

# Brian A. Howey: I am a son of the Great Lakes

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MICHIGAN CITY – I am a son of the Great Lakes. As a child, I remember awaking on misty mornings to the gentle throbbing of the Michigan City Lighthouse fog horn.

The Great Lakes are the world's most dangerously fabulous inland freshwater seas. I have kayaked into the Great Lakes at St. Joseph, Mich., as well as from the Big Two Hearted in the Upper Peninsula, which runs parallel to Lake Superior. You can hear the roar of the surf as it bends northward, and then it fades into leafy silence southward. Once while kayaking on the Tahquamenon River, we entered the mighty Lake Superior in dead calm conditions. It was surreal, paddling through this gigantic mirror, making the only waves that evening.

About 20 years ago, I took my sons to Paul's Barber Shop in Broad Ripple and Paul says to me, "This guy has a hell of a story to tell you," pointing to a gentleman awaiting a trim.

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I don't remember his name, but he told me, "I'm the only man on Earth who has seen the Edmund Fitzgerald on dry dock, and at the bottom of Lake Superior."

Oh yeah? Tell me more.

He was present when the SS Edmund Fitzgerald was launched at River Rouge, Mich., on June 7, 1958 from the Great Lakes Engineering Works. On Nov. 10, 1975, this huge ore freighter sank just short of White Fish Bay on Lake Superior during a

terrible storm, costing the lives of 29 sailors. This maritime tragedy was memorialized by Gordon Lightfoot's "[The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.](#)"

A friend of mine, Nashville, Ind., artist Jeff Hagen, told me about a cabin he owned on a high cliff overlooking Lake Superior near Cornucopia, Wis. "One day in town I met the man locals had told me about as 'the only survivor of the tragedy', Bud Cinker. He was the cook of the Edmund Fitzgerald, and a day prior, he came down with the flu and called in sick. He was replaced by a stand-in cook ('boys, it's been good to know ya') and survived to drive around town in his restored '56 Ford pickup with his dog and was grateful for being alive.

This man I met at the barber shop was also part of the crew of the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Woodrush, which located the Fitzgerald in May 1976 in two pieces at the bottom of Lake Superior. I don't remember the Coast Guard officer's name and haven't found any of my notes from that era. I found an undated photo of Capt. Ernest M. McSorley on the Edmund Fitzgerald. He is standing under the bridge with the ship's name in the background. The ghostly picture of the Fitz at the bottom of Lake Superior revealed the same bridge location.

About a week after the Edmund Fitzgerald sank, my father, Jack E. Howey, wrote a Peru Daily Tribune column about life on the Great Lakes. My father graduated from Hobart High School, Class of '43. These were the boys who would hit the beaches of Normandy a year later. He tried to enlist, but was rejected due to bad eyesight. So he and a buddy went to the Maritime center in Chicago, looking for work on a freighter.

They were hired onto the SS Arcturus and, unknown to my father, became a member of the Merchant Marine, part of the United States' Arsenal of Democracy. They would haul iron ore from Duluth, Minn., to Gary and other steel centers. This ore would become the tanks, Flying Fortresses, howitzers and aircraft that would win World War II.

He was aboard the Arcturus when it was caught in a late spring blizzard in 1944. Dad was assigned to routinely check the ballast tanks while tethered to the ship and, to his horror, he discovered one on the bow was filling up with water. It could have been catastrophic. He quickly ran to the bridge to inform the captain, who subsequently summoned the ship's engineer. This trio made their way to the ballast tank, where a hasty repair was made. My Dad remembers that as the Arcturus plunged into each trough of waves, he could hear the anchor slamming into the

bow, a truly haunting sound.

Unlike the Fitzgerald, the Arcturus survived.

I, too, sailed on the Great Lakes. My good friend Ray Irvin – Father of the Monon Trail and the Indianapolis Greenways – took me aboard his 38-foot sailboat Polaris to the Chicago Air Show. We were greeted by a Stealth bomber flying overhead about where the Indiana, Illinois and Michigan lines intersected in Lake Michigan. We spent a Saturday watching the Thunderbirds zipping around the Chicago skyline while we were anchored near Oprah Winfrey's yacht.

The following morning, we set sail back to Indiana. Then Ray informed me, "I'm tired. I'm going below to take a nap. See that little white matchstick just over the horizon."

Yes, I responded.

"Well, that's the Michigan City Lighthouse. Just keeping aiming there until I get up."

### *Postscript*

Reporter Stan Maddux has reported that the U.S. Coast Guard is seeking to downgrade the Michigan City station due to budget reasons. Maddux reported that Phil Gurtler, a public affairs officer for the Great Lakes at the U.S. Coast Guard station in Cleveland, said a manpower shortage nationwide is forcing the decision to restore staffing and other resources to levels they should be in areas where service calls are highest. "We are going to reallocate some of the personnel and assets," he said.

This comes after Michigan City struggled to find enough life guards in recent years. Michigan City Mayor Duane Parry called this potential downsizing "a matter of life and death."

The Indiana congressional delegation and Gov. Holcomb's administration need to push back on this cut in services, or lives will almost certainly be lost.

*-Brian Howey is senior writer and columnist for [Howey Politics Indiana/State Affairs](#). Find him on Facebook and X [@hwypol](#).*