

**USS Truxtun and USS Pollux
Disaster**

A local resident remembers the tragedy...

In the early hours of February 18th, 1942, 15 year old Adolph Jarvis was getting ready to go turr hunting. It was not yet daylight in Webber's Point and "you couldn't see a hand before your face" he remembers. When he saw flares in the sky he thought the war had reached our shores. The squall cleared and he could see two ships, one of them had come aground at Lawn Point's big head, the other at the middle of the point, but free (They had been there since 4 am, the Pollux aground, the Wilkes, damaged but standing by "until help comes").



He rounded up his first friend, Ken Roul, who has since passed away, and with encouragement of Jarvis' mother they set out for Lawn on his ox. All the men in Webber's were away at work in Salt Cove Brook. The Journey that normally took thirty minutes took them two hours due to the bucking gale force winds and the deep snow.

When they reached Lawn he told his uncle Andrew Edwards, who wouldn't believe him until they went to Lawn Ridge. When his uncle saw the evident - the Pollux fast ashore and breaking up - he "got a crew together" and set out for the scene to see what the local residents of Lawn rescued 140.

1942 – USS Truxtun and USS Pollux

On the night of February 18, 1942 three ships, the USS Wilkes, the USS Truxtun, and the USS Pollux were on route to the US Naval Base at Argentia, Newfoundland. At 03:50 on February 18, 1942 the Wilkes was the first to go aground. The Wilkes signalled the Truxtun and Pollux to “Emergency Stop” and broadcast “Wilkes Aground”. The Wilkes managed to back off the beach. The Truxtun and the Pollux were not so lucky for almost at the same time, the USS Pollux ran aground at Lawn Point and the USS Truxtun ran aground at Chambers Cove but unlike the USS Wilkes they could not break free. The 181 survivors of these doomed ships owed their rescue in large measure to the tireless, efficient and in many cases, heroic action of the people of Lawn and St. Lawrence, Newfoundland.

Pollux

Pollux was ready for sea May 1941, and served with the Atlantic Fleet on regular provisioning cruises. On 18 February 1942 Pollux and Truxtun (DD-229) grounded during a storm off St. Lawrence Harbour, Newfoundland, at Lawn Point and Chamber’s Cove respectively, and was lost. Only 181 survivors could tell o the fate of the 205 souls lost. At 04:14 on the 18th searchlights were sighted revealing land 2 points on the port bow. The Commanding Officer of the Pollux had just entered the bridge from the chart house, and immediately gave the order for full speed stern, hard right rudder, and sounding collision quarters. But it was too late and 3 minutes later the ship grounded. Realizing that she was hard aground and starting to go down slightly by the head, the Commanding Officer ordered full speed ahead to prevent the ship from sliding of and sinking in deep water.

Due to the extremely difficult surf caused by the gale raging in the Atlantic and the bitterness o the winter weather loss of life was heavy on both vessels. Heroic efforts to swim lines ashore failed due to the inability to handle them when they became oil soaked. Some o the crew attempted to swim ashore, many unsuccessfully. Finally lines with a boatswain’s chair were rigged to ledge and remaining personnel were conveyed ashore.

A first person account of the rescue written by the late Joseph Manning to Gerard Ryan, who had also been involved in the rescue operation.

Lawn
March 31, 1942

Dear Sir:

No doubt you will be surprised to get a letter from me. But I know you are interested in the entire goings on in Placentia Bay and especially the wrecks of the American ships that happened so handy to us and that you are after hearing so much about. Well I thought I would try and write and tell you about the USS Pollux which went ashore on Lawn Point and I am telling you from the time we got the report until we arrived home again. So you will be able to judge for yourself if Lawn doesn't deserve a little credit.

Well it was February 18, Ash Wednesday. I went to church as is the custom and came home and had breakfast and went up the harbour to clean up my skiff. While I was there, two young fellows from Webber Cove came along and told me that there was a ship ashore on Lawn Point and that they could see the sea between her and the land. So I argued with them that you couldn't see a ship ashore on Lawn Point in under that land as it was a bit thick and hazy. No time after we get a report that there was an American destroyer ashore at Chamber Cove, so then we came to the conclusion that the ship they saw from Webber on the west side o Lawn was a ship standing by the one in Chamber Cove and would shoot up around the point.

Anyway about two o'clock we got another report that there was a ship ashore on Lawn Point, but we had no foundation if it was correct or not and that would be a long journey on a fool earn as it is about ten miles by land and only four by water. So we thought it must be something to it so Jim and Tom Connors started off on foot to see I they could see her and I got the horse and said I'll go and have a look since I was going to her anyway. I took a new coil of rope, two hand lines, two cod jiggers, and an axe and started. Jim Son was with me and Fred Edwards. Well I drove to what's called Three Stick Ridge and I saw no signs of her. So I drive out towards the sea to try and bring her open if she was there at all. Well so I did bring her open – she was like a big island. I looked at her a little while and then I thought to myself if I was under that cliff I'd like for someone to come and try and save me. So I started by on my tracks. On my way back I met two

more horses and three men. So I told them she was really ashore and that we have to go, I had no food for myself or my horse, so I asked Grant if he had any food (that's Mrs. Grant's son) and he replied he just had a little lunch and very few oats for his horse. Well we decided on going, so I sent Jim Son home to look after my store, and Fred Edwards wasn't well at the time so he came home, too. But he had two pieces of brown bread in his pockets and he gave it to me – now that's what food I had. So we started for our journey, so I picked up Jim and Tom Connors on the path we had to drive all in around Little Lawn and up over that hill known as Break Heart.

On our way out, two more men with horses caught up to us. So that gave us eight men and five horses. Well it was a terrible climb out over that point and through woods, but I think it the first time in history that horses over went from Lawn to Lawn Point. It was a hard journey and not knowing if there was a man to be saved or not, and all our troubles was getting there before dark.

Well we are getting well out and I am the leading horse and I ran out on a hill and brought her open and I shouted back to the rest of the men that there wasn't a man alive on board. So they hitched on the horses and walked on. Now I had to go around a cop of woods to get to the rest of the horses, so that left me behind the rest, but Alfred Grant waited for me. So I took an axe, and when we broke over the hill one of our fellows is running back and shouting to bring the rope as the men were ashore under the big head, waving and shouting to us.

Well we went down and looked at some of them that were in a gulch. All crude oil and some poor fellows dying and more were diving around in the water. It wasn't nice to look at. Anyway they signalled to us that the main body of the men were outside in under the head. Well we went on what's known as the Big Head of Lawn Point. Twenty minutes after five in the evening and everything was in a sheet of glitter and you had to watch your steps. God only knows how high it is from the banks, but we had a fellow with us... knew the best places to go to the edge of the cliffs. So we rigged a loading line from the bank down to the cliff and then we got the rope down and started hauling them. I am sure that the cliff was one hundred and twenty feet or more, not counting the bank the cliff was over hung, and it was great for hauling them up and their life belt was a real slide runner.

When we had three up, two sailors and one officer, it was hedging to close in dark. So I took them and started to look for a cop of wood. I found one surrounded by hill. So I told them that's where they had to spend the night. They thought that I should go to the settlement with them. But I told them that the men had to come over the bank first and then we'd decide on what to do, not knowing that there was so many to be pulled up.

Anyway, I saw no chance of getting a fire going as everything was covered with glitter, so I thought on having some boards on my slide. I brought back the horse and got some board off the sled and when I arrived there was a Lawn man there who was working in St. Lawrence trying to get a few out of some of their life belts. I cut up the board and after a while got the fire going.

So then I began to look around to see who was there. There was one fellow from St. Lawrence there then and some of the survivors got him to go back to St. Lawrence with them. He wasn't much help to us anyway. I started for the cliff and I met another St. Lawrence man helping up the poor fellow to the fire. So when Gerard Ryan saw I was back, he asked me to take his place as outside man on the cliff, and just as he left the rope broke and I had to call for him to come back. We were trying to decide what we were going to do, and Gerard said "It's a good many down there" and he'll only make one more, so he took the rope and we lowered him down to get the other men.

After he put the last man on, he tied himself to the rope and we pulled him up safely. By that time we were all good and wet for the sprays use to go over the head and none of us had any oil skins on. I stayed outside man until Jim got after me and said that there were more men from St. Lawrence now with rubber suits on to take my place.

So we thought it must be eight or nine o'clock and someone had a time on them and it was a quarter to twelve. Well the night fled. Anyway, about two o'clock we hauled the captain and I just tell you we were some glad, our arms hauled out and our backs broken and starving to death besides. We had one fellow by the name of Jarvis who said, "My God how hungry am I," and he started to swear on the ranger and say that he should have a hundred men here tonight. The hunger we suffered was terrible, and we were expecting food to arrive from St. Lawrence all the time. But it didn't turn up until after we left.

Well, after we hauled the captain we went up to where the fire was and Jim stopped and looked at the men around the fire. He said I often saw the picture of the Pilgrim Fathers in books, but that was just like it. There were some lying down, more sitting and more standing with blankets over them. You couldn't get handy to the fire, you had to throw the boughs and wood right over them.

Now there were about eighteen men in Noghe Gulch to be pulled up yet, and we are pretty laggy. A few Americans and a couple of St. Lawrence men arrives, so an officer from the Pollux asked for volunteers amongst his crowd to go and save their comrades. They were pretty miserable and it was very hard work trying to bring them up that hill in blankets. It was some hard sight, bare-footed men and no boots on a winter night. It got so bad, the officer asked so often for volunteers. I called on all the Newfoundlanders to come and finish the job. So at 5 a.m. we had them on the cliffs and brought to safety. When that was finished after the night cutting, and it took more time to get it. So we decided we'd leave and try to get to St. Lawrence as it is only four or five miles, and it was twenty from home. We had to leave our axes with them to keep the fires going. We took six men besides our eight selves and started. We didn't know the country and we had no axes to cut our way clear if we come in contact with much wood. As we were about five minutes left, one of the fellows asked if it was much farther, so you can imagine how he was feeling. But we did it OK. When I saw Iron Springs shacks, I knew right where I was at as I have to go there to read the meters. So I didn't spare the horse although she was on the barrens all night without any food.

Well I arrived at Iron Springs (that's the mines in St. Lawrence) and I put my two fellows in. There were doctors and nurses there to do what they could for them. I drove then for St. Lawrence and got something to eat and Jim got some dry clothes as he was perishing with the cramps.

Now I forgot to mention, while we were hauling them up one fellow told us that five or seven (I am not sure) washed off the rocks. Well we arrived home at noon, all in and after having a hard night of experience. St. Lawrence got all the praise and credit for it first, but I don't think she's doing so well lately. Anyway, we didn't go out there for publicity or honour, we went to save life. And if we didn't arrive before dark, I don't think men would have attempted to go on that cliff to try to get a rope down as it was a terrible gale of wind along with the glitter.

Well they say the American government is wealthy, but they haven't got enough money to pay me to punch in another night like that unless it was to save lives. I am writing you this story so that if you happen to hear someone talking about it you will be able to talk to them as this is just as it happened. As for the one in Chamber Cove, I can't say much about. But some of our men played a big part there too. One fellow went in a dory with two of the men and saved the last two that was left on her.

But one thing I do know, that the mine shacks was a real life saver for them. No doubt St. Lawrence done all ever they could for the men, but they didn't do as much as they reported. Anyways, we credit ourselves for helping to haul up one hundred and thirty-seven men that night.

Well I could tell you a lot more, but I think I have done very good on this subject. If you see Val Manning, tell him that she went ashore outside of where they had their trap... The father and Shannie are quite well and I am plugging away at it myself, as ever. What the fishing looks like and what do you think of the war, now let me know what you think of this episode.

I remain
Yours Truly,

Joseph Manning