**The Tornado at Toledo Lighthouse April 11 1965**

**Written by then E.N.T.R.Mayer**

**…………….I don’t remember the date we opened the light in ’65, but it must have been sometime in March, because by April 11th the opening work had been completed. This consisted of hauling all of the gear back out to the light that we had removed last fall, and getting up the equipment we had secured at the light. The first thing we would do is start the generator engines to get the batteries recharged. After removing the shutters, we started setting up house-keeping, and the next several days were busy getting the living quarters washed down, swept out, and made livable. Turning to the outside, we used the P60 fire pump to draw water from the lake and hose down the building to rid it of all the accumulated spider nests, and the majority of dust and grit that had accumulated over the last five months. All of this usually took a week or so, and all of the assigned personnel would have been aboard. This year there were only three of us in the compliment, and by the time April rolled around we had started our on-off rotation, which was six days on the light, and three days “on the beach”.**

**B--- was on the beach which left H--- and I on the light standing a live watch six hours on, and six hours off, 24/7. While on watch, our primary duties were making sure the optic was functioning properly, sending weather reports to Toledo Depot via radio on a prescribed time interval, and taking “Time Checks” to ascertain our radio beacon was sending our signal with the designated “signature” at the specific time period so the pilots on the ships could distinguish our signal from Detroit River Light, and other beacons being broadcast. In addition to the mandatory watch duties, we would do general housekeeping and maintenance, all the while keeping an eye out to the shore lines to determine if the visibility made it necessary to start the fog horn. At night, if we could not see any lights in the area of what is now Maumee Bay State Park, or the Monroe Mich. shoreline, we set the horn. The same criteria applied during the daytime, although it was easier to discern the actual visibility.**

**Having settled into our routine we could relax a little, and our day to day items could be accomplished in-between the mandatory functions. As the engineer, I would tend to the engines, machinery, batteries, and what other items needed doing according to an in-house published work list. H--- developed this list on a weekly basis. Often during daylight hours we would share duties regardless of who was on watch.**

**If I was busy in the engine room and it was technically my watch, H---would send the weather, get the “time tics”, and listen for radio traffic pertaining to the light. If he was busy in the office and I was working in the living area, I would do those things for him. That way neither one of us was tied to the radio room during the day and could tend to other items that needed attention. From 1800 to 0600 we each stood our own watch, and it was understood that if we were in our bunk off watch, unless we were called, no matter what we heard, we could remain in our bunks and assume whoever was up would handle the situation.**

**It was pleasant doing the work in the engine room in the early spring with the doors and windows open. A breeze would blow through the spaces, and make it rather pleasant. After the engine room got squared away, the windows washed, deck and walls painted, and any repairs taken care of, it was an easy matter to keep them that way with just a little effort each day. We seemed to always keep an eye out for ships coming down channel just to watch them steam by. I can remember watching the occasional ore boat go by and the ships cook and perhaps a deck hand- but most generally the cook would wave across. I’d wave back, and even though we had never met, we still seemed to have a connection.**

**As I recall, early April ’65 was one of those warm April’s that promised early flowers and gardens at home. We knew it was Palm Sunday April 11th, but being on the light there was no variance in the routine. The air temperature at the light was unusually warm even with the still chilly lake water temperature. I took the opportunity to put our skiff over the side using the hand operated crane that was mounted on the west side of the crib. The crane worked well, but was very slow and letting the boat down took several minutes. I rowed around the light a few times, then came back, hooked the cable to the sling, and climbed back up to the crib and began cranking in the cable. By the time the boat was even with the crib, I just swung the crane in and set the boat down on the cradle, leaving the crane whip hooked up to the sling. Later that afternoon there was a haze, which was very nearly heavy enough to warrant the fog horn. Looking to the east and north it was hard to tell where the horizon ended and the sky began. H--and I stood on the crib looking towards Toledo, and remarked that it was eerily still, and the colors in the atmosphere were unusual and not what they should be. We knew that there would be some weather on the way and probably thunderstorms.**

**We decided late in the afternoon to shut the heavy outer doors of the engine room, and make sure the weight was two-blocked. (This weight drove the optic’s rotation through a clockwork mechanism in the event of a power failure. This and a mantel lantern set on a small pedestal so the mantel was centered in the middle of the bull’s eye of the lens were the emergency measures to ensure the light could still be shown, albeit at quite a diminished value. Even though the structure was powered by batteries and a total power failure was unlikely, it was in our best interest to have any redundant systems ready in the event something did happen.)**

**We kept watching towards Toledo for any hints as to what was coming, and later in the evening could see lightning in the clouds way off in the distance. At this point we were not overly concerned because we had seen it so many times in the past, and a good deal of the time these storms would miss us to the south. There was an unusual amount of static on the radio and H—mentioned he was unable to contact the Depot for the 1830 weather report. This too wasn’t totally uncommon. Weather conditions or the Depot on another frequency talking to one of the CG boats on a case occasionally made it impossible to raise them. He had made the attempt and logged it. We were convinced it was atmospheric and didn’t think much more about it. There was a TV in the day room, but the reception was terrible this day. The images looked like ghosts, and there was a lot of static in the audio. We were able to hear on the weather broadcast that there were severe thunderstorms in the area, and that west of us there had been tornadoes. Since I had the mid watch (2400-0600) I told H—I was going to turn in. I remember looking out the day room window towards Toledo and seeing a few rain drops on the glass, but other than that, nothing much had changed other than the clouds and lightning seeming to be higher in the sky. I made an off-hand remark to H—something to the effect of “… it’s on the way, see you later.”**

**My room was on the second level on the NW corner. I had a closet on the right as you entered the room, and the head was adjacent to that. Both of these had doors on them. My bunk was on the west wall under the window looking towards Toledo. At night I could lay in my bunk and pretty much guess as to the visibility by the intensity of the light beam as it swept through it’s rotation. On very clear nights with a lot of stars, it was hard to distinguish any beam at all by looking at the sky, but on hazy or foggy nights the beam was very dense and sometimes it was possible to see the red sector as it turned. If I sat up I could look towards Toledo and would sometimes watch an ore carrier as it steamed inbound to the harbor.**

**This evening being not much different than any other- excepting the storms coming in, I went into my room, sat on the bed and pulled my boots off, took off my shirt, doubled it up and put it on top of my boots. I then took off my dungarees, folded them twice and put them on my shirt, finally, I pulled off my socks and put them on top of the pile. I wasn’t obsessive about this, it was just a way to keep my clothes off the deck and handy. I pulled the covers down and turned in in my skivvies. I watched the light through several revolutions and could see rain drops streaking through the light beam. It was coming down much harder and at the same time H---had set the fog signal.**

**I must have dozed off, because what woke me was the rain and hail striking my window. I listened as it seemed to get louder and the next thing I heard was a window breaking and crashing on the lower level. I sat up anticipating a call from H---, but not hearing him, I laid down again although sleep was out of the question with the storm right on us. The storm had an ominous drone sound to it and was getting louder by the second. I had no sooner lain down again when there was what sounded like a double-barreled shotgun going off in the room. At the same instant I felt a jostling and was totally confused. I could not comprehend what was happening. Moments later I realized that my bunk was saturated with rain water and had several pieces of broken glass in it. I knew I had to get up and reached for my clothes but there were no clothes! My boots were there, but the clothes were gone. At this time the wind was still raging, the curtain over my window was standing out nearly horizontal into the room, and the north window curtain was blowing outside where the window had been. The rain was still coming down, but the noise seemed to have modified slightly. My only thought was to get out of there and downstairs. Knowing there was broken glass everywhere, pulling on my boots to keep from getting my feet cut seemed like the smart thing to do. I made my way through the adjacent room, through the office and out to the stair well. I went down the first set of stairs, turned on the landing and started down to the 1st floor when I saw H---standing at the foot of the stairs looking up. He had tears in his eyes and the first thing he said to me was “….you son of a b….. I called, and I called, but you never answered and I knew you were cut to ribbons. I wasn’t going to come up there and see you all over the floor!” Then he threw his arms around me and we hugged each other. Pretty soon he started laughing and backed up sizing me up telling me I was one of the funniest looking visions he had ever seen. I could imagine.**

**T shirt and skivvies with boots on. He said I better get dressed it was going to be a long night. I asked him what time it was and he told me about 2200. I had only been in bed a couple of hours.**

**My feet began to sting a little, so I went into the galley and sat down pulling off my boots. My thought about putting them on so I wouldn’t cut my feet on the glass that was all over the floor was a good one. It would have been even better if I had had the presence of mind to dump them out first! There were a couple of shards of glass in each one and I received a few cuts, but nothing really serious, and nothing that my current state of adrenalin couldn’t cope with. I dumped out the glass, put some paper towels on my feet and put the boots back on.**

**While I went back up to my room to pull on some clothes, H---tried to raise the Depot on the radio. What I discovered going back to my room was amazing. The blankets, sheets, pillow, and my clothes were not to be found anywhere in the room. They were simply gone. The bare mattress was on the bunk as though it hadn’t been made up since we came back aboard. The closet door I had left open was closed and I opened it to get another set of clothes. What I found in there was my pillow on the floor virtually dry. I pulled on some dry clothes after shaking them out, just in case they had glass in them too, and then went into the head to see if perhaps my first set were in there. They weren’t. All of the water had been sucked out of the commode, the shower curtain had been partially ripped off the shower, but my toothbrush and toothpaste were on the sink where I had left them.**

**I remember coming back downstairs and hearing nothing. H—told me there was no radio contact with the depot, or any ships that may be in the area. The TV was on, but blank and no sound, the radios were silent other than a steady light hissing sound. After the horrific noise just moments ago, the quiet of the present seemed surreal. We could hear waves washing over the crib stone because several windows had been blown out, and every step we took there was the crunching of glass underfoot. We instinctively looked outside to see if the light was working. The light was on, but it wasn’t rotating, and the beam was pointing at a strange angle into the sky. We knew we were on our own for the time being, and having come through whatever it was unhurt - it’s hard to describe the relief, and brotherhood we felt. We were certain that when the Depot hadn’t heard from us for a while, and especially if they noticed the light wasn’t operating properly, they’d send a boat out to check on us.**

**At this point, dear reader, I have lost the time-line thread. I recall vividly the damage we discovered, which I will describe in the next paragraphs, but what we accomplished between the two of us, and when we did it, is still a mystery. I have most of the details, but they are like so many puzzle pieces – the picture is there, it’s just fragmented. I don’t remember what we did immediately, but I am sure the optic took priority because we couldn’t get any messages out to anyone that it was not operating properly.**

**A little background here may be in order to explain what had happened to the lens. I was told at one point when I was first assigned to the light that the lens and it’s carriage floated on a bed of mercury that was contained in a circular channel built into the foundation of the light apparatus in the gallery. This was borne out by a bottle of mercury I discovered in a small cabinet on the level immediately below the gallery, although I have yet to read anything to positively state this is the case. I was told at some point the mercury had been replaced with a large number of steel ball bearings that were of such a size to allow the mercury channel to become a race and the whole apparatus essentially rolled on these bearings.**

**Prior to the storm, (that we later learned was a near miss, or a small tornado…..we will never know, because we never actually saw it, we just know what it did to the light,) there were two wooden spars of about six inches in diameter who’s heels were set against the gallery tower with the tops, or outer ends, secured by cables to the roof of the gallery. These spars projected towards the south and north side of the gallery, and we could only surmise that at some time they may have been signal halyard spars. At any rate, when the storm came through, these spars broke off at the base and since the tops were tethered by a cable, they became extremely large bats and apparently flew around, breaking several of the diamond shaped pieces of glass in the gallery. With these glass pieces broken, the wind was allowed inside the gallery. At some point it put enough pressure on the lens to blow it back at an angle sufficient to allow a number of the ball bearings to be forced out of the channel, thus lessening the continuous support of the lens and causing it’s base to drop into the channel and stall in the position we found it. I don’t recall physically putting the bearings back in the race, but I’m sure we did. I also could not say if there was any damage to the motor that drove the rotation.**

**Although the remainder of that night and early morning are lost to me, I can relate the damage we discovered the morning of 12 April. In addition to the broken windows in the gallery and several in the living quarters, three windows in the engine room were broken. One of them, the north side closest to the door was removed from the casing, carried across the engine room and set down against the wall intact! The glass wasn’t even cracked. Except for a few bent nails, one would think it was just waiting for the carpenter to install it. It’s mate to the right was smashed against #2 generator. Our beacon antenna was wrapped around the flag pole on the NE corner of the crib. The radio antenna had been broken from the building and was lying on the crib. Two virtually full fifty pound bottles of cooking gas had been attached to the outside wall of the galley on the south side. Both of them were gone. The skiff I had left on the crib right-side up was placed perfectly on the cradle upside down. The striking thing about that was the whip cable had cut it’s way through the gunwale, through the side and bilge of the boat, and was tending straight up to the crane head through the hull from the center of the bottom adjacent to the keel. There were white paint marks on the west side of the light structure about eight feet above the crib where the skiff had struck the building.**

**The Depot sent out the 40 footer to check on us since they had experienced the same storms and hadn’t heard from us for hours. I recall talking to the crew of the boat as they lay just off the crib of the light, but I cannot tell you today what time it was. Sometime during the night we had swept up the broken glass so we wouldn’t grind it into the linoleum, and for days after that we were finding pieces of glass here and there. One of the first things we did was put the winter shutters on the windows that were destroyed, and I thought in the days that followed how dark and dismal the interior of the living quarters were with the shutters in place. Over the course of the next 24 hours, we discovered several bizarre occurrences; the TV guide was in the refrigerator, the log book which was kept in the radio room (1st floor NW corner,) was found in the office which was immediately above the galley, and neither H-- nor I had put it there. Papers in the office were strewn all over the floor, yet in the day room – the room between the radio room and the galley where the first window imploded- there was a book case that was not disturbed. There was a large glass front dish cabinet on the east wall of the galley which remained intact.**

**Throughout the next several days and weeks we had visitors from all levels of CG authority assessing the light. Several different sorties of repair crews came out and within a month or six weeks, everything had been restored or repaired. I don’t know if the tornado damage had anything to do with the automation, or if the timing was coincidence, but in the summer of ’65 new equipment was brought aboard and installed. We worked directly with a civilian contractor mounting the new engines and ancillary gear, and had mixed emotions about the transformation. It was exciting thinking the light could be controlled from the Depot by radio waves, but by the end of the ’65 season it was sad thinking that after more than sixty years there wouldn’t be any more live watches at Toledo Harbor Light. There would still be the occasional visit to the light for engine maintenance, and whatever repairs were necessary, the structure would still perform the duties it was designed to do, a beacon would still shine, the mariners would still pass, but the windows in the living quarters would be darkened, and some of the soul would be gone……………**

**Signed: T. R. Mayer CWO (Ret) USCG**