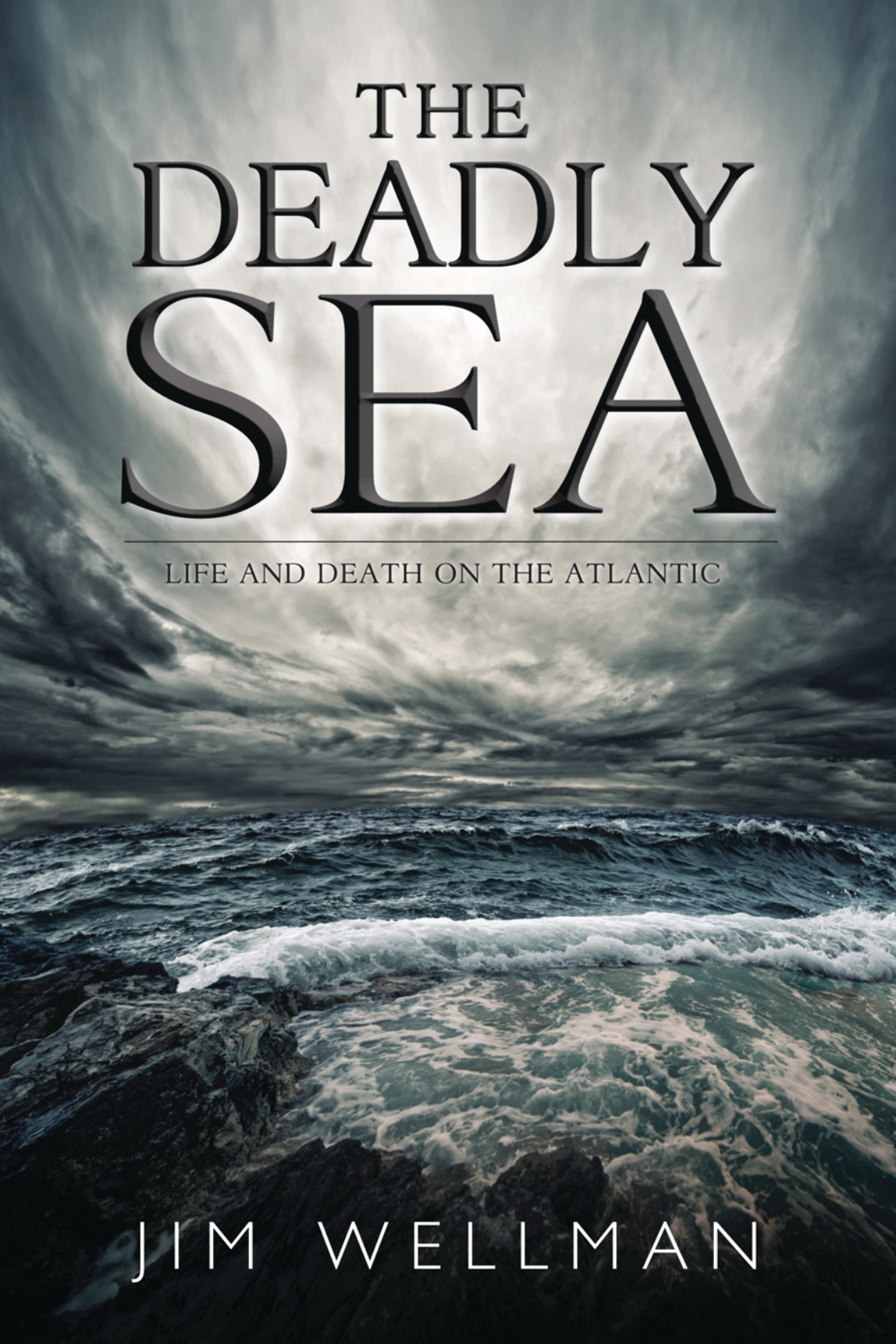




THE DEADLY SEA

LIFE AND DEATH ON THE ATLANTIC

JIM WELLMAN

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Life and Death on the Atlantic

JIM WELLMAN

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PO Box 2522, STATION C
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TELEPHONE: (709) 739-4477 FAX: (709) 739-4420 TOLL-FREE: 1-866-739-4420

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CONTENTS

Dedication and Acknowledgements	vii
1. Family Vacation Turns Tragic	1
2. It's a Family Thing	21
3. Like a Duck on the Water	27
4. The Fish Ladies	37
5. Salt of the Earth	49
6. Tabusintac's Troubled Year	55
7. The Woodmans of New Harbour	69
8. Privateers and Cutthroats	77
9. Hodges Cove Black Christmas	85
10. Ronnie from River John	103
11. Lady Luck Elusive for Springdale Skipper	109
12. Season of Small Mackerel	115
13. I Died Once and That's Enough	121

14. Beware a Greasy Sky	127
15. Working to Make Things Better	141
16. From Make and Breaks to Engines Big as Houses	147
17. Loss of the <i>Pubnico Explorer</i>	153
18. Addicted to Fisheries	163
19. The Memories Were All Made Here	169
20. Take Care of Your Mother	177
21. The Harbour Manager	183
22. The Last of His Era	189
23. The Worst Day of My Life	195
24. Fishing and Fancy Cars	205
25. A Big Gamble Pays Off	211
Index	219

DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A friend once said he thought that what I write about is very important.

I asked what he meant.

“It is extremely important that the stories of tragedy, rescue, courage, and bravery of our inshore fishing people be kept alive through stories like those you write. Otherwise, they would soon be forgotten and lost forever to everyone but the immediate family, and that would be a sad and terrible thing,” he said.

I reflected on his words, especially about the brave and courageous.

He was right.

People use the word “hero” a little lightly these days. It’s hardly heroism when someone rescues a kitten from a tree when, if left alone, the animal would likely have figured out the route to safety all by itself.

In some of the chapters you will meet some real heroes—ones who deserve great recognition and even medals of honour.

My friend's words made me realize that it's important to shine a light on some of the other very interesting people in the fishing industry: the people who build boats, who operate fish plants, and people like the two women you will meet in Chapter 4—they sell fish: fresh, frozen, or cooked—they are all important cogs in the survival wheel of the industry that was and still is, in many rural areas, the backbone of our economy and our culture.

This book is dedicated to all of them.

Once again, I'd like to thank the publishers of the *Navigator Magazine* for their continued support of my work by carrying these articles in their publication. Paul Pinhorn, Trevor Decker, and Rick Young have not only supported me but have constantly offered their encouragement to keep telling the stories of the amazing people in the fishing industry in all of Atlantic Canada.

And, of course, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to all of the people who allowed me to invade their privacy by asking them very personal and often painful questions about loved ones lost at sea. I have boundless respect for all of you.

Thank you all.

Jim Wellman
St. John's, 2015

THE DEADLY SEA

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CHAPTER 1

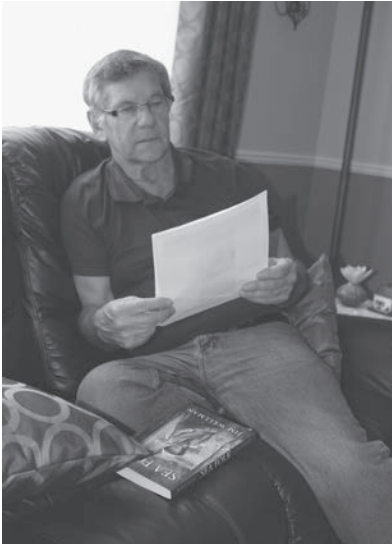
Family Vacation Turns Tragic

Loyola Pomroy was vacationing with his family at home in Placentia, Newfoundland, in July 1972. Loyola grew up on Merasheen Island but left home in 1965 to attend Memorial University in St. John's. He later got a job at a bank and in 1970 was transferred to Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Two years after Loyola left home, his parents moved from Merasheen to live in Placentia as part of the government's resettlement program, but his dad, Leo Pomroy, along with Leo's brother Pat, returned to the island every summer to fish. Merasheen was about a two-and-a-half-hour boat ride from Placentia, so Leo and Pat would go home to Placentia on Saturday evening to spend the weekend with their families and return to Merasheen on Monday morning.

Having lived in Halifax for two years, Loyola couldn't wait to include a visit to Merasheen as part of his summer vacation in 1972. While

planning a few days on the island, he thought how extra special it would be if his mom, his three younger sisters, and six-year-old brother could be there, too. It would be like a homecoming for the family. After some discussion, everyone grew more and more excited about the trip, and soon the list of family members grew to include an aunt, a cousin, a brother-in-law, and Loyola's girlfriend (now wife), Judy Snow.



Loyola Pomroy

Loyola arranged passage for the group to get to Merasheen on board the *Bertha Joyce*, a fish collector based in nearby Arnold's Cove. National Sea Products operated a fish plant in Arnold's Cove and had vessels that travelled to various fishing communities around Placentia Bay, including Merasheen, to collect fish from fishing crews and bring it back to the plant for processing. With no cold storage facilities in most of the communities, the collector boats made return trips

several times a week. Local fishermen and their family members often took advantage of the collectors to hitch a ride between communities.

On Monday, July 24, the Pomroy clan arrived at Arnold's Cove bright and early to join Captain Ray Berkshire, on board the schooner *Bertha Joyce*, for the trip across Placentia Bay to Merasheen, where they would spend three or four days roaming the meadows and cliffs of their beloved island. For Loyola it was another opportunity to spend a few mornings fishing in the trap skiff that he had spent many summer days working in with his dad during his teenage years. It was a great joy to

live life to the fullest back on the old homestead, away from the city and all the trappings that go hand in hand with the city lifestyle.

The family had a wonderful time enjoying the freedom of the open spaces of a twenty-mile-long island located in the middle of Placentia Bay, but all too soon it was time to go back home to Placentia.

Captain Berkshire notified Loyola that, due to the collector boat's schedules on Thursday, he would not be able to accommodate the family that day on the *Bertha Joyce*, but he would arrange with Captain Reuben Evans for them to join National Sea's other collector vessel, *Delroy*, which would be leaving Merasheen for Arnold's Cove on Thursday evening.

The evening weather on Thursday was about as good as it gets in Placentia Bay. The south coast of Newfoundland is renowned for fog in prevailing south and southwest winds at that time of year, but on July 27, 1972, seas were moderate with clear skies. The full moon allowed for excellent visibility even after dark, so, all in all, it would be a perfect evening for a boat trip across Placentia Bay.

Captain Evans and the crew of the *Delroy* had been collecting fish all day in various Placentia Bay communities and made Merasheen the last port of call, perhaps in consideration of the Pomroy family, so that their home port in Arnold's Cove would be the next stop. Just as the *Delroy* finished loading fish Thursday evening, the ten-member Pomroy clan boarded the vessel and settled in for the four-hour journey to Arnold's Cove.

As the *Delroy* pulled away from the shores of Merasheen, the Pomroy family gazed back for a last glance at the rocky shores of Merasheen and waved goodbye to the Pomroy brothers Leo and Pat standing on the wharf. Pat's wife, Nellie, was one of the group waving to her husband from

the deck of the *Delroy*. It was approximately 9:00 p.m. and getting dark, so the passengers began looking for a place to get comfortable for the next four hours. The *Delroy* was an eighty-foot schooner, built for work in the fishing industry, and not designed for passengers, so comfortable seating for ten passengers and five crew members was at a premium.

It was a fine July evening, so some stayed on deck for a while, but most of them found a place to sit in a cabin located just behind the wheelhouse, at the stern section of the vessel, directly above the engine room. A few of the adults played cards while Jean Pomroy, Loyola's mother, kept a close eye on her children, especially six-year-old Billy. Loyola and his brother-in-law, Ernie Pitcher, chatted with a couple of the crew before joining the rest of the family in the cabin. Loyola sat on a bunk with his back against a wall and eventually drifted off to sleep.

"The next thing I remember, my mother was calling me, saying there was a smell of smoke in the cabin, so I jumped up and ran out on the deck to see what was going on," he says.

Once outside, Loyola realized that whatever was happening must have been serious, because one or two of the crew, along with Ernie, were quickly removing things from a dory, situated on the starboard deck in front of the wheelhouse, and preparing it for use as a lifeboat.

"They were throwing stuff out of the dory as fast as they could. Some of it was landing on the deck and some of it was going overboard," Loyola remembers.

Still uncertain of exactly what was happening, Loyola ran back into the cabin just in time to see the engineer, Leo Bullen, grab a fire extinguisher and open the hatch door leading down to the engine room. That was when the situation went from serious to critical. As soon as the hatch door opened, flames came licking up through the hatch opening.

“I suppose it was the intense heat, but whatever it was, I saw the engineer throw the fire extinguisher through the hatch opening down into the engine room. He just threw it!” Loyola recalls.

With that scene playing out in front of his eyes, and then the sound of two or three explosions, it became obvious that it was time to get everyone off the burning vessel, and the quicker the better. But, as Loyola Pomroy soon discovered, much to his dismay, getting off the *Delroy* to safety was not going to be an easy task, if it was possible at all.



Delroy (Photo courtesy of Mac MacKay)

The entire wheelhouse and cabin were aflame as Loyola and others worked feverishly to prepare the only lifeboat on board the *Delroy*. The only lifeboat was actually a dory—it was designed as a work boat and not a real life-saving boat. However, the dory was large, about twenty

feet long, and could possibly hold fifteen people—a bonus considering that three of them would be children—but only if everyone could get on board the boat in an orderly fashion. With fire spreading quickly, now just a few feet from the dory on the deck, time was running out. It was too hot, and too risky for anyone to enter the wheelhouse and stop the engine, so the *Delroy* was left to steam along at approximately eight nautical miles an hour. With people in various stages of panic, scrambling from the burning vessel into a dory while the vessel was moving was not going to happen in an orderly manner. Meanwhile, the large dory was very heavy, and it took a lot of precious time to get it over the side and into the water.



Delroy (Photo courtesy of Mac MacKay)

Loyola jumped from the schooner into the dory, with the intention of having Ernie pass down the smaller children to him first, and then help the remaining family members over the side and, presumably, the captain and crew would follow. Despite the fear and confusion, fourteen people made it from the deck into the dory, while one crewman, Engineer Leo Bullen, stayed back to untie the dory from the burning schooner.

Loyola explains that after forty-two years his memory of some details of the unfolding events at that time have faded, but he does recall the scene as the engineer let go the painter (bow rope) of the dory and then ran to jump over the *Delroy*'s rail into the lifeboat.

“It was like slow motion. He let go the painter, and when he did the dory suddenly slowed down, so he had to run back from the bow to the stern to catch up and get ready to jump.”

Loyola is not certain whether the engineer actually landed in the dory or not. He doesn't think so because, at the very instant Leo jumped, the dory's stabilizing forces changed. The small boat was no longer attached to the *Delroy* and was now free-floating. The dory was probably capable of carrying fifteen people under normal circumstances, if all had been appropriately placed to distribute the total weight from bow to stern, but there was nothing normal about that night. It's possible that too many people had congregated to one side. Seconds after Leo untied the dory, it capsized, throwing all hands overboard.

At twenty-four, Loyola Pomroy was in the best physical condition of his entire life. A natural athlete, Loyola loved sports. In Halifax, where he was living at the time, he played hockey eight times a week, once every day and twice on Saturdays. His strength and good condition, combined with the fact that he was a good swimmer, contributed to the survival of six people that night. His physical and emotional strength would be tested to the limit.

Developing a rescue strategy that required making the most of every minute was crucial. With a mixture of men, women, and children, all but one without flotation devices of any kind, and nothing but an overturned flat-bottomed boat to try and cling to, survival would be almost impossible for some, if not all of them. Added to the challenge was the frigid water. Although July is usually the warmest time of year in Newfoundland, the northwest Atlantic Ocean was experiencing a wide-ranging cold period in 1972, and Placentia Bay temperatures hovered at just about three or four degrees above freezing. Besides the

initial shock to the body when suddenly immersed in near-freezing water, one's senses quickly become numb as the body temperature drops significantly. Decisions must be made before hypothermia advances to the stage where rational thinking is compromised.

Despite the odds, Loyola remained calm and took the leadership role in developing a survival plan. Herding those who surfaced near the dory to both sides of the overturned boat, he had them reach across the bottom of the dory and grip each other's hands. The closest two were his sister Carmel and his fiancée, Judy Snow. Captain Evans and his son, Clarence, climbed onto the bottom of the dory and tried to assist the other crew members in the water. Leo Bullen and one other crewman were soon alongside the dory. Because he was the last to leave the *Del-roy*, Leo had the only life jacket that anyone could remember seeing. It was old-fashioned, with flotation material in the front and back joined by straps.

"The crew members were doing their own thing and I was trying to do whatever I could for our family," Loyola says.

As soon as Carmel and Judy were safe, Loyola started searching for the others. It was dark, and although it was relatively calm, a small lop on the dark water made it difficult to see anyone, even just a few feet away.

"I sort of thought that I wouldn't find anyone alive at this point, especially the children, because they couldn't swim or anything," he says.

After what Loyola thinks may have been about four or five minutes swimming, he saw what appeared to be a black object that at first caused him some alarm.

"I recall thinking that it could be a shark," he says.

Despite his fear, he swam toward the object and was elated to find

it was his cousin, thirteen-year-old Marjorie Ennis, and she was alive, barely. Although she couldn't swim, Marjorie managed to tread water, and despite having gone under twice or more, she kept her head above the surface most of the time and hoped for the best.

Loyola swam his cousin back to the others at the dory and then set out to search for more family members, hopeful that, like Marjorie, some of them had held on long enough to be found alive.

But fate had other plans, and Loyola would soon be facing an emotional reality almost beyond comprehension.

After getting his cousin Marjorie situated safely at the side of the overturned dory, along with Carmel and Judy, Loyola swam back to where he had found Marjorie, hoping there were others in the same area. For several minutes he scanned the surface of the dark ocean, hoping to see something, all the while calling out and listening for a response. But there was nothing but darkness and silence. At length he saw something in the distance, but it looked too large to be a person. Swimming closer, Loyola realized that it was in fact two people huddled close together. They were unresponsive to his calls. Drawing closer, Loyola realized he was looking at the faces of his mother, Jean Pomroy, and his aunt, Nellie Pomroy.

"They were close together, and something tells me, although I can't remember for sure, but I seem to think they were holding on to each other's hands, I guess so they wouldn't drift apart," he says.

Both women were silent and still. They might have been dead, but Loyola couldn't be sure, and he knew he had to do what he could to try and save them. For a moment he was seized with anxiety about who he should start with, how he would choose, knowing that even if he could successfully revive one, precious survival time would be lost for the other.

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