Interview with Dennis Powers, author of *Taking the Sea*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Dennis M. Powers, who is here to talk about his new book, "Taking the Sea: Perilous Waters, Sunken Ships, and the True Story of the Legendary Wrecker Captains."

Dennis Powers is an avid historian of nautical life. He is the author of "Treasure Ship" and "The Raging Sea." He previously joined me in 2007 to talk about his book, "Sentinel of the Seas," about lighthouses and particularly the St. George Reef Lighthouse located off the California coast. He spent five years meticulously researching this subject. Today he is back to tell us about more fascinating nautical tales with his new book, "Taking the Sea."

Tyler: Welcome, Dennis. It's an honor to have you join me again. I really enjoyed our last talk and all the history and colorful stories you told us about the St. George Reef Lighthouse. I'm sure you won't disappoint me by having some interesting stories for us today. To begin, I want to ask you just why you chose the name "Taking the Sea"?

Dennis: For centuries, ships were our trucks, buses, and trains but over oceans, lakes, and rivers. Vessels filled with people and goods continually slammed into reefs, were thrashed by storms, and rendered helpless by strong currents. I became awed by the stories of these shipwrecks, the courage, and the epic salvage efforts by the wreckers. In near unbelievable storms and settings, these salvagers saved people and ships by "taking the sea."

Tyler: Would you explain to us just what a "wrecker" is?

Dennis: Wrecking was the term for captains and seamen, who for a cut of the goods saved, rescued people, salvaged goods, and saved ships—hopefully in that order—when they came upon a wrecked vessel. By the mid-nineteenth century, these intrepid, reckless groups of men ruled the ocean and made their living by rescuing ships in distress and raising sunken ones, even in the face of monstrous waves and fierce conditions.

Tyler: Can you give us some history of wreckers and how they originated?

Dennis: Wrecking as a livelihood dated back to the rugged coastlines of Europe, which had been a haven for wreckers and smugglers, and needy villagers followed stricken ships in the hopes of improving their lives a little. Immigrants to the United States brought along these traditions, and wreckers in the nineteenth century even built the town of Key West in Florida. When ships foundered, the first mariner on the scene—from a flotilla of streaking schooners—was designated the master of that wreck and ran the operation. Salvors later received their cut from a share of the auction proceeds or "in kind." Residents of Key West estimated that one-half of the wealth and fine goods, such as the bottles of champagne and the best clothing, came from the wreckers.

Tyler: Were wreckers commissioned to do this work, or were they really pirates, or a little bit of both? Was there a fine line to distinguish between what was legitimate work and what was scavenging?

Dennis: There was a fine line between what was fair or not. Salvagers would race to a wreck and negotiate with the captain over their "fee" to save a vessel and even its passengers. When doing this, the ship's master was at a distinct disadvantage. One salvager calmly looked down the barrel of the captain's gun and still received the deal he wanted. Another skipper complained about why his vessel had grounded; the wrecker simply shrugged his shoulders and said he didn't care, adding, "You and I" are here because of it." Abuses happened: goods disappeared on their way to the dock; captains and wreckers conspired over a wreck; salvagers misled a master over how bad his ship's condition really was.

Laws, courts, and insurance companies over time changed this to negotiated bids and written contracts. This rough-and-tumble world became regulated and eventually matured by the 1900s into a competitive business for hire. The heyday of these wrecker captains was then when steamships and schooners ruled this country's byways.

The United States had its share of stand-out salvors from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific and Great Lakes, including Captain T.P.H. Whitelaw on the West Coast. These "modern-day" wreckers were about salvage—not plunder. They saved put together ventures to refloat sunk or beached ships for a fee; or they might buy the salvage rights to what could be saved. *"Taking the Sea"* traces the journey of these legendary men through the story of Captain Whitelaw, the premier ship salvager of his day (1847-1932).

Tyler: I understand you focus especially on Thomas Whitelaw. What makes him standout among the wreckers of his era?

Dennis: Whitelaw saw firsthand as ships and their designs changed. He and his crews pulled tall-masted sail ships from reefs, refloated steamers whose hulls had been slashed by rocks, and salvaged schooners from the bottom of bays. I discovered that over time he became a large ship owner, in addition to owning huge maritime used-parts lots.

Whitelaw had arrived in San Francisco at age sixteen with twenty-five cents to his name. By age forty-five, he was extensively engaged in mining and real estate ventures, operated a stock ranch of 43,000 acres, and had accumulated substantial holdings of land. He was an avid reader of the Greek classics, a self-taught philosopher, and literary genius. Internationally recognized, Whitelaw was now called "The Master Wrecker" and "The Great Wrecker of the Pacific." Ranging far from his San Francisco base, Captain Whitelaw's ventures ranged from Mexico to the Bering Sea and different countries called on him for his expertise. His counterparts on the East Coast such as Captains Merritt, Chapman, and Scott rose also into prominence, and their stories are an integral part of this book.

Tyler: From the book, I understand that wreckers often helped people on ships in distress. Can you tell us how this happened? Was it by accident or did they come to the aid of ships that were sinking or in danger?

Dennis: Wreckers did both. If anyone happened upon a ship in distress, he was entitled to a substantial reward for saving that vessel. Ship captains and even passing-by fishermen would try to rescue someone because maritime law allowed such rich payments. By the time the industry matured, however, most of the rescues and ship saving was by well-equipped, far-ranging salvage firms that insurers and owners alerted to their needs and gave salvage contracts. Rescue vessels quickly steamed to the site with the equipment they needed—or thought they did.

Tyler: Dennis, what role if any did technology such as radio signals or communication from a ship in distress play in such situations?

Dennis: The ability to send out SOS signals was the final step needed to regulate the wrecking industry. Ships could radio precise locations and what was required; insurance companies and owners knew instantly what a problem was and could contact a salvager. The horrid conditions, however, still existed.

Tyler: In terms of raising ships, how was this done in the nineteenth century when I assume the technology was much more primitive and when even today attempts to raise ships have not been successful?

Dennis: Wreckers such as Whitelaw had to understand the incredible, combined powers of the winds, waves, currents, and tides that not only reduced the sturdiest vessels into piles of splintered wood, but also would be used to float a grounded or sunken ship. They used tide and wind changes, divers who nailed wooden patches inside and outside ships, air bags, and a combination of ingenuous methods. While the winds howled, seas crashed, and hulls cracked, he and his peers showed ingenuity in raising vessels from the dead.

Before technology developed, divers used hacksaws, axes, hammers, and saws in the darkness of deep oceans. By the early 1900s, wireless radio was in use, and divers were equipped with telephones and electric lights. Underwater workers used acetylene cutters instead of hacksaws; electric-powered generators replaced the old hand-operated diver air-supply pumps, and caulks and concrete inside steel hulls were used in place of hooks and wooden caps on the outside of wooden schooners.

Still, divers faced a very hostile environment and ship salvagers were at the mercy of great typhoons and hurricanes. The salvaging was still just as complex, even though their tools were greatly modernized. Even though they now utilized pontoons, powerful tugs, and strong steam engines on huge wreck ships to save sunken vessels, the conditions and risks were just as terrifying.

Tyler: Can you tell us of any rescue attempts by wreckers that failed or that went seriously wrong?

Dennis: The same dangerous seas and reefs confronted the wreckers as did the conditions that first caused the disasters—and these times are told. One account concerned an iron-hulled, full-sail freighter that grounded in the late nineteenth century off the Long Island coast. Although the people were safely evacuated, another fierce winter storm caught the wreckers onboard, and when even the wreck vessels had to leave for safe harbor, the savage gale caught the men without any escape routes. The monstrous waves and winds disintegrated the ship and twenty-eight of the crewmen died. In a daring rescue, however, rescuers saved four, who told the incredible stories of how they survived.

Tyler: The ship in distress that probably comes to mind for everyone was the Titanic. Do you know whether the ship that came to its rescue qualified as a wrecker ship?

Dennis: The *Titanic* sank before any rescuers appeared, and the *Carpathia* picked up all of the *Titanic*'s survivors. This ship and its captain were recognized by the U.S. Senate for their actions, but no monetary compensation was to be paid for rescuing the passengers. Showing how lawyers came onto the maritime scene, salvage attempts to recover the *Titanic*'s artifacts have always seen litigation. No meaningful recovery can be made due to the depth the ship sank—2-1/2 mile down—but since its discovery in 1985, every recovery expedition has run into legal problems from groups claiming these rights.

Tyler: What do you feel is the most dramatic or exciting story that you tell in the book?

Dennis: This is hard to say, because as one reviewer commented, "…There are plenty of interludes blending tragedy and triumph, and a few wondrous, death-defying finales." From raising a large, square-rigged ghost ship that had rolled over at her dock to being forced to leap from a disintegrating tanker, Whitelaw had various risky, almost "spiritual" experiences. And wreckers in these stories paid for their courage with their lives.

As to one, a four-masted, coal freighter had grounded off the California coast. Whitelaw was alone when the huge ship suddenly broke in half and forced him to leap for his life to one section. Rigging and heavy sails crashed about him—and only the railing cushioned him from certain death. Seamen found Whitelaw lying under the mess of canvas, thick poles, and splintered wood, miraculously unhurt.

In 1913, an oil tanker impaled itself on a rock. Whitelaw's crew placed inside a surgical "explosive device" that shattered the rock and used cement plus steel patches to seal the ship. When pulling the tanker from the reef, it suddenly sprang from the hawser's tautness straight at his wreck-ship. In a very close call, he avoided the collision, but then had to track down the out-of-control ship and rope it with a thick rope just like you would a steer.

Tyler: Do you have a story about wreckers on the Great Lakes? Were there any major differences between situations on the Great Lakes for wreckers compared to on the oceans?

Dennis: Yes—the book tells the tales about wreckers on both coasts and the inland seas. From the standpoint of horrid weather, numerous vessels running into extreme trouble, and danger at the depths, the Great Lakes had the same experiences as ocean-bound ships. Although rough waves can be office-building-sized on the high seas, the Great Lakes (the largest group of freshwater lakes on the planet) challenged every wrecker.

One story revolves around the *William C. Moreland*, which was a bulk ore carrier as long as two football fields. When it crashed onto a reef on Lake Superior, different salvagers tried to save the ship; however, the huge storms that rolled in nearly made this impossible. James Reid, a notable salvager, floated the longer stern section off, leaving the bow impaled on the rocks. Over a few years and after much expense, he finally towed the section for hundreds of miles and through the Poe Locks at Sault Ste. Marie, where a 300-foot, new bow was built and attached. The "new" 580-foot-long ship spent another fifty years in service.

Tyler: Dennis, would you tell us about the research you did in writing "Taking the Sea"? What did you find most difficult, and most fascinating about researching this subject?

Dennis: The writing of "*Taking the Sea"* required working with numerous maritime museum curators, librarians, experts, and researchers to forge the stories of adventure and courage. I tracked down files from the San Francisco Maritime Museum to the Columbia River Maritime Museum and into British Columbia. The most difficult research was I wanted to use Whitelaw as a centering device for the stories of the wreckers—and it was difficult to find anecdotes about the man. Then, I stumbled across the rare tapes of an entire afternoon of recordings made by his grandson that unlocked everything.

Reviewing the classic, old pictures of wrecks and the times were intriguing—and these are in the book. Additionally, the "odd" stories of salvage, such as the search for the $50,000 brick of gold, a sunken locomotive, and a Hart automobile "at the depths with a mind of its own," were equally fascinating.

Tyler: While Whitelaw is the central figure in the book, you mentioned above that you also found stories about the East Coast wreckers. Is there anything substantially different about their experiences on the Atlantic compared to the experiences of wreckers in the Pacific?

Dennis: I was able to use the stories on the Atlantic to complement those from the Pacific. Ships similarly mysteriously overturned at their docks, grounded while racing a competitor into port, and smashed into reefs. No matter where located, wreckers used similar approaches to save ships and cargo. East Coast salvagers also used wreck ships with powerful lifting derricks to reclaim smaller vessels, however, owing to the relatively shallower depths. And this is recounted.

Tyler: Dennis, how have the efforts to rescue ships changed since Whitelaw's day?

Dennis: With the sophisticated use of radar, GPS, doubled-hulled vessels, and better engine machinery, ship operations are much safer than before. Wreck tugs and ships are similarly better designed with these instant positioning and communication tools; helicopters are used to rescue and at times save goods. Even in these modern times with our technology, however, the basic conditions of bad weather, a ship in distress, and need to save lives are always present. Even now, octopuses and sharks still attack divers and salvors continually work in bitter cold and darkness. The dangers of the sea are still present and history gives us our guide.

Tyler: Thank you for letting me interview you today, Dennis. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information may be found there about "Taking the Sea: Perilous Waters, Sunken Ships, and the True Story of the Legendary Wrecker Captains"?

Dennis: My website, dennispowersbooks.com, at its home page displays some of the pictures, as well as a new theme composed by Justin Durban. The site also has two excerpts that show the action and hardships, as well as reviews, ordering, and contact information. The site additionally has clips, excerpts, and background information on my last three books—"*Sentinel of the Seas,*" "*Treasure Ship*," and "*The Raging Sea"*—which your readers should find interesting.

Tyler, it is my pleasure and I have always enjoyed working with you, Irene, Juanita, and the other fine folks at Reader Views. My best...

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