

Service Recalls Edmund Fitzgerald

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DETROIT (AP) Twenty-five years to the day after it plunged to the bottom of Lake Superior during a fierce storm, the ore-hauling Edmund Fitzgerald was far from forgotten Friday in solemn observances for the famed ship and its dead 29 mariners.

"It lives on because it was the last large freighter on the Great Lakes to go down, and it's always been a mystery," said John Polacsek, curator of Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Detroit's Belle Isle. The museum was among several sites of memorial programs Friday in Michigan and Minnesota.

"In this case, this vessel was noted because she went to the bottom with all of her crew members, and no one knows why," said Polacsek.

About 150 people attended the 90-minute Detroit program where 29 small oil lamps – one for each of the ship's late crewmen - were to encircle a five tonne anchor the Fitzgerald lost in the Detroit River a year before the ship sank.

Mystery and fascination about the Fitzgerald remained keen since Nov. 10, 1975, when the ship ran into an unforgiving storm at Lake Superior's eastern end while lugging 23,582 tonnes of concentrated iron ore from Superior; Wisconsin.

After reading about the wreck in a Newsweek article, Canadian singer Gordon Lightfoot penned The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald, a haunting ballad that sold nearly one million copies after its 1976 release.

The morning after the ship's sinking, the Rev. Richard Ingalls tolled the bell at his Mariners' Church of Detroit 29 times, once for each crewman. Light-foot's song notes the gesture at the "musty old hall in Detroit."

Rocked by 145 kmh gusts and nine-metre waves, the 222-metre ship lost both radars and relied on radio directions from a trailing freighter, which lost sight of the Fitzgerald when the ore carrier sailed blindly into a snow squall.

The Fitzgerald, which vanished without an SOS, rests 162 metres below the lake's surface, 27 kilometres northwest of Whitefish Point, Michigan. The crewmen's bodies are believed to be entombed inside the ship or on the lake's floor on the Canadian side of the border.

Some family members are lobbying Canada to declare the Fitzgerald an official gravesite, off limits to future explorations. At least one scuba team claims to have visited the shipwreck briefly, and relatives fear others will follow as underwater technology improves.

A coast guard investigation concluded the ship sank after losing buoyancy from cargo-hold flooding due to ineffective hatch covers.

Others believe the ship hit a shoal that damaged its hull, or that the vessel had structural failure and broke apart.

About this time each year since, Ingalls holds a memorial service for the Fitzgerald's lost crew, for whom the bell there still tolls 29 times.