Eagle Point” (probably because a majestic Steller’s sea eagle made its nest on the tall spire of rock that jutted out from the island’s bluffs). On Friday the 8th of October the crew continued to feed blubber into the iron

⁵ *Log of the Whaling Ship Phoenix*, Bethuel G. Handy keeper, Oct 5., 1859. In the collection of the Nantucket Historical Society

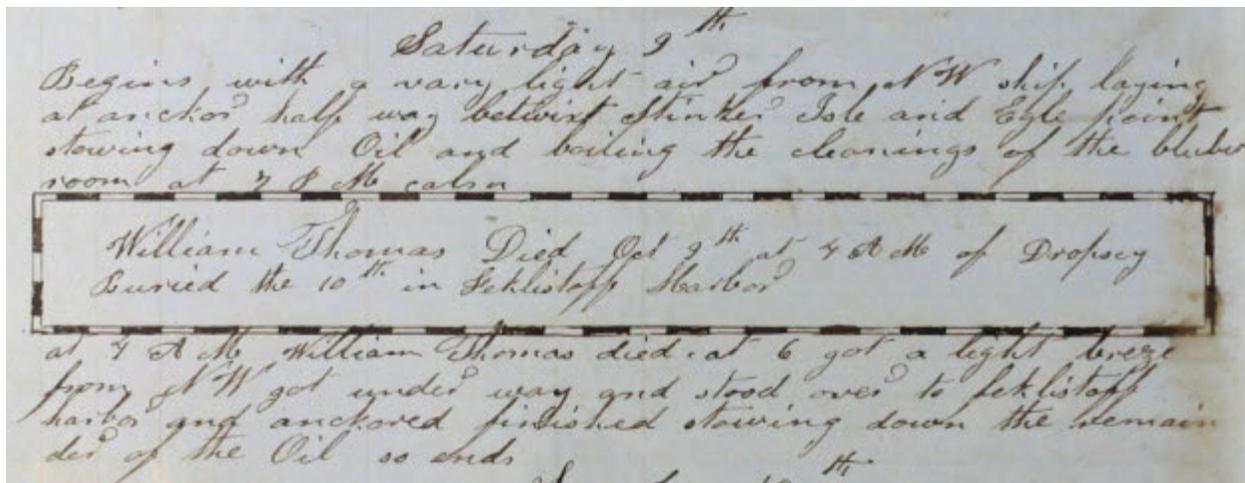
kettles over the burning flames in the brick tryworks, gouts of thick oily smoke smudging her sails as they poured the oil off into new barrels assembled by the cooper. No new whales were sighted that day.

On Saturday morning, Octobe 9, the day began with the ship still at anchor between Eagle Point and Stinker Isle. She rode on her one remaining anchor comfortably in “very light air” and the crew boiled “the leavings of the blubber room,” clearing the decks of the last of the whale meat. At 4 a.m. on Sunday the 10th, the ailing sailor --- William Thomas -- died of “dropsy” – the antiquated name for edema and congestive heart failure -- and his body was buried that same afternoon on the beach of Feklistoff’s Sobolova Bay.

Captains also served as medics aboard whalers, and Bethuel had previously noted in the ship’s log that the sailor was very ill and not expected to live. At 1 pm on Sunday the 10th, the body was wrapped in an old sail, sewn up, and rowed ashore where a grave was dug and the corpse lowered in the hole. Handy may have read a psalm from a Bible or Book of Common Prayer because his many duties included those of minister as well as doctor.

With the sailor buried and the shore party back aboard, Bethuel mournfully marked the somber event in the log – William Thomas was the first man to die under his command -- by drawing a box on a fresh page with a meticulously spaced checkerboard of black ink rectangles forming a frame on the page in which he wrote:

“William Thomas Died Oct 9th at 4 AM of Dropsey. Buried the 10th in Feklistoff Harbor.”



The burial party returned to the ship, and their boat and some others were lowered and used to tow the ship out of the harbor at 8 pm. Handy wrote in the log: “Got a light breeze from N. Stood over towards the rock off Elbow Isle in company with *Ocean Wave*. Ends the wind very light from NE.”

Sailing close by in the company of the *Phoenix* was the whaler *Ocean Wave*, a new ship hailing from her home port of New Bedford where she was launched in 1856. She was on her maiden voyage under the command of Captain Hiram Baker of Sandwich with a crew of Cape Codders, sailing for her owners, the firm of H. Taber & Co.

The *Ocean Wave* departed New Bedford on October 28, 1856 and sent home -- after her first summer in the Okhotsk in 1857 -- 180 barrels of sperm and 350 barrels of whale oil and 7,000 pounds of baleen. Handy doesn't mention in his log if he and Captain Baker ever met or spoke, but the presence of another ship in the same waters would have been of some comfort to the young captain, so he kept her in sight throughout the night as they sailed together towards Elbow Island where they could seek shelter from any easterly gales coming up from the mainland to the south.

Monday, October 11th began with a light wind blowing from the northeast, flowing fitfully over Feklistoff Island and ruffling the placid waters of the thirty-mile wide sound that separates it from the mainland. The wind was too light to give the ship much headway. Handy tried to work her firther south to get closer to the mainland, but the wind faded in the early afternoon down to a complete calm that left the ship adrift and in the grip of the currents rushing through the straits south of Feklistoff. At 4 p.m., as the sun was setting in those high latitudes, the wind shifted from the northeast to the northwest, blowing lightly across the open water of the Uda Gulf. On the wind shift, as her sails bellied out and began to fill with air, Handy turned the *Phoenix* around and pointed her back towards shelter under the lee of Feklistoff. At 7 pm the wind died down completely so the remaining anchor was dropped to the bottom in the open sea half-way between Elbow Isl and Feklistoff. The crew used the brief break to wash over the side the mess of gore and oil smeared on the main deck from the previous week's work of boiling and cutting. By 9 that night the wind began to blow a light breeze from the east. Handy once more hauled up the last anchor and sent the crew aloft in the rigging to set the sails and get the ship sailing on a southerly course back towards the north shore of the mainland again. The ship gathered speed as the wind built up to a fresh breeze, pushing her along on the starboard tack in the wake of the *Ocean Wave* as she led the way towards the protected anchorage off the western shore of Elbow Isle.

The logbook entry for October 12th, 1858 – a Tuesday – is crossed over by a big “X” made by some unknown person wielding an angry pencil. It would be the last day in the long life of the 37-year old ship. This is Handy's log entry for that fateful day:

“Begins with a fresh breeze from E. Steering over toward the North Shore. Saw nothing. Began to breeze on at 2 PM. Wore ship and steered for Elbow Isle. At 3 took in main topgallant sail. At half past 3 pm took in fly jib and spanker. At 4 dubble [sic] reefed the topsails. Aat 6 came to anchor 2 ½ miles west of Elbow Isle. Blowing a strong gale and began to rain. At 9 pm the wind came out W in squall and blowed a gale accompanied with thick snow very dark could not see anything. Lett [sic] go second anchor and gave her all chain. She lay without dragging until half past 3 AM.

Handy and Captain Baker on the *Ocean Wave* sailed to Elbow Isle to find k a protected anchorage against a possible gale from the southeast. With no weather forecast to warn them, only their barometers and the clouds scudding high overhead to give them a sense of what was too come, the two captains were betting on a new low-pressure system coming in from the east. The weather had other plans, and instead of doing what Handy and Baker hoped it would, it did the opposite and turned the western shore of Elbow Island from safe place to ride out an easterly blow, into one the worst possible anchorages in all the western Shantars to ride out a northwest gale.

And so, like the toss of a coin, the two captains bet on heads, but the weather came up tails, and so they came to be caught by the first blizzard of the season. The two ships had anchored in company in the open Uda Gulf with nothing to block the wind pouring off the western mainland coast of Russia some 50 miles to the west. The fetch, or amount of open water the wind travelled over, gave the tundra-spawned winds more time to build up steep waves and throw them at the two whalers riding together at anchor with the cliffs of Elbow Isle behind them. Their backs were against a lee shore and the Siberian winter was about to begin.

The *Ocean Wave* rode on her anchors a half a mile north of the *Phoenix*, abeam of the *Phoenix's* starboard side. Handy and his crew could see her lights pitching through breaks in

the snow as she rode the building seas head on in an even more exposed stretch of open water than the *Phoenix* pitched and plunged in. Somewhere in the darkness to the north, were the Pinnacle Rocks or the *Ostrovski Sivuch'i Kamni*, a vicious set of stone spires with needle-like summits surrounded by a reef of rocks covered with foaming breakers. Both ship's anchors were set on a rocky bottom covered with a thin layer of sand which would have been acceptable holding ground in a light breeze, but when the blizzard began to rage the flukes of the iron anchors started to drag impotently through the sand, skipping over the rocky bottom and refusing to dig in and hold. The nearest protected anchorage lay 30 miles to the northeast at Feklistoff Island, where -- had the two ships remained after the burial of the dead sailor -- they would have had a good chance of surviving the building storm in a sheltered anchorage. Any ship caught out to the west, in the wide, shallow expanse of Southwest Bay (as they called the Uda Gulf), would have no option but to run before the storm and try for Feklistoff. To fall off to the south towards the mainland wasn't an option. That escape route would have entailed a dangerous passage before the wind between Elbow Island's southern coast and the mainland through the shallow Shevchenko Straits where whirlpools were known to form during the peak tides. The only option for a square rigged ship was to fall off to the north on the port tack and make the turn for a run across the sound to Feklistoff. The challenge for the sailors was how to get the anchors up, set the sails, and then use the mainsail on the aft mast and the jibs on the forestay to back the ship around without getting trapped in "irons" when a ship is blown helplessly backwards by the wind, sails pressed aback against her masts.

Anchors are the bane and salvation of a mariner. They are the equivalent of a pair of brakes on a sailing vessel without an auxiliary engine; a temporary mooring when no wharf or

permanent mooring is available. Anchors can also be used as a means of propulsion, sometimes rowed away the ship in one of the whale boats and dropped in a particular location so the crew can winch the ship off of a sandbar or other submerged obstruction using the mechanical power of the capstan or anchor winch – a practice known as “kedging.” Modern anchors are engineered to efficiently dig into the ocean floor and bury themselves deep in the sand or mud like plows cutting a furrow into a field. Weight is less significant a factor in determining an anchor’s holding power than its ability to bury itself in the bottom and stay there. Burying capabilities being the first consideration for a good anchor, the second is the “ground tackle” or arrangement of chains, cables and hawsers that attach the shank of the anchor to the ship floating above. A sailor factors the depth of the water in an anchorage to determine how much chain or rope to pay out from the bow of the ship to the anchor below. The more chain, the more acute the angle between the anchor’s shank and the ship’s hawse pipe. This length is referred to by mariners as “scope”. The more scope means the better the angle between the ship and the anchor. Too short a scope and the plunging and pitching of the ship over any swells entering the anchorage can pop it free of the bottom. Conversely, too much scope can increase the swing radius of the ship around the anchor, meaning a wind shift or turn of the current can move the ship around and put her stern at risk of hitting a nearby anchored vessel or even a fixed obstruction such as a reef or shoreline. Mooring a ship is a science where a captain needs to calculate the range of the tide from its highest to its lowest point. High tides, especially extreme tides such as those in southwestern reaches of the Sea of Okhotsk, can lift and drop a ship as much as 30 feet between the tidal extremes. The higher the tide, the more the angle of the anchor chain will open and reduce the holding power of the flukes. A ship with its anchor chain running straight up and

down vertically has almost no holding power. One good wave and the rising bows will lift the massive chain and pop the shank of the anchor upwards, tripping the flukes and prying them out of the mud below.

One piece of information a captain in the age before GPS would consider when trying to establish an approximate position is the composition and consistency of the ocean bottom. Most nautical charts note the composition of the bottom in a cryptic glossary of 26 abbreviations indicating what type, texture and color the sea floor is in a region: *S* for sand. *M* for mud; *Stk* for sticky and *H* for hard; *Wh* for white, *Br* for brown, and so forth.

A rock bottom means the anchor will slide uselessly over the ground with no chance of catching and burying itself unless one of the spade-shaped flukes gets wedged in a crevice in the stone. Too much vegetation, such as kelp or eel grass, can cause the anchor to slide over the plant material without giving the pointed flukes a chance to dig into the substrate. Shells, coral, pebbles The consistency of the ocean's floor varies enormously from one region to the next and a good captain examines the bottom with a "lead line" before committing an anchor to the deep.

A lead line is a long length of thin rope tied to a heavy lead "plummet" with a concave cavity on its bottom that is packed with a ball of tallow. The plummet would be thrown over the side by a sailor standing at the bow. He would fling it forward of the moving ship to give it time to sink perpendicularly to the bottom and give him an accurate sounding of the depth by noting marks braided into the line every six feet or fathom. After waiting for the lead to hit the bottom, the sailor calls out the depth to the officer of the watch, then hauls the line back up to examine the tallow packed into the lead's indentation for any fragments of whatever material lies below

(mud, sand, coral, shells, etc.). Whatever the tallow captures, is some evidence that can help a captain decide whether or not to proceed with the mooring process. Having a bottom sample and depth sounding is also a valuable source of information that can help a navigator confirm the ship's position as they approach landfall on an unseen coast.

The ocean floor west and south of the Shantar Islands is greatly affected by the delta of the Uda River, a shallow, slow flowing stream that empties the wilderness watershed south of the islands into the southwest corner of the Okhotsk Sea. River deltas fan out the sediment and organic material carried by the river out into the sea for several miles offshore, fanning the sediments out and depositing a layer of sand and organic material to create shallow, shifting coastlines. The sailing directions for the mouth of the Uda River note that at low tide the mud flats off Chumikan – the village on the eastern banks of the mouth of the river -- can be completely exposed up to three miles offshore. At high tide, if the wind is blowing from the northeast, those flats are covered with foaming breakers. The muddy bottom of the Uda Delta would be an excellent holding ground, (assuming a ship could get close enough to drop an anchor onto it) if not for the deceptive fact that it sits on top of flat bedrock. An anchor would hit the bottom, its flukes would dig into the mud, but eventually hit the impermeable rock below and penetrate no further.

Handy anchored the *Phoenix* in the open sea west of Elbow Isle because he assumed the next gale would blow offshore from the mainland from the southeast and the tall cliffs on the western end of the long island would block the full blast of the wind and so shield the ship from the huge waves that can build over open water.

Handy's brother-in-law, Thomas Chatfield, master of the *Massachusetts*, wrote in his reminiscences:

“During a southeast storm both the Phenix [sic] and Wave had anchored under Elbow Island (a good harbor in a southeaster, but exposed to a forty-mile rake in a northwest gale – a thing almost certain to follow a southeaster at that season of the year) and that he had considered it safer to remain under sail in the open bay than anchor under Elbow Island, which he did. He [Handy] also reported that the wind did shift to the northwest at midnight, bringing a blinding snowstorm, which lasted some four hours. The wind reached the dimension of a howling gale before daylight, and that he was sure that neither of these ships were able to get away or able to hold on where they were.”⁶

Chatfield heard about the plight of the *Phoenix* and *Ocean Wave* while riding out the winter in the Hawaiian Islands in the spring of 1859 from another ship who had also been cruising the western Shantars in the company of those two doomed ships in late September. Chatfield's account of the wrecks -- as told to him by Handy more than 40 years before the writing of his reminiscences -- offers some more details about the events that led up to the demise of the two vessels.

“He [Handy] had lost one of his anchors during the summer, and so had only one to depend on: and in consequence when well into the harbor where the water was smooth. The Wave anchored farther out a half mile distant.”

Considering the factors that led to the wreck of the *Phoenix*, Handy was at a severe disadvantage before the storm struck due to the loss of the second anchor the previous week. To make up for that handicap, he issued an order to the crew to quickly collect all the chains, boat anchors, harpoons, spades, and any other piece of heavy iron on the ship to wishfully fashion into a spare anchor of sorts; anything, something to throw over the side and assist the tenuous

⁶ Chatfield, page CITE

holding power of the only remaining anchor. The crew rushed to collect whatever iron they could find, tying it all onto to the spare anchor chain Handy had prudently stowed on deck after losing the anchor the previous week.

The storm intensified and blew blasts of snow horizontally across the ocean. Even with the extra pile of iron thrown over the side to help the relieve the strain on the remaining anchor, the *Phoenix* began to slowly slide backwards towards the island somewhere behind them in the night. The ship's options were vanishing with every new shrieking blast of wind and Handy had to make a move. Once he confirmed the ship wasn't holding her ground, and was in fact sliding astern, he had three options.

First was to set the sails, haul up the anchor, and run for shelter back to Feklistoff. That was a difficult process in the best of conditions. A whaling ship could take ten minutes to tack and change her course at sea when facing into the wind. Setting sail in a gale while simultaneously retrieving the anchor meant the crew had to execute a perfectly timed maneuver where the ship would be put into "irons" and forced backwards by the gale, the rudder put over in the opposite direction to back her around and turn her bows to starboard far enough to catch the wind, fill her sails and gain enough some headway to get the ponderous hull moving fast enough that the helm would respond. Both ship's captains would have factored in the perils of the Pinnacle Rocks a few miles to the north of their position before committing to that option. The danger they faced was if ships refused to respond to their helms quickly enough after their anchors were aboard, then their sails would have snapped full and accelerated the heeling ship onto a fast reach aimed right at the Pinnacles. Turning the ship as she heeled over under the force of the gale, her starboard rail awash, would have been a huge effort for the helmsman to turn her

bows under the force of the full rig. Even with two sailors on the wheel, a ship falling away in a strong wind has very little control and needs more than just her rudder to get her turned around. The deckhands would strain to ease the sheets that controlled the angle of the yardarms, trying to simultaneously get the ship moving away from Elbow Island's reef behind them, and around far enough to sail under the threat of the Pinnacles

The second option was the same as the first, but in the opposite direction: falling off to port towards the south where the mainland lay about ten miles away. That option would have been the more dangerous of the two, because that course would commit the ship to sailing before the full fury of tempest through the shallow Shevchenko Straits separating Elbow Island from the mainland. At the west end of those straits, close to where the *Phoenix* plunged up and down on her anchor, was a standing whirlpool, or maelstrom, that appeared during the peak of the tidal ebb and flood.

The third option? Do nothing and hope the anchor would hold until daylight. A reasonable risk if the captain had good holding ground and two anchors to rely upon. Handy didn't have that option. However, Captain Hiram Baker on the *Ocean Wave* did, so he decided to weigh anchor and run. His ship was in somewhat of a worse position than Handy's, as she lay a half-mile away to the north with the Pinnacles that much closer to him. In the darkest hours of the early morning, as the crew of the *Phoenix* watched their only companion in the wild night get ready to escape, the *Ocean Wave* got under way, the angle of her lights growing dim and then vanishing in the snow as her sails filled and she gathered speed.

Chatfield wrote:

“When the wind shifted – which it did suddenly – the Wave got underway – at least he [Handy] saw the gleam of her lights through the snowstorm, and knew by that

time that they were heaving up the anchors: and after a seasonable time the lights disappeared, when he knew she had filled away, and that was the last he knew of her. (She was wrecked and all hands gone in less than an hour afterwards).”⁷

Getting a whaleship underway is a laborious process even in calm conditions, but the crew of the *Ocean Wave* managed to do so during a building Arctic storm. The anchors were slowly recovered by some of the crew using the ship’s windlass to winch the chain up through the two hawser pipes – iron rimmed holes on either side of the bow by the bowsprit. Others in the crew were aloft, barefoot in the rigging trying to set enough sail in the blinding snow to get the *Wave*’s bow around to starboard so she could run before the wind to shelter. As the *Ocean Wave* “wore ship”, she performed a complex maneuver where she set the foremost and aftermost sails – mostly likely a stout storm jib on the bow, and the gaff-rigged spanker astern that bark rigged whaling ships favored because it gave them a “fore-and-aft” rigged sail that could be backed, or hauled to one side or the other to catch the wind and help propel the ship’s stern around while the jib at the bow was sheeted in on the opposite direction to catch the wind and force her around 180 degrees onto an easterly course. All of this was done in 50 to 60 knot winds, when canvas sails can be ripped from the spars or torn in half with a single savage gust. The crew of the *Ocean Wave* had to perform a precise minuet of serious seamanship involving the trimming of yardarms, the passing of booms and clews and tacks from one side of the ship to the other, all while orders were shouted into the wind as the anchor was painfully winched up, waves rolling out of the black night and over the bow, the ship plunging and snapping from side to side as the anchor chain was winched aboard one clicking pawl of the windlass at a time.

⁷ Chatfield, CITE

If any mistake is made – even in a decent fresh breeze of 15 to 20 knots on a sunny day – the maneuver can fail and the ship can fall “into irons” and start sliding helplessly in reverse against her rudder, pushed in whatever direction the wind decides to push her. Sails must be quickly backed, the helm thrown over in the opposite direction of the turn, and eventually, finally, with maddening slowness, the square-rigged floating factory ship would begin to move and gradually pick up enough speed to give the helmsman some control over the helm. When the ship finally fell away from the wind, its sails would have filled with a sharp snap, the loud clamor of their luffing silenced as the crew sheeted them in; rising, up on the peak of the next wave to expose the rig to the full blast of the gale, the sails bellying out to their limits, slamming the ship over onto her side, yardarms dipping down to make rooster tails in the foaming seas to leeward. With the ship canted over on her beam ends, there would have been no way to stand erect on deck other than to hang onto something and try not to fall down the sloping deck to the buried rail. The crew would have been crawling on their bellies on the wet, oil impregnated deck, scrambling for a secure handhold as the leeward rail dipped under and a surge of green sea water flooded the deck. Knives would have been unsheathed if the ship refused to right itself from her beam ends. If the blubber room was full of unrendered meat, then tons of the slimy, rancid whale flesh would have slid down the slanted deck of the hold to the leeward side in a rush, further pinning the ship over onto her side. Only if the sheets and braces were cut and the helmsmen were able to wrestle the wheel over, winding the steering ropes around the helm’s drum against the weight of the twenty-five foot long rudder, then, and only then might the ship recover and come back from the point of no return and a certain foundering.

Mostly likely the *Ocean Wave* wore ship, filled her sails, got knocked down, and didn't have time enough to recover and turn herself around soon enough to clear the Pinnacles. There's no beach at the foot of those rocks: only sheer towers of sharp stone surrounded by rocks the size of houses, half awash in the surf. The ship's destruction would have been fast and complete, with some shreds of wreckage left wedged in the rocks, her rigging and spars tangled and knotted by the waves rolling over the boulders slippery with kelp. She would have struck the rocks at high speed, a sudden impact that stopped her in her tracks, spun her on her keel in time to take the next wave foaming out of the darkness. That wave would have lifted her high and just as suddenly dropped her hard on the rocks, snapping her 3-foot thick keel and breaking her back, the hull smashing open with sprung planks, releasing hundreds of wooden barrels filled with oil which would burst against the cliffs with every following wave, smoothing the water in an iridescent slick that calmed it for a moment as the sailors bobbed in the water, thrown over the side by the succession of relentless waves flying at them from the west. The drowning men may have had a moment's respite from the water blowing off the crests of the breaking waves in the lee of the broken ship before being dashed to death against the rocks. Those who remained aboard might have climbed whatever rigging remained, climbing high to escape the breaking seas, only to slowly freeze to death in the first winter wind.

With the *Ocean Wave* gone, the *Phoenix* was left alone with no witnesses to watch her fate unfold. Nothing was heard of the *Ocean Wave* again. Every man aboard her perished and some of her wreckage was spotted on the north shore of Feklistova Island in the late summer of 1859 by a passing ship. In June of 1859, Eliza Azelia Williams was aboard the New Bedford

whaler *Florida*. She was the wife of her captain, and with her three children (two were born at sea) she sailed into the Okhotsk during its most beautiful season. She kept a journal during her three-year voyage to the sub-Arctic, and in it she wrote of the mystery of the *Ocean Wave*'s fate while the *Florida* cruised the Shantar's a year after the *Wave* vanished.

“About every day now we have some of the Captains aboard and my Husband goes aboard of them occasionally. None of the Ships have seen anything of the *Ocean Wave*. Nothing has been heard of her, they tell me, since the fleet left here last fall. Some left as late as October and she was seen then near Shanter Bay. The Captains were in hopes that her crew had been saved and had wintered at one of these settlements, but not hearing anything about her here, ears are entertains that all hands were lost. It is sad to hear such news from the Ships.”⁸

The sailing directions for the south side of Udkaya Guba (the Gulf of Uda) describe the Pinnacles as “two detached groups of barren islets and rocks.” The Rocks lie seven miles north of the northwestern end of Elbow Island. Whalers were comfortable hunting whales near the rocks from whaleboats in summer conditions, but the ships were kept well clear and let their boats work the channel between the two clusters of exposed spires and sunken reefs, which -- according to the 2004 edition of the sailing directions for those waters -- had yet to be surveyed one hundred and forty years after the wreck of the *Wave*. The currents around the Sivuch'i Rocks are extremely strong, setting west on the flood and east on the ebb at four to five knots: all but impossible for a ship to sail against in good weather.

⁸ *One Whaling Family*, p.62-63, Harold Williams, Houghton Mifflin, 1964

It was on the sharp rocks of the Pinnacles -- according to the speculation of other captains familiar with waters around the Shantar Islands – that the 380-ton *Ocean Wave* was probably destroyed in the bleakest hour of the night, sometime around 4 a.m. on October 13.

The crew of the *Ocean Wave* died alone before dawn with no eyewitnesses or possible saviors to witness their demise. The last men to see the ship alive were the crew of the *Phoenix* and her captain. Within a few minutes it would be Bethuel Handy's turn to decide whether to run or ride out the building storm out on a single anchor.

He would have checked astern constantly, ducking behind the helm to peer over the taffrail through the flying snow to try to gauge the remaining distance between the stern of his sliding ship and the breakers blasting white explosions of spray into the air on the reefs around Elbow Isle. There were no lighthouses or fixed landmarks for him to take compass bearings on to determine how fast the ship was dragging backwards towards the island. He didn't have enough sea room to slip his chains and set sail. The *Phoenix* was running out of sea room and her captain was running out of time to get her underway.

The *Phoenix* plunged and reared up on the building seas rolling at her out of the darkness. Every surge lifted the heavy anchor chain off the bottom, eventually growing taut and prying the massive anchor out of the bottom. When that happened, every man aboard would have felt a sudden change in her motion as she lurched free of the tether and her wallowing hull began to turn broadside to the swells and move with them. At that point the ship's motion would have been too violent for the anchor to dig its flukes back into the silt. Once started, she wouldn't stop until she touched the hard shore.

When the *Phoenix* went adrift Handy gave the order to cut away the masts. It was a desperate measure. Sacrificing the spars and letting them go adrift was like an airliner in distress dumping its fuel before attempting to crash land without landing gear. Spars could always be remade from trees, a jury rig could be assembled; but preserving the integrity of the ship's hull was an absolute necessity. Anything that saved the ship and kept her afloat would offer some hope of rescue, especially if *Ocean Wave* could make it to a safe harbor and come back to rescue the crew of the *Phoenix*. There had been other ships in the vicinity, so there was a chance some of them were also riding out the storm in the lee of Feklistoff. To deliberately destroy the ship's masts and sever her rigging would lighten her, reduce the pressure of the gale on her bare spars, and significantly ease her pitching and rolling by getting rid of the weight aloft that was rolling her like a pendulum on every set of waves.

If a ship has an Achilles Heel, then it is its rudder and steering gear. Most ships who get into trouble at sea, especially yachts, usually issue a mayday because their steering failed. Modern yachts have fin rudders that aren't attached to the keel but are exposed and vulnerable to impacts from submerged debris. One touch of such a fin rudder on a hard bottom can snap it completely off, crippling the vessel with no way to steer other than the trimming and backing of her sails, or the rigging of a temporary rudder using an oar or plank lashed to the transom. Bluewater yachts designed to make long, open ocean passages usually protect the rudders by joining them to the keel and protecting their bottom edges by resting them on skegs. Should their steering gear fail, many ocean-going yachts have emergency tillers which can be fitted on top of the rudder post.

On a whaling ship, the rudder was a huge twenty-foot long, narrow set of thick oak planks sandwiched together with bronze rods pushed through holes drilled through the width of the planks and hammered over at the ends to form a sort of rivet. The rudder extends from below the fantail of the ship's stern down to the bottom of the keel. At the top of the rudder, a post goes up through the stern and through the main deck, where a stout tiller is fitted at a ninety-degree angle parallel to the deck. The wheel is mounted on top of that short tiller, and turns a wooden drum wound with two steering ropes passed through two sets of block and tackle anchored securely into the ship's frames on either side of the ship. As the helmsman spins the spoked wheel, it in turn rotates the rope-wrapped drum and uses the mechanical advantage of the block and tackle on both sides of the ship to turn the rudder from side to side. As the rudder turns, the entire helm moves with it.

The weakest part of the rudder assembly are its hinges -- referred to as "pintles" -- sets of heavy iron pins affixed to the front edge of the rudder on iron straps. The pintles point down and slide into round iron hinge points called "gudgeons" which are anchored through the stern post of the ship. This hinge assembly relies on the weight of the rudder to keep the pintles settled down in place through the gudgeons. The rudder looks small compared to the rest of the ship, serving more like a trim tab on the wing of an airplane than the type of barn door rudders used by catboats and skiffs. The bottom of the twenty-foot rudder rests its heel on a bronze flange bolted into the bottom of the stout oak keel. A failure of any of these components can cripple a ship but wouldn't be insurmountable for an experienced captain and crew, who knew how to steer a rudderless ship in the open sea by trimming her sails.

A ship dragging her anchor backwards towards a lee shore will usually strike stern-first, with the fragile rudder assembly usually being the first thing to hit a reef or submerged rock. The ship's mass guarantees that even the slightest touch against a reef or rock can snap a rudder, and, in the case of the *Phoenix*, that first contact against the rocks either snapped the pintles or drove them up and out of the gudgeons, unfixing the rudder and turning it into a battering ram.

There are few sensations more sickening to a sailor than the first bump of his ship's keel against a rock, reef or sandbar. The entire soul of a ship is embodied by her buoyancy, her rolling and pitching over the waves and the fluid motion that imbues her with life as she sails freely along. A grounding, a collision, the merest brush against a solid object is a shock to the entire ship, literally shivering her timbers as she hits the "hard" (as sailors refer to land) and the shock is transmitted through every timber in her hull.

Handy's log entry describes the scene best:

Let up a little and blowed harder a heavy sea a running. She began to drag. Being too near the land to slip the cables we gave her all extra iron fluke chains fin chains boat anchors etc. Dragging still and very close to land commenced to cut away the masts. While doing so she struck on the end of a reef and dragged over. Broke off the rudder pintles and done no more damage after she got over the reef she stopped dragging. The tide was falling but water enough to drop the rudder out of the port. Wedged it up as well as could. She soon began to strike bottom. Started the pumps and found she leaked badly. Sounded and found two feet of water. Found by keeping both pumps a going could keep her free. The rudder working in the port had knocked [sic] off one of the planks off of the stern. Ends this day the tide down and the ship striking bottom heavey and still a blowing."

The instant the first impact on Elbow's reefs tore the rudder off the *Phoenix*, Captain Handy realized his chances of returning home to Cape Cod were gone. The helm would have been useless, spinning wildly as the loose rudder fell away from the ship, connected only by the rudder post poking up through the fantail of the pilot house. Handy and his crews couldn't

assess the damage from the deck; the overhang of the stern would block the view over the transom to assess the damage. The useless ship's wheel and the violent motion of the rudder post and tiller would have been enough to know the *Phoenix's* rudder was disabled.

She still could be saved. She had to be saved. The ship was the only way home for Handy and his crew of thirty-two men. Saving her was to save themselves. Losing her meant going in the water to die. In such moments all hands were very motivated to protect her from suffering any further damage to her hull. There wasn't any time left to weigh the options Handy and his crew could take to protect the ship from further damage and complete destruction. As the ship dragged backwards on her one anchor, the 29-year-old first time Captain would have looked astern at the black mass of Elbow Island's cliffs looming behind him in the dark, the sea foaming as the waves roared ashore and smashed against the rocks. He would have accepted she was lost the instant her rudder first kissed the rocks that would eventually kill his first command.

At the moment he accepted the dire situation, Handy shouted an order over the shrieking wind and blinding snow to cut the masts away before the ship struck. Those orders would have been made quickly, perhaps after a quick consultation with his chief mate, Charles Chester, who would relay Handy's command forward from the helm, relayed by the other mates to the terrified crew. All hands would have been on deck in her final moments as she wallowed and pitched in the confused backwash of the breaking waves bouncing off the cliffs of the islands. They cut away the rigging first, letting all running rigging fly free, uncleating them from the belaying pins, unreeving them from blocks as others slashed away at the standing rigging, cutting through the web of hemp shrouds with hatchets and knives. Others grabbed axes and

began wildly hacking away at the base of the huge masts, staggering with every lurch of the deck.

It may seem counterintuitive to start chopping down masts and cutting away rigging in the middle of a grounding; but the first thing to do when a ship goes aground is to “ease her” by taking all pressure off of her rig by letting the sheet fly and letting the sails luff. The *Phoenix*’s sails were still furled tightly under the yardarms, yet the bare masts were still a problem. The 125-foot tall timbers acted like wild pendulums, the mastheads of gyrating in the sky and contributing more energy to her wallowing hull. Every impact of the keel against the reef would have vibrated up through the masts, making it even more treacherous for the crew to move safely around the wet deck. The lever effect of a tall ship’s masts on her hull was well known, as ships becalmed in huge ocean swells will roll aimlessly in the troughs, their motion exaggerated by the mass of wood, rope and canvas aloft, insidiously working the hull planking’s seams open to admit the sea.

Dropping the masts and getting them and the other spars over the side might give the crew a chance to fashion a jury rig if the hull could be saved. They had the tools and skills needed to repair nearly any damage and fashion a temporary rig sufficient to sail the ship out of the Okhotsk and perhaps onwards to Yokohama where some victims of the Okhotsk Sea went to be condemned after a bad season of constant ice danger.

Few ships ever go ashore and manage to get off again without the assistance of a salvage team and an ocean-going tugboat. Most of the ships lost in the Sea of Okhotsk had their hulls stove in by drifting pack ice and sank. Others discovered some uncharted, submerged spike of Russian rock that punched holes through the hull too big to patch or get ahead of with the ship’s

pumps. Some ships caught fire from their tryworks while boiling oil, but surprisingly not many as the crews were prepared to extinguish an oil fire with buckets of sand and tarpaulins. And some ships just vanished and were never seen again.

Someone, perhaps his uncles Horace and Seth Nickerson, Jr. back in Cotuit Port, had taught Bethuel Handy how to successfully wreck a ship *in theory*. Anyone who has taken a sailing lesson is taught early on some essential procedures they need to know in case they capsize, break a spar, run aground, lose a person overboard, etc.. Learning how to recover from such calamities is the better part of seamanship. Not that any of Handy's salty uncles had any firsthand experience surviving a wreck, but every master and mate knew what to do (in theory) to save a ship when it was in danger of foundering. The coverage given to wrecks and disasters at sea in the shipping news of that era indicates there was keen interest by sailors to learn how wrecks occurred, and how a damaged ship was repaired, or its crew rescued. Captains traded stories of maritime disasters among the fleet in the same spirit that airplane pilots study crash reports. Wrecks were usually investigated by insurers and semi-official boards of inquiry comprised of other ship captains before claims were paid to the ship owners. In 1858 there were few official regulations covering safety at sea. There was no certification system for Captains and mates, no exams were administered and there were no licenses, or "tickets" that could be gained by taking a test which would attest to a captain's competency. Although the U.S. Coast Guard was founded in 1790 as "The Revenue Cutter Service" to enforce federal tariff and trade laws

and to prevent smuggling.”⁹its mission to save lives wasn’t expanded until it merged with the U.S. Life-Saving Service in 1915.

The decisions Bethuel Handy made in the dark morning hours of October 12, 1858, were informed by what little he knew about what other captains had done to save their ships in similar situations. There were no formal lessons in how to successfully wreck a ship so she could be sailed again after repairs. The order to “cut away the masts” wasn’t one any sailor could practice over and over like a man-overboard drill spent chasing a floating cask tossed over the side; it was simply the last desperate act a ship’s crew could do when the situation was dire and no other options remained. All the sailors had was hearsay and the wisdom of older sailors who had survived a disaster before.

Of the books a captain like Bethuel Handy would bring aboard, one was an absolute necessity. It was not a bible, but the 18th edition of Nathaniel Bowditch’s *American Practical Navigator*, the “epitome of navigation” first published in 1802. “Bowditch”, as the thick book was known, contained the astronomical tables giving the position of the stars as observed from the meridian at Greenwich, England at the Royal Naval Observatory. Those pages of celestial angles and declinations are essential to calculate a ship’s position at sea. Bowditch is also a fascinating compendium of nautical knowledge, ranging from a complete course in the fundamental mathematics that underly celestial navigation, to a glossary of nautical terms. Bowditch is not, however, an “owner’s manual” for a ship, and nowhere does the book give a

⁹ *The Coast Guard Through History*, United States Coast Guard, <https://www.gocoastguard.com/about-the-coast-guard/learn-the-history>

panicked captain advice on what to do when their ship is moments away from being driven by wind and wave onto a lee shore off the coast of Siberia.

The command to cut away the masts was relayed with urgent shouting up the deck from the helm to the fo’c’sle. All hands had been on deck throughout the night, the crew trying to stay warm in the howling wind and wind-blown snow behind whatever shelter they could find on deck. Axes and hatchets abounded everywhere on a whaler and every sailor had a knife on their belt. The five whaleboats had hatchets fixed to their bow and stern decks in leather sheaths in case the boatsteerer or mate needed to grab one in a panic to prevent their boat from being sucked under the sea by a harpooned whale diving for its life. The cooper, the blacksmith, the cook ... all had cleavers and axes at hand. With Handy’s order shouted over the wind wailing through the rigging, the crew would have first cleared the sheets and halyards, uncleating them from the belaying pins and unreeving them from the blocks before cutting the shrouds that ran from the deck to the cross-trees of the three enormous spars. When a ship loses a mast over the side it becomes a battering ram alongside her hull, tossed by the waves and a threat with every surge. The crew would want the masts to fall over the side and drift clear of the hull where it couldn’t punch a hole through her hull. A long line would have been tied to the thick masts to keep the valuable wreckage from drifting away. When the mates were confident the masts could fall safely over the lee of the ship the order would have been given to start chopping the masts down.

When the masts were gone and over the side the ship would ride upright, ballasted as she was with hundreds of barrels of whale oil and thousands of pounds of bone. She would ride

higher in the water without their weight, thus reducing her draft or the amount of water beneath her keel. “De-masting” is a drastic move but an essential one. Once the ship struck bottom she wouldn’t be able to roll with the waves, and every succeeding wave would strike her sides with an impact so hard that it would have been impossible for the crew to keep her feet on the slanted, listing deck. Hence the decision to get rid of the masts before the ship struck. Once that fateful moment occurred there would be no hope for the crew to cut them free.

The *Phoenix* smashed into the reef stern-first before her masts could be cut away. The vulnerable rudder hit first, snapping its pintles off until it was only secured loosely to the ship by the helm on the main deck. The rudder began to slam into the hull like a battering ram trying to break through the stern planks. Each wave that followed lifted the ship and dropped her down again onto the rocks, the impact emphatic and unforgiving, knocking men to their knees and making it all but impossible for them to do anything more than hang on for their lives. Every new wave lifted her up and drove her back further over the first line of rocks, eventually pushing her clear of the reef that fringed the shore and onwards into small cove beyond where she floated once more. Suddenly she turned into the wind and steadied herself in the relative calm behind the reef, her last anchor had caught the reef and she was holding her ground off the beach of Elbow Island.¹⁰

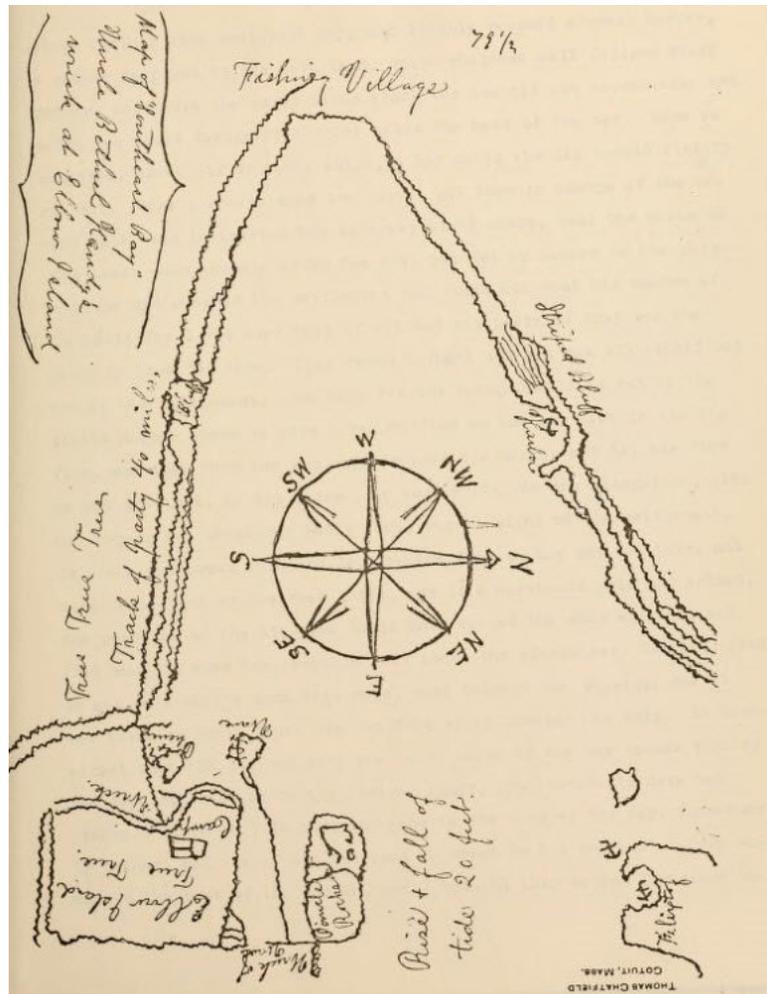
The ship was finally at rest at 5 a.m. with her spars intact, but she was taking on water from some undiscovered holes in her hull. Sunrise appears at 8 a.m. at that latitude in mid-

¹⁰ Prostar Sailing Directions, 2004 East Coast of Russia, pg. 96

October, and twilight wouldn't have brightened the gloomy scene until 7, so Handy would have to wait for some daylight to brighten the sky so he could inspect the damage. Any light struggling to emerge in the false dawn was blocked out by the 800-foot high face of the island cliffs that loomed over ship rolling wounded in the shallow cove.

Handy ordered the crew to start the pumps and found she was taking on a lot of water through the holes in her bottom as the bilge pumps vomited water over the side of the ship. The tide continued to fall – it has a range of about 18 feet between its highest and lowest point at Elbow Isle-- and the ship went aground again, causing her keel to “badly pound” on the rocky bottom of the cove. The offshore reef blocked some of the power of the storm waves, acting like a submerged breakwater, but the surge of those waves and the force of the wind were still building as the blizzard gathered more strength and began to blow another whole gale that gave no sign of easing. The *Phoenix* continued to pound her keel on the bottom. When daylight finally appeared Handy discovered that the rudder, while hanging free of its pintles after the first impact, had been “*working in the port and had knocked off one of the planks off of the stern.*” Despite the falling tide, there was still enough “*water enough to drop the rudder out of the port. Wedged it up as well as could. She soon began to strike bottom.*”

Handy's voyage was over and his ship was finished Chatfield wrote years later of the ship's first grounding on the reef off Elbow Island: “*...in doing so broke the rudder, both fastenings and stuck: and so they lost it altogether: and that meant the loss of the ship, and the wintering of the crew on an uninhabited island during an Arctic winter.*”



Thomas Chatfield's hand-drawn map of the wreck of the Phoenix and Ocean Wave

The dawn hours of Tuesday the 13th of October 1859 gave light to the scene and the “violent gale” still blowing. Handy chose the word “violent” with care, knowing one day some other captain would read the log and scrutinize every word. On the Beaufort Scale, used by mariners since it was officially adopted by the Royal Navy in the late 1830s (merchant vessels adopted it in the 1850s) as the standard for ship logs’ entries, the word “violent” only appears

once and that is used to describe the second highest “force” in the 12-step scale. A force 11 gale is described officially as:

“Exceptionally high waves (small and medium sized ships might be lost for a time behind the waves). The sea is completely covered with long white patches of foam lying along the direction of the wind. Everywhere, the edges of the waves are blown into froth. Visibility affected.”

Only a hurricane is more severe on the Beaufort scale. Dawn gave some dim light to the crew of the *Phoenix* as they worked to save their ship in winter conditions with winds blowing over 60 knots. The temperature of the sea water would have been around 46° Fahrenheit, but the air would have been hovering around the freezing mark, the windchill pushing it much lower for the wet sailors sheltering on deck in the first snow of the season.

Handy convened “a consultation amongst officers and boatsteerers whether to go on shore or stay by the ship.” The decision was made to stay aboard, and by the middle of the afternoon he noted in the log that the rising tide had floated the ship again and the pounding on the bottom had ceased for the time being. The barometer began to rise (Handy never logged the atmospheric pressure in his previous log entries, he mentions the barometer for the first time the morning of the wreck) and for a moment, he dared to hope the worst of the violent gale was over as “some appearance of better weather” gave him some hope in the light of day.

The rudder continued to be his main concern. If it was lost it would be extremely challenging to rebuild one strong enough to withstand a long voyage to a port such as Yokohama. Leaving the rudder to dangle free under the stern was dangerous, as the heavy oak fin had already knocked a big hole in the hull. The top of the rudderpost was cut off as soon as the tide lifted the ship off the bottom and the rudder was dropped out of its port and secured to the ship with lines. The rising tide brought the waves back into the cove, causing the ship to start

pitching on her anchor chain. Water poured into the ship through the sprung planks the rudder had smashed open in her stern, flooding in faster than the exhausted sailors working the two pumps could manage.

Late that afternoon the storm began to “moderate a little” and the water in the exposed cove “*grewed some smoother.*” The pump started to get ahead of the leaks, and by 7 p.m., an hour after sunset, the ship was declared “*freed of water*” by her Captain, who had “*hopes of saving ship and cargo.*”

His optimism was essential. Every man aboard waited for his orders. Any hesitation, any sign of doubt by Handy would crush the tired crew’s spirit. His job was to give them some hope that all would well in the end. So inspired, the crew kept at the pumps in shifts, working all through the next night, barely able to “just keep her free.”

At first light on Wednesday, more than 24 hours after the *Phoenix* went ashore, Handy logged that the storm had moderated, and the sea was calmer than the day before. He went below to check the bilge but “found she leaked as bad as ever.” At that point he made the difficult decision to prepare to abandon the ship and emerged from her bowels to order the crew to start hauling all the provisions that could be saved from the flooded hold and onto the deck. The snow continued to fall, building a white blanket over the beach and the ship. The pumps constantly gushed water over the side. Handy’s next move would mark his acceptance that his ship would never sail again: he ordered the anchor chains slipped over the side, releasing the ship so she could be beached close enough to the island to salvage her cargo. He gave the order to drop the anchor chain “*with the intension of laying her on the beach the next high water if we could as the only means of saving the cargo.*”

Most of the crew went ashore before the anchor was cast away. They used all five whaleboats to get ashore so a work party could begin constructing some sort of temporary shelter from the storm for the freezing men. Those that stayed aboard the *Phoenix* on Wednesday night continued to work the pumps to buy themselves more time to salvage her gear. Handy was concerned another storm was headed their way and at 4 am on Thursday morning the wind indeed began to blow hard again and the snow intensified. At 5 a.m. he gave the order to slip the cable. The ship began to drift ashore. By 6 a.m. the *Phoenix* was on the beach.

“Shifted over everything on deck to make her heel inshore,” Handy wrote in the logbook. *“At 7 am had her all fast and all hands ashore. Blowing a violent gale from the W the remainder of the day.”*

Handy’s brother-in-law, Thomas Chatfield, wrote in his Reminiscences:

“They slipped the chain, let the ship go on the beach, made fast to the trees, and went to work getting out everything that would help them through the winter. Provisions, clothing, bedding, tools, sails and rope, everything that would be of use in their then situation. And it was no child’s play either. The beach was steep, the bluff from twelve to twenty feet high, the rise and the fall of the tide twenty feet, and the snow not less than two feet deep; and there was no certainty of their being able to hold onto the ship for any length of time.”¹¹

The *Phoenix* came ashore and was canted over on her side, her deck and masts pointing towards the cliffs, her keel and punctured hull facing the breaking seas. The snow fell faster as the storm found its second wind, covering the ship and the shore with a deep blanket of the season’s first snowfall. The crew rushed to get as many barrels of provisions – *“bread, flour, meat etc.”* – out of the hold of the dying ship and onto the berm of the narrow beach, safely

¹¹ Chatfield CITE

above the high tide mark. The ship held her position most of the morning, but by the noon she *“struck very heavey on the beach.”*

One newspaper report, written more than a year later, described the scene of the wreck:

“The forces were divided out, some chopping trees, others landing provisions, and others building the house. That night the gale recommened furiously, and the wreck was beating with tremendous force upon the beach, striking so heavily as to jar the solid ground some distance up.”¹²

The beach was a dismal place that night. The wind shrieked through what remained of the *Phoenix*'s rigging. Snow and sleet stung wet faces in the gusts, soaking the sailors in their oilskins and wool jerseys, fingers numb with the cold. The waves roared ashore out of the night and crashed over the grinding hulk, the sea spray snatched off the tops of the breaking surf and thrown high by the wind up over the cliff tops above the beach.

On the next falling tide *“one of the trees to which the hawser was made fast tore out by the roots¹³”* and without any mooring to hold her in place, the ship shifted, spun around on her keel and ended up facing away from the beach, her copper sheathed bottom facing the beach and the shore party. Trying to salvage the cargo would have been impossible with the deck and hatches facing out to sea. There was no way to climb up the ship's hull to get to the top of the deck. For the first time the sailors could see the damage done below the waterline of the ship. *“Found the ship's bottom was stove badly. Could do nothing on this tide with the ship heeled off the land and a heavey sea on the beach,”* Handy wrote.

¹² Daily Alta p TK

¹³ Chatfield, pTK

The storm was on its fourth day with no signs of letting up. It continued to blow from the west all of Friday the 16th of October. The crew took axes and hacked a hole through the bottom of the hull but were only able to salvage two casks of flour and three casks of bread (the dry crackers that were the staple of the sailor's diet) from the hold. Handy wrote very little in the log that day. As he stood ashore at the base of the cliffs, a chaos of driftwood and logs between him and the sheer cliff face, he could do nothing but watch the black hull of the ship pound into the beach over and over, every impact of the waves booming and shaking the beach with a dull thump, the spray smashing into her deck soaring high over her flanks and blowing like spindrift over the cliffs behind him.

The crew were motivated to survive but they were exhausted, on the verge of hypothermia, and too tired to carry the heap of salvaged stores to higher ground. All they could do by that point was shelter together in a canvas tent they fashioned from one of the ship's sails, listening to the ship die on the beach in the incessant surf.

Sometime during the night the *Phoenix* broke up and vanished. At dawn the crew looked out of their tent to find the massive ship had disappeared, her cargo of whale oil and baleen, and a mass of wreckage scattered on the shore and floating in the rough water of the cove. Chatfield wrote "*...and they never saw anything more of her.*"

"Everything came out of the ship and went adrift," Handy wrote in the ship's log on Saturday the 17th. *"Found two casks of flour on the beach, a cask of powder and some meal. Those we rolled up on the bank."*

When Handy related his story to a reporter in San Francisco more than a year later, he described the scene:

It was a “desolate and dreary place. When the tide went down a smooth place was presented, upon which they rolled out of the wreck such beef, pork, bread and other stores as they could save. On either side of them were ledges of high rocks. The island, as far as they could see, was clad with a mantle of snow. The woods, which commenced a short distance back from the beach, were of spruce and pine, now and then interspersed with birch. The snow was then two feet deep, the result of the last storm, and the trees, which were from seventy-five to a hundred and twenty feet in height, were covered with it. They could see no great distance inland; all was silent and deserted, and as complete a picture of sterile desolation as could be imagined. Thirty-five souls, in all, landed, and there were well grounded fears that as the whaling fleet had nearly or quite all left the northern regions, they would be obliged to remain there through the rigors of an almost Arctic winter. It was still snowing when they landed, about seven o’clock in the morning. They found no signs of human habitation, and only here and there the tracks of bears, which afterwards proved to be the Polar brown bear.... They had some faint hopes of being taken off before the winter full set in, but, nevertheless, took every precaution to prepare their winter quarters.”¹⁴

The survivors climbed from their tent and stood together, stunned and silent in the feeble morning light on a cold beach on a deserted island. The ship was gone. Home was 7,000 miles away over the polar ice cap, 15,000 miles by sea. Now their new home was Elbow Isle; so named because some whaler thought it resembled a man’s arm. The crew of the *Phoenix* had no idea the island’s real name was “Ostrov Medivizhiy” or Bear Island. They may have been unaware that three months earlier, on July 1, the *Espalon of Havre*, a French whaler, lost one of her crew to a bear attack on the same island where they were now stranded.¹⁵

¹⁴ A Winter in the Northern Regions: Narrative of Adventures of a Shipwrecked Whaling Crew in the Okhotsk Sea – Life in Eastern Siberia, *The Daily Alta*, San Francisco page 1, vol XI, no. 332, November 30, 1859

¹⁵ *Polynesian*, Oct. 30, 1858, page 3