



# The Sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald: The Loss of the Largest Ship on the Great Lakes

*Charles River Editors*

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- \*Includes pictures
- \*Discusses official investigations and amateur expeditions to the wreckage
- \*Discusses the evidence and theories about the sinking
- \*Includes a bibliography for further reading

"They might have split up or they might have capsized; they may have broke deep and took water. And all that remains is the faces and the names of the wives and the sons and the daughters." – Gordon Lightfoot, "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald"

The Great Lakes have claimed countless thousands of vessels over the course of history, but its biggest and most famous victim was the SS Edmund Fitzgerald, the largest ship of its day to sail the Great Lakes and still the largest to lie below Lake Superior's murky depths.

The giant ore freighter was intentionally built "within a foot of the maximum length allowed for passage through the soon-to-be completed Saint Lawrence Seaway." but despite its commercial purpose, the Edmund Fitzgerald was also one of the most luxurious ships to ever set sail in the Great Lakes. One person who sailed aboard the ship recounted, "Stewards treated the guests to the entire VIP routine. The cuisine was reportedly excellent and snacks were always available in the lounge. A small but well stocked kitchenette provided the drinks. Once each trip, the captain held a candlelight dinner for the guests, complete with mess-jacketed stewards and special 'clamdigger' punch." Indeed, when it was completed in 1957, the Edmund Fitzgerald was nearly 730 feet long and dubbed "Queen of the Lakes", and it was so popular that people would wait along the shores to catch a glimpse of the famous boat.

The ship had already earned various safety awards and never suffered a serious problem when it set sail from Superior, Wisconsin with over 26,000 tons of freight on November 9, 1975 and headed for a steel mill near Detroit. During that afternoon, however, the National Weather Service, which had earlier predicted that a storm would miss Lake Superior, revised its estimates and issued gale warnings. Over the course of the next 24 hours, the Fitzgerald and other ships in Lake Superior tried to weather the storm, but by the early evening hours of November 10, the Fitzgerald's captain radioed other ships to report that the ship was having some problems and was taking on water.

In the ship's last radio contact, the captain reported that the ship and crew were "holding our own," but just what happened next still remains a mystery to this day. Minutes after that last contact, the Edmund Fitzgerald stopped replying on the radio and no longer showed up on radar, indicating that it sank, but no distress signal was ever given, suggesting something catastrophic happened almost instantly. At the time the ship went down with all 29 of its crew, winds had reached about 60 miles per hour, waves were about 25 feet high, and rogue waves were measured at 35 feet.

The wreck of the ship was found within days, and the fact that it was found in two large pieces suggest it broke apart on the surface of the lake, but it's still unclear how that happened. Since her loss with all hands, people from all walks of life have weighed in on the ship's fate, including official investigators, sailors, and

meteorologists, but no one has yet to come to a clear conclusion about what exactly went wrong. Various theories have since been put forth, attributing the sinking to everything from rogue waves to the flooding of the cargo hold, but the loss made clear that more stringent regulations on shipping in the Great Lakes was necessary, and it was also a painful reminder of the dangers of maritime travel.

The Sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald: The Loss of the Largest Ship on the Great Lakes chronicles the story of the Great Lakes' biggest victim. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald like never before, in no time at all.

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