



USS TRUKTUN (DD-229)

USS POLLUX (AKS-2)

DEDICATED TO THE MEN AND WOMEN OF ST. LEONARD'S LARK AND SURROUNDING AREAS FOR THE DARING COURAGE, BRAVERY, AND HEROISM SHOWN BY THE OFFICERS AND CREW OF THE USS TRUKTUN AND THE USS POLLUX FOR THOSE WHO LOST THEIR LIVES AND WHOSE BODIES REMAINED UNRECOVERED ON FEBRUARY 12, 1942. *Their story will always be remembered in our hearts and minds.*

# A RESCUER'S TALE

**The last surviving rescuer of the *Truxtun-Pollux* disaster shares his recollections of that fateful day.**

BY LINDA BROWNE

IT MAY HAVE HAPPENED 80 YEARS AGO, but it's a day forever etched in 97-year-old Gus Etchegary's mind. It was the morning of February 18, 1942, and Gus, then 17, was sitting safely at home in St. Lawrence, on Newfoundland's Burin Peninsula, as a fierce winter storm raged outside. That's when he received a frantic phone call from his father.

While locals were sleeping, three American naval ships (destroyers USS *Truxtun* and USS *Wilkes*, and the supply ship USS *Pollux*) had run aground between St. Lawrence and nearby Lawn. It was in the midst of the Second World War, and they were travelling from Casco Bay, Maine, to the American naval base at Argentia in Placentia Bay. While the *Wilkes* was refloated some hours later, the *Truxtun* and *Pollux* (wrecked at Chamber Cove and Lawn Point respectively) would not be so lucky, leaving the sailors aboard to make an impossible decision: cling to the icy vessels being battered mercilessly by the pounding surf (and which, eventually, would be smashed to pieces), or jump into the freezing North Atlantic and attempt to swim to shore.

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**Left: The *Truxtun-Pollux* memorial at Chamber Cove.** *Linda Browne Photo*

One of those who did manage to reach shore was 18-year-old Edward Bergeron. Using a knife to scale the icy cliff face at Chamber Cove, and fighting against blinding snow and gale-force winds, he followed a fence along the coastline until he reached Iron Springs Mine, where Gus's father (the mill manager) and the mine manager were starting to plan the day's activities.

"They had three or four or five men around them... and out of the snowstorm came this guy," says Gus over the phone from his St. John's apartment. (It's December 2021 the day of this interview, and it's the first snowstorm of the season, with the howling winds and rapidly growing snowdrifts mirroring the weather of that fateful day eight decades ago.)

As soon as Bergeron explained what had happened, the decision was made to shut down the mining operations and start a rescue mission, with Gus's father and others alerting people throughout town. (They wouldn't learn the fate of the *Pollux* and her sailors until later that day.)

"I was home, of course, and he called and said, 'Get your friend,' who had a pickup, 'and gather as many ropes as you possibly can and get down here.' So I guess it was an hour after he called that we were down there. And the rescue operation went on for, I guess [until] 4:30 or 5:00 in the afternoon," Gus recalls.

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**The *Truxtun* grounded on the rocks in the middle of Chamber Cove in 1942. The beach is visible where most of the sailors were rescued and hoisted up by ropes to the top of the bluff.**



## CHAOS AT THE COVE

When he reached the site, Gus was greeted by a horrific, chaotic scene. Below, the bodies of several sailors bobbed in the frigid, oily water; while others, fighting against the wind and huge waves, clawed at the slippery beach rocks in a desperate attempt to reach the shore before the undertow sucked them back in. Several rescuers made their way down the approximately 250-foot cliff to the beach with ropes tied around their waists, and someone holding fast to the other end, in an effort to pull the sailors to safety.

close to an hour or more,” Gus says.

“These sailors, who could not be reached, they really had to make their own initiative and try to swim ashore under the very worst conditions. Many of them, incidentally, didn’t drown – a number of them were thrown up on the cliff and... were killed. So it was a terrible sight... Up on the hill, there were many, many, many miners with ropes that were pulling up the sailors, which was a very difficult job,” he adds.

“These guys, they were drenched, of course, because they were in the water, and they were covered with oil and they were in a pretty miserable state. You know, there was lots of heroism displayed on the beach by these young sailors.”

One who stands out in particular, Gus recalls, was a signalman who was rescued and brought near his fire before someone attempted to bring him up the hill to the first aid centre that had been

set up by the local women at the mine site.

“But he refused to go because there was only himself who could signal on the shore, and there was only one signalman left on board the ship, which was a couple of hundred yards away... that man died on the beach signalling to his friends who were still left on the vessel trying to decide whether they’ll jump into the North Atlantic water in February and try to



**Gus Etchegary shares his story while unveiling a painting by Nancy Molloy commemorating the disaster.**

*Cynthia Farrell photo*

“My father, who was at the rescue site along with these other men that were salvaging the survivors, he ordered me to start a fire. And that’s what I was involved in for the whole day, as the rescue operations were going on about 50 feet away. A lot of those sailors came in, and the fire certainly wasn’t any great help, but at least it was inviting to these guys who had been in the water for probably

save themselves, or stay on the ship. So, there was a lot of that happening because all these sailors, of course, most of them knew each other and they tried their best to save each other, as well as the rescuers on the shore.”

Even though he’s edging closer to his 100th year, the images from that day are still crystal clear for Gus.

“Many of my friends and relatives, and lots of those miners that risked their own lives... I can see them wading out in the roughest kind of waves lashing up on the shore to reach these young sailors,” he says.

“It would have an impact, a lasting impact, on anyone – even the seasoned individual who had been around for quite a long time. But to a 17-year-old who never [had] much suffering in his life, it had an impact for a long, long time.”

## ENDURING FRIENDSHIPS

Out of the 389 men on board the two ships, 186 survived. Perhaps the most well-known survivor is Lanier Phillips, a Black mess attendant aboard the *Truxtun* who was just a year older than Gus was at the time. Growing up in Lithonia, Georgia, where schools were segregated and the Ku Klux Klan paraded in the streets and beat Black men in front of their families, he carried that fear of persecution with him the day of the disaster.

“He thought, along with some of

his friends, that... they were actually grounded in Iceland, not Newfoundland. They had no idea where they were,” Gus says. And because Iceland wasn’t permitting Black sailors to go ashore at the time, “he was kind of scared of that,” Gus adds. So Phillips jumped onto a raft and hoped for the best.



**Lanier Phillips and Gus Etchegary in Charleston, South Carolina, during the commissioning of the newly constructed *Truxtun* in 2009.**

Once the local women attending to Phillips realized he was a Black man (after trying, in vain, to scrub what they thought was oil from his dark skin), they treated him no differently than the white sailors. This triggered an awakening in Phillips and encouraged him to rise above racism and reach his full potential. He later went on to become the Navy’s first Black sonar technician and became active in the civil rights movement, joining Martin Luther King’s historic marches. In 2008, Memorial University bestowed upon Phillips an honorary Doctor of Laws degree (the same year that Gus

received the same honour), for his capacity to rise above repression.

“It had quite an effect on him, for the rest of his life, and I can attest to this... he became a very popular speaker in various communities all over the United States actually, talking about the treatment and the change in his whole outlook toward life, as a result of the experience he had,” says Gus, who enjoyed many visits and conversations with Phillips over the years.

“We were close friends, right up until he died just a few years ago,” Gus says. (Phillips died on March 12, 2012, two days before his 89th birthday and one month after visiting St. Lawrence for the last time for the 70th anniversary of the *Truxtun-Pollux* disaster.) Today, that spirit of friendship lives on between Gus and Phillips’ son, Terry.

Over the years, Gus has kept in touch with other survivors and their families, exchanging Christmas cards and visits. This past summer, he and his wife received a very special visit from the six nieces of Lovira Wright Leggett Jr., one of the *Truxtun* sailors whom Gus warmed by his fire. They travelled from South Carolina to meet the man who helped save their uncle all those years ago and to view the site of the disaster.

“As a matter of fact, we had a Christmas card from them yesterday. They’re very nice people and we enjoyed having them,” Gus says.

While he may be a hero in their eyes, as the last living rescuer from the *Truxtun-Pollux* disaster, Gus remains humble about the role he played that day.

“My role in it was not all that great, and I still have visions of men risking

their lives. Many of them have passed on and their names were never published in any way other than the fact that they were generally included,” he says.



**Gus Etchegary and Lanier Phillips’ son, Terry Phillips, in 2017, at a play in St. Lawrence commemorating the 75th anniversary of the *Truxtun-Pollux* disaster. Terry’s father passed away in 2012.** *Cynthia Farrell photo*

“But the whole thing was a major undertaking in a small community, where something like that was just unbelievable in many ways. But I’ve always felt that... if the same event occurred in any coastal area around Newfoundland, you’d get the same sort of reaction from the people. It just so happened that it was in St. Lawrence and the people reacted as they were expected, as was their nature. But it also applied to many others over the years and centuries around this province.” 📖