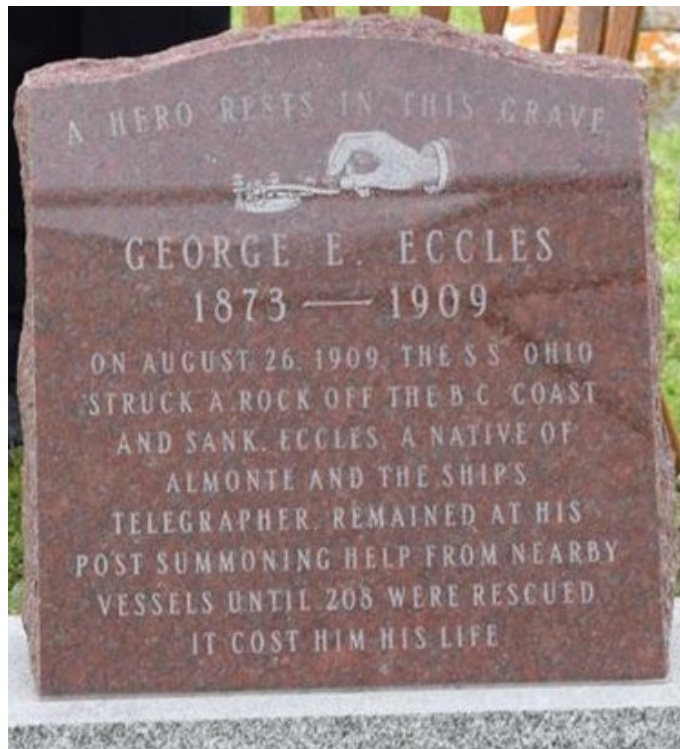


A Long-Dead Wireless Operator, George E. Eccles, Gets A Headstone -- A Century Later

By Bart Lee, K6VK, A Fellow in History of the
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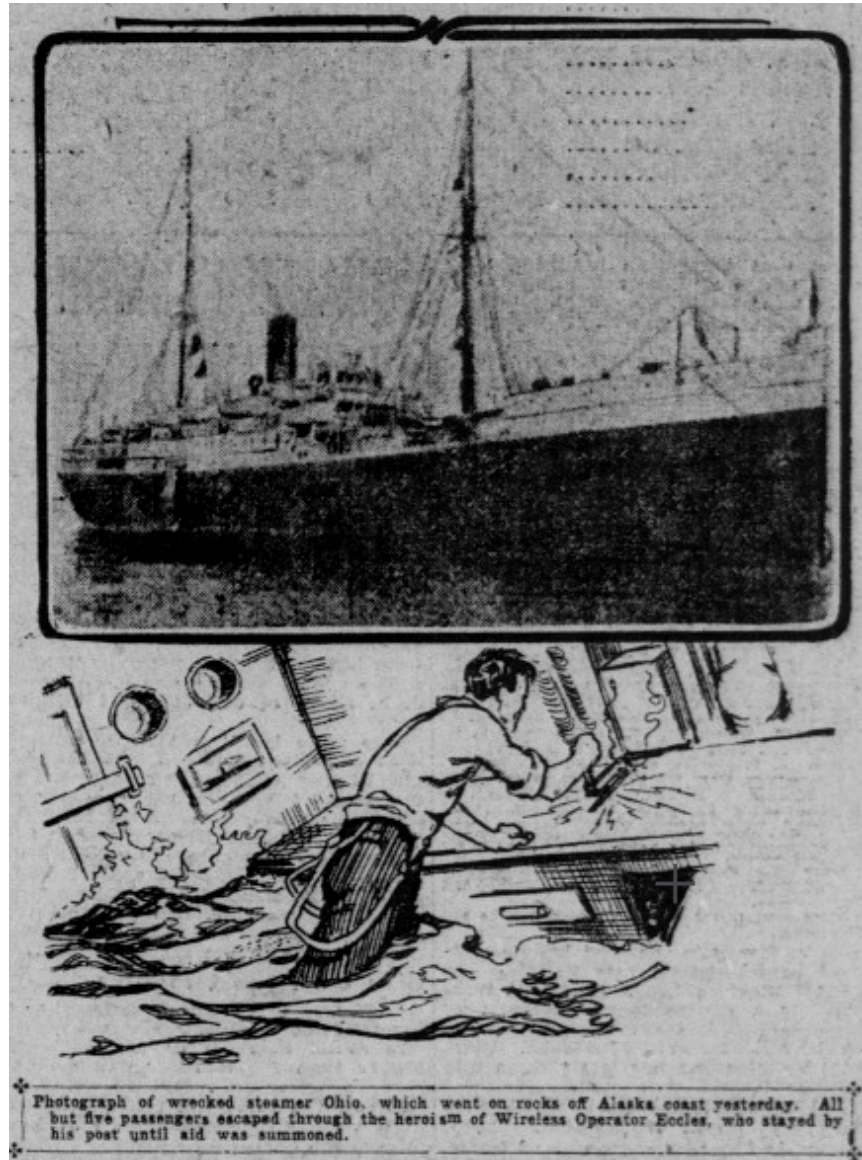


George C. Eccles, a United Wireless Marine Operator, Died in 1909 a Hero Saving as many as 208 Lives. In 2018, his Canadian hometown erected a memorial to him. Personal failure and tragedy as a railroad man had sent him west to make a new life. He redeemed himself by saving the lives of more than 200 people, sending the wireless telegraphy messages from his sinking ship that brought rescue. Then he tried to save one last man, and as a result of this last personal heroism, he died at sea.

The dramatic story of this hero and his death in Alaska appeared within days in *The San Francisco Call* newspaper (as follows, transcribed):

WIRELESS OPERATOR IS HERO

Gives Up Life to Save All on Ohio



[Caption] "Photograph of wrecked steamer Ohio, which went on rocks off Alaska coast yesterday. All but five passengers escaped through the heroism of Wireless Operator Eccles, who stayed by his post until aid was summoned."

ILL FATED SHIP SINKS UPON REEF

Wireless Operator's Tragic "C.Q.D." Warns Nearby Steamers of Distress

Great Hole Smashed in Bow and Vessel Sinks in 100 Feet of Water

George E. Eccles Stays to Call Aid While Passengers and Crew Escape

Remains by Instrument Until Assured of Aid From Passing Vessels

Meets Death While Hurrying to Rescue of a Soldier Lost in the Hold

Special Dispatch to The Call

SEATTLE, Wash., Aug. 27. — That all but five persons aboard the steamship Ohio, which sank 250 miles south of Ketchikan, Alaskan, last night were borne, to safety has been conclusively established by A. Z. Washburn, chief operator of the United Wireless telegraph company.

"While I have no specific Information bearing upon individuals other than those who were drowned" said he tonight, "there can be no question but that the passengers were transferred to the halibut steamer *Kingfisher*, the *Humboldt* or the *Rupert City*. The latter will reach Vancouver late tonight, and we expect to pick up a wireless message by midnight giving the personnel of the list of passengers rescued from the Ohio. The *Kingfisher* landed its passengers at a nearby port on the extreme southeast coast of Alaska this afternoon, but it is the understanding here that they were mostly steerage passengers, consisting of laborers en route to Alaska."

Hero Binns Outdone

George E. Eccles, the wireless telegraph operator who went down with the ill fated vessel, performed deeds of heroism beside which those of Jack Binns, who achieved fame in the wreck of the liner *Republic* off Nantucket six months ago, pale into insignificance.

After summoning help, until, he was assured that the *Rupert City* and *Humboldt* were en route to assist the *Ohio*, Eccles directed his attention to the rescue of the passengers. Learning that one of the soldiers had not been transferred to the lifeboats and that he was probably lost in the lower part of

the vessel, Eccles and Purser F. J. Stephens went below in an effort to find him.

The rapidly filling vessel was all but submerged when they abandoned the search. Stephens was caught below decks and it is expected his body still lies in the sunken wreck.

Eccles was cheered by the occupants of the lifeboats as he appeared on the deck and he was urged to leap overboard. As he did so his head struck a timber, his skull was crushed and he sank to rise no more.

Had Resigned Post

Eccles resigned from his position with the Ohio, last week, but was persuaded by Chief Operator Washburn as a personal favor to make one more trip, and his willingness to accommodate his friend cost his life.

[Text corrupt ...] in view of the fact that he was discharged by the Canadian Pacific railroad for carelessness and inefficiency while a train dispatcher on that road four years ago. He had worked 35 hours without sleep and was responsible for confused orders that resulted in a headon collision.*

Leaving his wife and child behind he disappeared from Winnipeg and came to Vancouver. Later he located in Seattle and from here he went to Alaska, where he was employed on the Copper River and Northwestern railroad. He then accepted the position with the Wireless telegraph company and was stationed on the Ohio.†

He was offered a position with the Alaska commercial company last week at a better salary and resigned. After consenting to make this trip, he intended departing immediately for his new position. He was 39 years old, exceedingly popular with his associates and conceded to be an exceptionally expert operator.

* Archivist's note: One fatality reported.

† Archivist's note: His wife and child reportedly rejoined him in the West.

Strikes Submerged Reef

The Ohio sailed Tuesday with 131 passengers and a crew of 82 men. It struck a submerged reef that rises out of deep water[‡] and sank in nearly 100 feet of water. It was built in 1873 at Philadelphia. The vessel carried \$220,000 insurance.

It was at 1 o'clock in the morning that the Ohio crashed into the rock that brought its destruction. Almost the first man to respond to the danger signal given by the crash of the impact was Operator Eccles. Clad only in his nightgown he rushed to his station and dispatched to whomsoever might pick it up the "C.Q.D." or distress signal.

Somewhere not far distant were the steamers Humboldt and Rupert City, both of them equipped with the United wireless service. The call for help, "C.Q.D." "C.Q.D." came flashing through the night and aboard these two steamers. It meant that somewhere, not far distant, a steamer was in distress.

Flashes Broken Off

Then came the name of the vessel and its location. Almost instantly the Humboldt and the Rupert City had started toward the scene, when suddenly the wireless men on the two ships found that they had "lost" the Ohio.

This ominous indication led to the belief that they were in danger of being too late, or that the operator on the Ohio had deserted his post. Developments showed, however, that Eccles had played the role of hero, to the end that he sacrificed his own life in an effort to save the lives of others. With Purser Stephens, Eccles was among the first to aid the other officers of the vessel in calming the distracted passengers, so that order might be maintained and great loss of life prevented.

While Eccles was flashing out through the blackness of night the appeal of the stricken ship, boats were being lowered and passengers and crew made safe therein.

[‡] Archivist's note: Reportedly, an inland marine pilot had the Conn.

The greatest speed possible in transferring those aboard the vessel was necessary, as the fatal impact had torn so great a hole in the bow of the vessel that there was no hope of its remaining afloat for longer than a very short time.

It was still dark when the lights of the Humboldt and Rupert City appeared in answer to the signal of Operator Eccles, who, in the meantime, had gone to his death.

The passengers and members of the crew of the wrecked vessel were then transferred to the rescuing steamers.

Company Gets Report

A brief report received tonight by the Alaska steamship company from Captain John Johnson says:

“Ohio struck rock 1 a. m., August 26, off Steep point. Afterward ran her toward shore in Carter bay. She now lies submerged in six fathoms forward and 12 fathoms aft. Purser, wireless operator, quartermaster, one steerage passenger and one soldier missing. Ship damaged on port side on bottom. Some bulkheads are gone. Impossible to say the extent of the damage. Captain and four men are standing by the wreck. Passengers and crew were picked up by fishing boat Kingfisher and landed in Swanson bay. Send instructions to Carter bay.”

Messages received from Ketchikan, Alaska, state that George W. Perkins' private yacht Yucatan left there this morning and will stop at Swanson bay to pick up Captain Johnson and the members of his crew who are still there.

Wireless Flashes News

The United Wireless, one of whose operators perished in the sinking of the steamship Ohio, received an account of the disaster from Operator Booth at Ketchikan late today. Booth says in a dispatch to headquarters of the company here:

“About 1 a. m. I was sitting with my receivers clapped to my ears, having just finished working with Operator Eccles on board the Ohio, when

I was startled by hearing him call: ‘C.Q.D., C.Q.D.’ I Immediately answered and he sent the following message: ‘Ohio struck a rock, steamer sinking; send aid immediately or everybody will be lost.’

“The steamships Humboldt and Rupert of the McKenzie Brothers steamship company happened to be near and they both called the Ohio, asking for her latitude, Eccles gave it immediately, and the Rupert flashed back that they would change their course and stand by the Ohio as soon as possible.

“Meanwhile Eccles sent another message saying:

““Ohio sinking fast — can not hold out. Passengers are being taken off in small boats. Captain and crew will stick to the last.’

“The Humboldt and Rupert both replied that they were headed for the Ohio and would pick the passengers up. Then came the final message from the stricken vessel. It was never finished: ‘Passengers all off and adrift in small boats.’ it said. [‘]Captain and crew going off in the last boat; waiting for me now— goodbye.’[§]

“I was unable to get him again and knew he had gone down with his ship.”

Roster of Passengers [The names of many of the 132 saved, noted individually by the newspaper, are here omitted^{**}]

Vessel’s Coast History

The Ohio made its first appearance at this port May 5, 1898, as one of the vessels sent around from the Atlantic side to reap the transportation harvest that followed the Klondike discoveries.

The Ohio made six trips to the Philippines as an army transport, and since 1901 has been in the Seattle-Alaska trade.

[§] Archivist’s note: Some reports say this messaged ended with “My God, I’m —”

^{**} Archivist’s note: The Captain (above) reported three crew members and two passengers missing, one a steerage passenger and one a soldier. The names of steerage and military passengers did not appear in this or other reports of the wreck.

The Ohio is a sister ship to the ill fated Indiana and to the Pennsylvania, which was recently bought by the Harriman interests for the Pacific Mail and Panama service. [33]

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The foregoing is an edited and corrected OCR transcription from the *California Digital Newspaper Collection, Center for Bibliographic Studies and Research, University of California, Riverside*, <<http://cdnc.ucr.edu>>
<https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SFC19090828.2.9&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-----1>

Three graphics follow:

The only readily available picture of George E. Eccles:



Source: Newspaper accounts of the events.

The SS *Ohio* before the sinking:



The wreck of the SS *Ohio*, sunk in Alaska inland waters:



On the Pacific Coast through 1914, seven wireless operators died in sinkings and wrecks, “lost at sea at the post of duty”:

1909 George E. Eccles, SS *Ohio*

1913 Lawrence Prudhunt, SS *Rose Cranz*

1913 Donald C. Perkins, SS *State of California*

1913 Walter E. Reker, SS *Admiral Sampson*

1914 Harry Fred Otto, SS *Francis H. Leggett*

1914 Clifton J. Fleming, SS *Francis H. Leggett*

1914 Adolph J. Svenson, SS *Hanalei*

Sources: Wireless Operators Monument, Battery Park, New York; VWOA 1992 & Society of Wireless Pioneers archives, as noted in Lee, A CHRONOLOGY OF WIRELESS AND RADIO ON THE WEST COAST (Perham Foundation, 2006).

We are grateful to W. Williamson, Archivist for the Radio Officers Association, for a recent article on George Eccles and these events, as edited by David Barlow, G3PLE, Curator of the Lizard Marconi Wireless Station in Cornwall, UK, and published in the Poldhu [Cornwall, UK] Amateur Radio Club GB2GM Newsletter (99/1) March, 2019, for reminding us of the heroism of Marine Radio Operator Eccles, and that of other early Pacific marine wireless operators “lost at sea at the post of duty.” The photograph of the wreck of the SS Ohio comes from that newsletter, as do some of the details in the archivist’s notes above.

(de K6VK, 05 III '19, v2) ##