

## Remembering *MS Hans Hedtoft*

### **M/S Hans Hedtoft, the unsinkable ship, collides with an iceberg on its maiden voyage in 1959**

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As ships go, *MS Hans Hedtoft* was not remarkable, except that she was conceived with more than the usual heavy dose of idealism: “Now we can sail to Greenland all year round!” (Danish government official), launched with supreme confidence: “This ship means a revolution in Arctic navigation.” (Captain Poul Ludwig Rasmussen) and jinxed by the most unfortunate accolade ever bestowed upon a ship: “The safest ship afloat ... unsinkable.” (Danish press).

*MS Hans Hedtoft* sank on the return leg of her maiden voyage after encountering ice (reported iceberg but more likely growler) 37 miles south of Cape Farewell, Greenland on 30 January 1959. None of her 55 passengers and 40 crew survived and no wreckage ever found.

As disasters go, *MS Hans Hedtoft's* numbers are no more impressive than the ship itself, a quite ordinary freighter, 95 souls lost, 66 long years ago. So why tell the story? A look beyond the raw numbers offers two answers to this question:

First comes the crew and passenger names. A maiden voyage being a festive occasion, wives, children, entire families were aboard that fateful day: 8 Niensens, 7 Andersens, 7 Jensens, 5 Olsens, 4 Hansens, 4 Rasmussens, 3 Larsens, 3 Skaerbos. Nineteen were women, one of whom was Captain Rasmussen's wife and another his mother. Six children were aboard. One dignitary was aboard, Mr. Aage Lyngge who was one of Greenland's two representatives in Denmark's Parliament and who ironically had opposed the new winter shipping service project on grounds it was too dangerous. Huge casualty figures are impressive but abstract. In 1959 Denmark had a population of only 4.5 million, probably it was difficult to find a Dane or Greenlander who did not know someone who perished aboard *MS Hans Hedtoft*, so the tragedy was a national hurt.

The second part of the story behind this story is more technical and admittedly more conjectural and is offered up as starting point were another investigator to consider digging deeper regarding *MS Hans Hedtoft*. He or she should be fluent in Danish and would need unhindered access to all records because *MS Hans Hedtoft* might not have been quite so ordinary passenger / freighter as is commonly presented. This is explored further below.

### **A Ship to Unite Lacked Unanimous Support**

In the 1950s, as now, Greenland was Denmark's most distant overseas possession, making the proposed year-round shipping service by KGH (*Den Kongelige Grønlandske Handel*, The Royal Greenland Trading Department) the de facto national flag carrier. For an island more than five

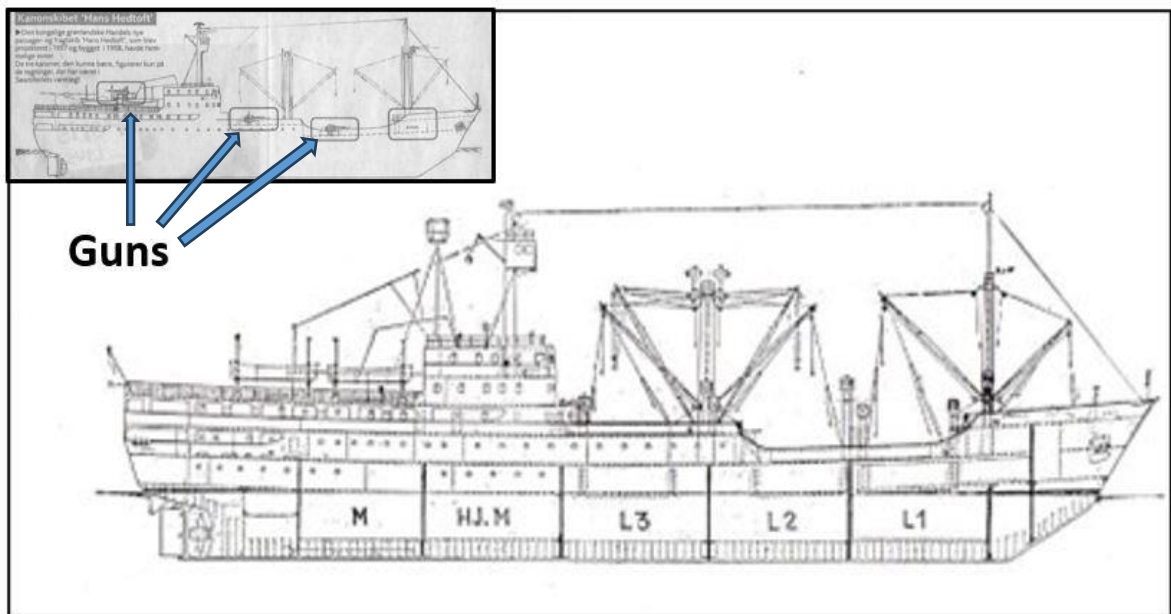
times the size of California with only 32,000 inhabitants, it must have been a time of exuberant new hope when KGH announced its plan, but all were not happy in Denmark:

Maritime unions and even one of Greenland's two representatives to Denmark's Parliament objected on the grounds of safety; even Vikings had not dared navigate Greenland's waters in winter time, and none since.

Private shipowner Knud Lauritzen who had pioneered Arctic cargo / passenger ships in the early 1950s was not pleased to see a government-backed monopoly entering the business by contracting with a shipyard to build a similar design to his "Dan" class vessels. He faulted *Hedtoft's* riveted hull as less able to withstand ice pressure, which some dismissed as the resentful words of a private operator who preferred the government to charter his vessels rather than constructing its own.



And finally, opposition came in the form of a political bombshell when it was leaked that the Danish Ministry of Defense had had *MS Hans Hedtoft* secretly fitted with armament in the form of three 3.40 mm anti-aircraft guns (inset below). Armament required Parliamentary consent which had not been sought or granted and of course it added costs that had not been accurately and openly disclosed.



After some murky explanations that included the ability to dispatch whale poachers in Greenland waters, KGH eventually received permission to operate *MS Hans Hedtoft* by agreeing removal of the guns and ammunition to an onboard storage locker. But less clear is how the weight of three guns, ammunition and reinforced gun foundations was included in the ship's

stability calculations, or if they even were, since the armament did not appear on all plans, nor in the ship's construction specification. As a percentage of light ship weight, the armament was not very large, nevertheless, it was high in the ship and raised the VCG, possibly so little as to have no noticeable effect, except for the fact that Captain Rasmussen commented upon arriving Julianehaab that on the voyage from Copenhagen *MS Hans Hedtoft* seemed a little more tender than expected. But he followed this statement by saying it was of no concern.

## Vision Realized

Despite the controversies, in august 1958 Frederikshavns Værft shipyard handed over tidy, compact, handsome passenger/ freight ship *MS Hans Hedtoft* to KGH.



General Characteristics	
Type:	Arctic Passenger / Freighter
Tonnage:	2875 GRT/1368 NRT / 1730 CDWT
Length:	82.6 / 271.2
Beam:	14.2 / 46.5
Draft:	6.3 / 21.1
Propulsion:	2860 HP 6-cyl. B&W diesel
Speed:	14.0 knots

The ship measured 82.6 meters (271 ft.) LOA, 14.2 meters (46.5 ft.) beam and 2,857 gross tons, with accommodations for 60 passengers in a single class, plus 40 crew, and a capacity of 1,730 tons of general cargo, much of which could be refrigerated for transporting frozen fish.

Accommodations were basic, as expected aboard a governmental department ship running an essential (and monopolized) service to a remote, sparsely populated territory. Passengers had a dining room, lounge, smoking / card room; cabins ranged from double berths to dormitories, all was furnished in Danish modern functional.

With double bottom throughout and seven watertight compartments, along with reinforced ice-breaker bow and armored stern, *MS Hans Hedtoft* was engineered for resilience and safety, equipped with state-of-the-art navigation equipment, three 35-person lifeboats, two 20-person motor launches and five self-inflating life rafts with capacity for 12 adults, all boats and rafts radio-equipped. International safety conventions were surpassed, sea trials were accomplished easily, *MS. Hans Hedtoft* was ready to go to work.

## Tragic Ending

KGH added final touches in fall of 1958 and on 7 January 1959 *MS Hans Hedtoft* departed Copenhagen on her maiden voyage, reaching Julianehaab, Greenland, in seven days. The trip was uneventful except for Captain Rasmussen's noted observation that the ship's roll period seemed slightly longer than he had anticipated. An aside that normally would have gone

unrecorded was that Captain Rasmussen received notification in Greenland that the ship's anti-aircraft guns and ammunition would have to be off-loaded immediately upon their return to Copenhagen. There is no doubt that the armaments were aboard, although locked away.

At 2115 on 29 January, *MS Hans Hedtoft* set out from Julianehaab on her maiden return to Copenhagen, loaded with 55 passengers and 40 crew, plus a cargo of frozen fish and three tons of crated records from parish registers in Greenland destined for the national archives in Denmark. The departure in darkness Thursday night was preferable to sailing on Friday, since antiquity considered bad luck by mariners and to be avoided.

At 0900 on 30 January, Captain Rasmussen radioed in that the ship had encountered a severe snowstorm that limited visibility to 1 nautical mile, reduced speed to 8-9 knots. But, by 1100, conditions were reported as clear with some ice floes, speed back up to 13 knots. At 1332, the ship reported in that everything was fine.

The 1332 message is the last routine communication from *MS Hans Hedtoft*. Over the next four hours communications were cryptic and increasingly urgent. To provide context, *RMS Titanic* sank in 2 hours 40 minutes, *RMS Lusitania* sank in just eighteen minutes however in both cases there were survivors to recount what happened. What the end was like for *MS Hans Hedtoft* is conjecture since none survived. Not a single body was ever recovered, nor was any flotsam and debris discovered that normally breaks free and pops to the surface from a wreck; only a lone life ring washed up on Iceland nine months later bearing witness to tragedy.



The following narrative constructed from *Hedtoft's* messages, from on-scene reports from the two ships that attempted rescue, and from meteorological data provides a best guess glimpse into the surreal terror endured by *Hedtoft's* ship's company that day:

1356 *Hedtoft* reported they had struck an iceberg 65 km (27 nm) due south of Cape Farewell. The radio operator probably used "iceberg" generically to include growler, a small berg that is no more than a meter or so in height, can be mistaken in poor visibility for much thinner drift ice and would not be picked up by radar.

US Coast Guard cutter *Campbell* and West German fishing trawler *Johannes Kruss* acknowledged the distress call and set course to assist. *Kruss* was closer and made radar contact but no sign of *Hedtoft* was found when they reached the broadcast position.

1400, only 4 minutes after reporting striking ice, *Hedtoft* reported her engine room was flooding. This indicates damage came from the ship's side.

1512 *Hedtoft* radioed they were "clearly sinking".

The more than one hour since the 1400 call was sufficient time to sound all compartments and "clearly sinking" means at least three watertight compartments had been breached.

Throughout the afternoon the main engine and generators would have been running at full output to operate pumps but as water in the engine room rose, electrical and mechanical equipment would cut out enfolding the ship in eerie quiet punctuated by the shrill of rising wind and occasional crescendos of wave-tossed ice smashing against an immobile steel hull.

A ghostly glow would emanate from the bridge windows where the emergency generator was powering lights and the ship's radio transmitter.

With no way on, *Hedtoft* would broach to, wallowing in deepening troughs as the wind speed rose above Beaufort 40 (USCG Campbell later would report winds were above Beaufort 50 with wave height 25 - 30 feet).

Every bit of spray touching frozen steel would freeze instantly increasing topside weight. And with each roll, the free-surface effect of water sloshing inside flooded compartments would further erode diminishing stability. Rolls were becoming longer and lazier.

1705 brought sunset. The sun had only reached 14 degrees altitude at noon, now gone. Winds and seas were increasing. In such conditions *Hedtoft's* crew knew the time for attempting to launch life boats had passed. Danes are no strangers to the sea; the passengers knew this too.

1741 came the last message from *Hedtoft*: "Sinking faster, in urgent need of assistance."

What transpired aboard a ship that was already dead but not yet surrendered will never be known. It is reasonable to believe able men frantically busted ice with whatever they had to preserve stability (and sanity). Other crew and passengers wearing heavy coats against arctic freeze, surrounded by friends and in some cases, families drawn close, likely sang in sober unison, *Der Er Et Yndigt Land*, or perhaps *En mægtig fæstning er vores Gud*.

The prayer whispered by all who travel was granted to *MS Hans Hedtoft's* company when the ship rolled and did not recover. It had not come quickly but it was absolute. An agonizingly long wait was ended.

***Den 30. januar er alle dødelige mænd og kvinder danskere!***