

# Newfoundland hospitality on steroids

*The secret wartime shipwreck that dramatically changed a community*

BY JENNIFER BAIN

**W**ith near-hurricane level winds coming from the northwest and menacing waves coming from the south, we have what's called "a contrary sea" as Carl Slaney grasps my arm on the way up a steep grassy hill to Chamber Cove to see the site of a wartime shipwreck. It's no wonder that a striking black and grey memorial monument perched on the top of the cliffs has been reinforced with steel to withstand the North Atlantic's fearsome gales.

The sun is setting over the Burin Peninsula and casting a warm glow on the memorial that stands where Newfoundland miners helped pull American sailors up the cliffs to safety when the *USS Truxtun* grounded in a fierce storm on February 18, 1942.

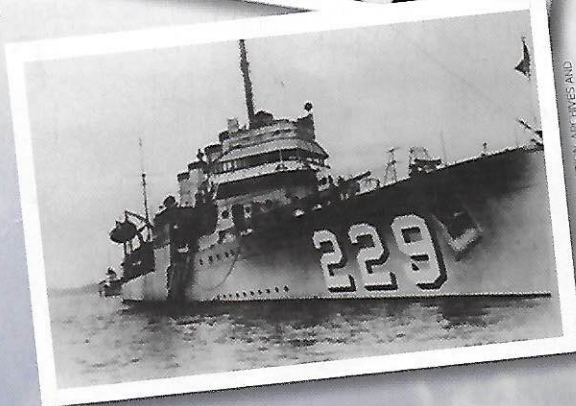
We can't see it, but at an even more remote spot along the barren, uninhabited shore, the *USS Pollux* met the same fate that day and triggered a second rescue. A third ship, the *USS Wilkes*, grounded just past the *Pollux*, but managed to free itself.

The people of St. Lawrence and Lawn saved 186 American sailors that terrible day, but another 203 men died. The memorial was unveiled in 2017 to

mark the 75th anniversary of the disaster. Overlooking the *Truxtun's* final resting place, it's shaped like a ship's anchor. The wings at its base represent the American bald eagle—the symbol of American pride. Viewed from a distance as a silhouette, the eagle wings look like two people kneeling to pray at the cross.

This is the story of a fishing community hit by the double blow of a devastating tsunami and the Great Depression, its reinvention at the hands of an American fluorspar mining company, a navy shipwreck that was hushed up, racism with an inspiring twist, and the working conditions that slowly killed the same miners who saved so many sailors.

"I'm embarrassed to say it, but I didn't know an awful lot about this story when I was growing up here," Slaney admits. "A lot of people in this community didn't want to speak of it. They would only say 'That happened. We got through it.' I personally think that in today's world, with a disaster that killed 203 people, there would be PTSD counselling."



■ Above: Survivors and rescuers the day after the disaster; the destroyer *USS Truxtun*. Only 46 out of 156 men aboard survived.

Below: Carl Slaney, of Laurentian Legacy Tours, stands at the Chamber Cove memorial dedicated to everyone involved in the *Truxtun-Pollux* shipwreck disaster.

St. Lawrence, population almost 1,200, is wrapped around St. Lawrence Harbour in Placentia Bay on the Burin. The peninsula's nickname, confides mayor Paul Pike, is "the Boot" and, "St. Lawrence is on the heel." Most people work for the fish plant (harvesting crab, sea cucumber and whelks) or the fluorspar mine. There's hope that a wind power generating plant will grow and provide more jobs. The town



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COLLIER CASSE BROWN COLLECTION ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY



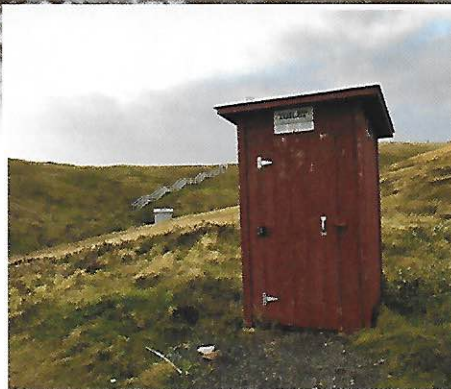
■ Iron Springs Mine, St. Lawrence. Several fluorspar mines operated until the late 1970s.

was once called “the Soccer Capital of Canada” for winning more provincial championships than any other town its size in the country, and the name stuck.

There is the Ocean View Motel, Em’s Takeout for fried chicken, Nanny B’s for fish and chips and hot turkey sandwiches, and Rita’s Kitchen inside the motel for fish and chips and the Greco Pizza franchise. Two churches, one Catholic and one Anglican, take turns holding a wreath-laying service every February 18 to commemorate the *Truxtun-Pollux* disaster.

Slaney is recently retired from a career as a welding inspector on off-shore projects. He volunteers with the St. Lawrence Historical Advisory Committee and just launched Laurentian Legacy Tours. For \$25, he will drive you to the shipwreck site and tell you the entire story, plus the area history, in minute detail. The tours are not meant to be a moneymaker, just a way to keep the story that fascinates him alive. At the end, he’ll deliver you to the St. Lawrence Miners’ Memorial Museum.

Through Slaney, I learn that St. Lawrence was a comfortable fishing town until a November 1929 earthquake off the Burin Peninsula triggered a tidal wave (tsunami) that hit the shore, wiped out the fishing infrastructure and destroyed the cod fishing grounds. It was the start of the Great Depression and people struggled to survive. Four years later, when an American entrepreneur started open-pit mining for fluorspar, people jumped at the work, not yet realizing the deadly toll that an unsafe workplace and poor



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ventilation would have.

The shipwreck happened during the Second World War, when a convoy of three American ships travelling from Maine to the US naval station at Argentia, NL crashed due to a series of navigational errors, bad decisions and terrible weather. The *Pollux* was a supply vessel. The *Truxtun* and *Wilkes* were destroyers sent along for protection. All three kept radio silence and travelled on a zigzag course through “Torpedo Alley” where German U-Boats were trying to disrupt supply lines between North America and Europe.

The ships were knocked off course by gale force winds, huge waves and a raging blizzard. All three “grounded” within minutes of each other and without being able to reach out for help or to warn the others. The *Wilkes* eventually freed itself. The *Truxtun* and *Pollux* weren’t so lucky.

Slaney drives me through town, past a sign to the Trails of Valour in Chamber Cove. Because it’s so windy and nearing sunset, we skip the 1.1-kilometre, carefully maintained trail that starts at the Miners’ Memorial Bridge, and instead drive on an old mining road as close as we can to the *Truxtun* wreck site.

Slaney tells horrifying tales of how the ship wedged between two rocks just offshore and spilled crude oil into the icy ocean. Two young sailors made it to



■ Left: The trail to the Chamber Cove shipwreck site is marked and even features wooden stairs and an outhouse. Above: St. Lawrence’s location on the Burin Peninsula.

shore, scaled the cliffs and found a fisherman’s hay shed so knew help was nearby. One man made his way across the desolate land and found a mine at shift change. The miners sprang to action.

This was the 1940s, before telephones and private cars were common (and before Newfoundland joined Canada) so the miners headed out on foot or horseback, with ropes, carts and sleds. The women gathered dry clothes, blankets, food, hot baths and warm beds.

Back at the *Truxtun*, many drowned in the oily water, some because they had not been taught to properly secure their lifejackets. Soon after the *Truxtun* rescue was complete came word of the *Pollux* grounding closer to the neighbouring community of Lawn. A second rescue spilled into the next day. Both ships were battered and destroyed, leaving only an underwater debris field today.

Because it was wartime, the United States didn’t want the world to know it had lost two ships. The sailors were quietly buried but disinterred after the war and taken to American cemeteries. For the Newfoundlanders, the trauma continued as bodies washed up on the shores for months. Slaney’s own father was sent by his parish priest to search for bodies as a boy. Until 1988, when St. Lawrence belatedly hosted the first reunion of miners and sailors, almost nobody talked about the tragedy.

Ena Farrell was an exception. She was 24 and photographed the aftermath of the disaster. When the US navy tried to seize her film, she defiantly refused. She waited to develop her



film and a year later her stark photos of corpses, coffins and wrecked ships appeared in newspapers around the world. She always talked openly and often about the disaster. “It was front row centre in this house,” remembers her son Rick Edwards, who spent teenage summers at Chamber Cove salvaging shipwreck copper and brass.

If people know anything about this shipwreck, it’s the poignant story of Lanier Phillips.

Violet Pike was part of a group of women cleaning up young soldiers when she had trouble with one man.

“My dear—I can’t seem to get the oil off,” she is quoted as saying in *Standing Into Danger* by Cassie Brown.

“That’s all right, ma’am. It won’t come off. My skin is black.”

Phillips was just 18 and had grown up in Georgia during segregation and the Ku Klux Klan, so he hated white people. He joined the navy ostensibly to escape racism but was relegated to mess attendant and forbidden from eating or sleeping with the other sailors. When Pike—who had never seen a black person before—brought Phillips home to nurse him back to health, eating meals with him and treating him like a human being, his world view instantly changed.

Phillips became the navy’s first African American sonar technician



■ Left: At the US Memorial Health Centre, St. Lawrence mayor Paul Pike sits in a nook devoted to the shipwreck story. Below: The bronze *Echoes of Valour* sculpture honours those who died in the shipwrecks and from the mining disease.



in 1957 and famously joined Martin Luther King at the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. He spoke often of St. Lawrence and received the Order of Newfoundland and Labrador. His story is immortalized in *A Change of Heart*, a children’s book by Alice Walsh, and *Life Lines: The Lanier Phillips Story* by Christine Welldon. St. Lawrence named a playground after Phillips. The mayor says he was “treated like a home-town hero” every time he returned up until his death in 2012 a month after visiting for the 70th anniversary of the disaster.

The Lanier Phillips story is given prominent space in the museum, where Cindy Edwards leads a tour that showcases the community’s complicated history of fishing and mining, and the tidal wave and shipwreck that changed everything.

For Edwards, the most bittersweet result of the *Truxtun-Pollux* disaster was the fact that the American government thanked the community by erecting the US Memorial Hospital in 1953. It was, according to a plaque in the lobby, meant to honour the brave Newfoundlanders, serve as a living memorial to those who died, and act “as a vital reminder of the inherent courage of mankind.”


But soon after the shipwreck rescues, the miners started to be diagnosed with silicosis, a form of lung disease from inhaling silica (quartz) dust during dry drilling. The miners also developed cancer from radon-saturated groundwater.

“That hospital was a gift for saving so many lives,” says Edwards, “but most all the miners spent their final days

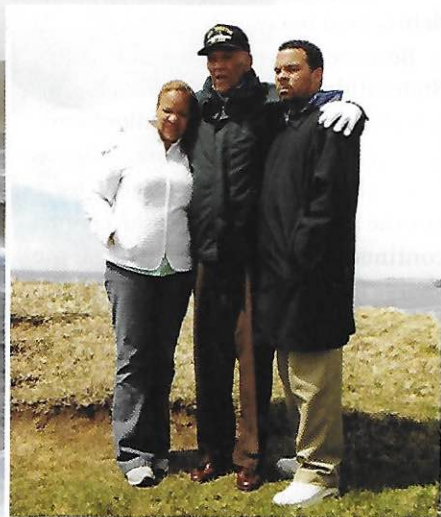
or hours in that building because of silicosis.” At the museum, Edwards has created a family-driven memorial room that names the victims of industrial disease, as it’s called here—400 so far.

On a happier note, because the ongoing story of St. Lawrence has ups and downs, the seasonal museum was created to give meaningful work to people with intellectual disabilities. They create jewelry and crafts for the gift shop from fluorspar, donated by the area’s newest mine, in a workshop with a state-of-the-art ventilation system and equipment run by water pumps so the dangerous dust settles in liquid and can be safely disposed of.

There’s a bronze sculpture outside the town’s municipal office called *Echoes of Valour* that honours the shipwreck and mine victims. I tell the mayor that this story about Newfoundlanders helping with one of the worst disasters in naval history reminds me of the community of Gander famously helping people grounded during the September 11 attacks—a moving story that has become a Broadway hit.

“We have a story that needs to be told on screen,” says Pike. “No doubt about that.” 

(Editor’s note: Saltscapes has previously told the moving story of the 18 year-old black American sailor, Lanier Phillips, in a poignant piece written by Rob Antle. It can be found on our website at [Saltscapes.com](http://Saltscapes.com)).



■ USS *Truxtun* survivor Lanier Phillips (centre) with his daughter Vonzia and son Terry at Chamber Cove, near St. Lawrence, NL. Phillips passed away in 2012, a month after this visit.