

Wilhelm Gustloff Museum – Survivor Account

Walter Salk

Twenty-one year old Walter Salk perished aboard the *Wilhelm Gustloff* on the night it was torpedoed. His niece, Rita Rowand from Virginia, USA has kindly agreed to share the personal details of his story with us. It is a moving narrative that reinforces the human side of this terrible tragedy – and the emotional impact it has on family and friends.

The letters truly tell the story by themselves – beginning with excerpts of Walter's wartime-censored letters to his parents back home in Essen-Altenessen. Despite work of the censors, one gets glimpses into Walter's feelings. It is obvious that the pressure is mounting as the Soviet Red Army closes in on the port town of Gotenhafen (Gdynia) – home of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* and the 2nd U-Boat Training Division.



According to Rita:

“Walter Salk was a seaman mechanic in the German Navy. He was stationed on the *Wilhelm Gustloff* in 1945. He had served on the *T.S. Murwik* where he met and befriended a young canteen worker named Christa Hausen.

I recently discovered a series of letters which documents Walter's last days on the *Gustloff* before it sank, and a poignant letter from Christa to Walter's mother, (my grandmother), inquiring as to his whereabouts. Because of only basic communications at that time, immediate notification of the sinking of the *Gustloff* was not evident.

On February 1st, 1945, a few days after the sinking, my grandmother wrote to Walter. This letter was returned to her and is part of the collection. I have translated some excerpts from the letters to tell the story of how this tragedy unfolded in one family's lives, and also have the notice from the German Controller of the Naval Document Centre, which officially notifies of Walter's death, after being listed as “missing” for over a year.

I know from my mother's accounts that my grandmother clung to a thread of hope that perhaps he was captured by the Russians and still lived in confinement, somewhere in Russia. But that was not the case, and the official notice from September 28th, 1946 concludes that since Walter was not one of the ship's survivors and it was virtually impossible that he could have been captured since no Russian ships were in the area around the time of the sinking to pick up survivors.

And now, here are excerpts from these very letters:

Gotenhafen, December 25th, 1944

My dear Parents!

Yesterday we had our holiday but I had duty from 7:00 am to noon, and then again from 20:00 to 21:00 hours... We were each given 10 cigarettes and 4 cigars. How is Inge (his sister, my mother) and Grandma (Oma) and Grandpa (Opa)?

Gotenhafen, January 3rd, 1945

My dear Parents!

Yesterday, I got your nice letter with all your lovely greetings and the 50 DM, of which I am very grateful...

Gotenhafen, January 8th, 1945

My dear Parents!

Yesterday, I got your letter from January 1. Thank you!

Gotenhafen, January 9th, 1945

My dear Parents!

I just want to thank you again for the money you sent. Its 23:10. We watched a film this evening at 20:00...

Gotenhafen, January 14th, 1945 (Final Letter)

My dear Parents!

...everything is as always. Yesterday, some comrades and I went out... I will be glad when I leave Gotenhafen, ... and get stationed somewhere else. I will let you know my new address. Now I must close, I have duty later...

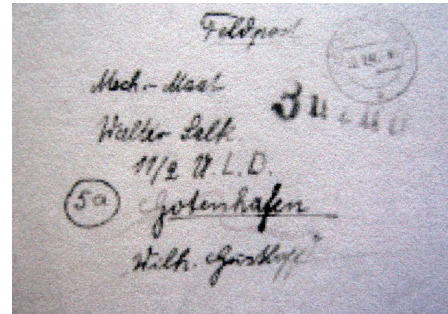
Your son, Walter.

Essen-Altenessen, February 1st, 1945
(Letter eventually returned as undeliverable)

My dear Walter!

I want to send my greetings to you. A lot has changed in the East recently. I am writing to let you know that Aunt Martha left on January 16th. We didn't hear from her until January 25th. She was in East Prussia and may not be able to get out. She was going to try and visit you. Maybe we'll hear more from her soon. Your father is feeling a little better, and Inge will be having her 17th birthday on the 9th of February. Send me your new address as soon as you know it. You are my good boy.

Heartfelt greetings and kisses from your Mother and Father.



Flensburg, March 8th, 1945. (From Christa)

Dear Mrs. Salk!

You will be surprised to get a letter from someone you have never met.

My dear Mrs. Salk, I would be very grateful if you could give me some news. I know your son very well, I was Canteen Helper on the *T.S. Murwik*. Walter and I became good friends.

Now, I have not received any mail from Walter since the 21st of January. Since he was living on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, and it was torpedoed, I am dreading that Walter was on board. Perhaps, Mrs. Salk, you can tell me if Walter still lives?

Walter told me shortly before he was repositioned from Flensburg, "If you don't hear from me, you will know I am dead." One of his friends gave me your address, and so I beg you dear Mrs. Salk, give me some information if you have gotten any news of him, and I would be eternally grateful.

With kind regards,
Christa Hausen

Warnemunde, December 18th, 1945

OFFICIAL NOTICE

With this list we notify you that Mech. Maat Walter Salk, born on September 29, 1923 in Essen-Altenessen on the ship *Wilhelm Gustloff*, on the high seas near Stolpmunde in the middle of the Ost See (Baltic), is officially listed as missing.

H. Brueggemann

Naval Document Centre
British Naval Headquarters
(Marine-Personal-Document Central
By British Marine Oberkommando)
(21 a) Minden/Westf.

September 28th, 1946

Ref. Nr.: Vd. 0232

Re: Whereabouts of Mech. Mt. Walter Salk, on the ship *Wilhelm Gustloff*.

Ref: Letter from Rudolph Dommasch, [ed.note: Uncle of Walter] of March 7th, 1946

Dear Mr. Salk!

It is my duty to give you the painful news that your son, Mech.Mt. Walter Salk was officially listed as missing since January 30th, 1945. He was stationed on the ship, KdF *Wilhelm Gustloff*. This ship was torpedoed by a Russian submarine on January 30th, 1945 and sunk. Your son was not one of the survivors to be rescued, so you must reconcile yourself that he is no longer among the living. The possibility that he could be in a Russian prison camp is extremely unlikely. Russian ships were not in the area at the time of the rescue operation.

Should you not have heard from your son by now, we officiate that he is legally declared dead and recorded as such in Hamburg.

German Controller
Naval Document Centre

Dedicated to the memory of Walter Salk
Born: September 29th, 1923 – Died: January 30th, 1945

Thank you Rita Rowand for sharing this touching story from your family history.
All photos are property of Rita Rowand.