

Stories of Peril and Rescue

**Tales of peril and rescue under
harrowing weather conditions**

Table of Contents

- **Caleb Elliott: A dedicated operator**
- **Snowbound! A family in peril**
- **Stranded on an ice pan! Rex Saunders**

Caleb Elliott School bus rescue



Figure 1 Caleb & Cornelia on their wedding day

A tie for every occasion

Caleb Elliott is a natty dresser, even at the age of 90. He says he has always worn a tie and has a dozen hanging in his closet. When he worked for the highways department he always wore a tie. He often wore a tie in the woods, and now when he gets up in the morning, the first thing that comes to mind is to put on a tie.

Mr. Elliott is also a humble man, and doesn't like anyone to make too much of his accomplishments or successes, although he is proud that he was able to be of assistance when called upon.

Born in Billy's Harbour

Caleb Elliott was born in Billy's Harbour, April 10, 1923 and turned 90 in 2013. His mother, Priscilla (Warren) Elliott, died of tuberculosis at the age of

29 when Caleb was four years old. He was the youngest of three; his two older sisters were Gladys and Dora. Gladys is 96 now and lives in St. John's and Dora is 92. His father, Bertram Elliott, remarried, and there were six children from the second marriage. Unfortunately, Caleb's father Bertram eventually succumbed to the disease of tuberculosis as well.

Winter Tilts

People in Cook's Harbour often moved to Billy's Harbour in the fall and returned to Cook's Harbour in the summer. Billy's Harbour was in the woods; that's where people cut their wood and stayed for the winter. To his recollection there were 21 families in Billy's Harbour. Caleb's parents had a house in Cook's Harbour and a house in Billy's Harbour, but of course, they weren't like the homes people live in now. There was a school in Billy's Harbour but it only stayed open three or four months. Children who moved to Billy's Harbour didn't get much schooling in those years, and Caleb had very little education to speak of as far as schooling went. "Three parts of the year I never went to school; there was nobody to drive me."

From fishing to operating heavy equipment

Mr. Elliott married Cornelia Stevens, who was from Battle Harbour. She was working as a cook in the Orphanage in St. Anthony at the time. They had no children. Cornelia lived to be 79 and died in the year 2000.

Although he started out as a fisherman, he gave that up and went to work for the Department of Highways for 20 years, retiring when he was 60 years old. He drove the tractor, loader, and blower...anything to do with the roads. In winter he cleared snow, in summer he was out with the equipment spreading gravel. At the Highways Department he worked 12 months a year for 20 years. "And I always wore my tie," he smiles.

While he worked for Highways, he mostly worked in the Cook's Harbour area: from Burnt Head to Cook's Harbour. He says there was a highways camp at Burnt Head, six miles in from Cook's Harbour, where highways crews were able to stay in inclement weather.

When he worked for Highways, his usual route was Cook's Harbour, Wild Bight, Cape Norman, and Boat Harbour.

Commendations

Mr. Elliott resides at Shirley's Haven, and on the wall in his room there is a framed letter from the Minister of the Department of Transportation and Communications, commending Caleb Elliott for his foresight and quick thinking on the night of March 17, 1976 when the Cook's Harbour School Bus was stranded.

"It was St. Patrick's Day. I was sent down after the school bus, which was carrying between 25 and 30 students on their way home from school. The bus had broken down, and I went down in my loader to tow the bus, and towed her for at least three or four miles. I towed her up until I lost the transmission in the loader. I had got partway across the bog, and the transmission was gone, and there we was.

"The snow was so thick you couldn't see a thing; I wouldn't have got home that night anyhow. We were stranded from 2 p.m. one day and never got out of it until 7 p.m. the next night. As well as students, I picked up two men and four women on the road. I told them to leave their machines, and brought them aboard the bus. They were in their cars, and I knew they'd be caught all night; they weren't going to be able to get through. We had the principal's wife aboard, with a little girl a year old, so I had my thermos bottle of tea and a couple of buns, and I gave that to she.

"There was no heat on the bus because the bus was give out, but there were enough of us on the bus to keep each other warm. There was nothing to eat, but there were four or five bottles of liquor that the bus driver had for people up home. So when they got cold in the night, coming on towards morning, I gave them a drink. Cold liquor makes the body warm. So that's what we done. We had a flask with a big stopper on it, and we served the liquor in that. I kept a bottle of brandy and a bottle of whiskey for the next day if we never got home.

"I tended on everyone because the bus driver went to sleep after it got dark.

"Next day, the first thing that got to we was a snow boggan, and then the grader got to us."

Cal Diamond remarks:

Cal Diamond was working for Newfoundland Hydro in March 1976 when the school bus broke down near Cook's Harbour, and narrates the part he played in the rescue.

“A bus got stranded on the Cook's Harbour Road St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1976 with a crowd of youngsters aboard. Caleb Elliott was on the loader, but when his loader broke down he got on the bus. They called in from the bus and said they was caught. They were almost to the branch. They called Hydro because we had the machine; she had a three-foot track on her.

We left from St. Anthony and we got to the bus. We were the first to arrive there; nobody else could get there. They tried to get in from Cook's Harbour but it was too stormy.

We went from here in a Go Track—three of us. There was an RCMP officer with us that time in the ski-dozer, which was a machine with a small blade on it with wide tracks. We was two days before we got back to St. Anthony.

And there were girls on the bus with those short mini-skirts on. That was their uniform at school; grey skirts, dark jackets. None of them were prepared for the conditions.



GOVERNMENT OF NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

Office of the Minister

ST. JOHN'S

May 20th, 1976.

Mr. Caleb Elliott,
Cook's Harbour,
Northern Peninsula,
Newfoundland.

Dear Mr. Elliott:

It was with great pleasure as the Minister of the Department of Transportation and Communications that I learned from the District Superintendent of the Vinland Integrated School Board, Mr. R.B. Hancock, of your co-operation and concern during the night of March 17th of this year, when the Cook's Harbour school bus was stranded.

This kind of dedication and co-operation is indeed excellent public relations for this Department. I commend you for your actions and I sincerely hope that your dedication will be appreciated for many years to come by this Department.

Yours sincerely,

James Morgan, M.H.A.,
Minister.

c.c. Mr. B. Stratton,
District Director,
Deer Lake.

Mr. Richard Simms,
Dept. of Transportation & Communications,
St. Anthony.

Vinland Integrated School Board

St. Anthony

P.O. Box 419

April 6/76

The Department of Highways
St. Anthony
NFld

Dear Sirs:

On behalf of the Vinland Integrated School Board and the parents and students of Cook's Harbour, I would like at this time to sincerely thank the Department of Highways and commend them for their cooperation and concern during the night of March 17/76 when the Cook's Harbour bus was stranded. I would especially thank your employee, Caleb Elliott for his part in this ordeal. Mr. Elliott did everything in his power to keep the students cheerful and comfortable and undoubtedly made their experience as pleasant as possible.

Through the endeavours of concerned groups like the Department of Highways, the stranded students and their parents were very much relieved of fears and anxieties. More importantly, without this concern, a number of young people could have suffered very serious consequences.

I join with the Vinland Integrated School Board in commending the Department of Highways for its part in this entire matter.

Very sincerely yours,

R.B. Hancock
District Superintendent

RBH/jn

c.c. Caleb Elliott
Cook's Harbour

Snowbound!

A story about six people from Black Duck Cove, northern Newfoundland, who attempted to drive to St. Anthony and became snowbound in a March blizzard in the area between Big Brook and Cook's Harbour. Had it not been for the assistance of the Highways crew at Burnt Head—and in particular a man named Johnny Coates who just happened to discover a car antenna poking up through a snowdrift—they could all have perished.



Figure 2 Left: Barry was a little boy in 1967. Right: Jim and Barry Dredge survived a difficult ordeal in a March 1967 blizzard.

Millie is worried

It happened in 1967 and memories have faded over time, but nobody has forgotten the deep sympathy they felt for the little boy who was found lying unconscious at his mother's feet.

March in Newfoundland can be a month of sudden snowstorms, high winds and drifting snow. Nowhere is this more evident than along the highway that runs the length of the Great Northern Peninsula from Deer Lake north to St. Anthony. The peninsula is flanked on the west coast by the Gulf of St. Lawrence and on the east coast by the North Atlantic; in March, both are jam-packed with Arctic ice. There is nothing on that narrow peninsula of land to hinder the punishing winds that sweep across it. Even the trees along the western coast are dwarfed and disfigured by salt-sea air and wind-driven snow.

In the mid-1960s, Route 430 had just opened up a whole new world of travel on the Northern Peninsula. Instead of traveling by boat to visit friends and relatives, communities were now connected by a highway.

Roland Dredge of Black Duck Cove—a village located just south of the St. Barbe ferry—owned a brand new 1967 Mercury Meteor, a blue 4-door sedan with attractive chrome accents and plenty of interior space.



Figure 3 Roland Dredge owned a 1967 Mercury Meteor sedan.

On that fateful March morning, six people set out for St. Anthony in the new car: 20 year-old Jim Dredge, his mother Amelia (Millie), his 15 year-old sister Caroline, his five year-old brother Barry, and two friends of the family, Rowena Dredge and Marion Dredge. Caroline had a job interview at the old hospital and Millie was taking young Barry to see a doctor about getting his tonsils out. Rowena and Marion would spend the day shopping.

As she got into the car, Millie cast an anxious look at the sky and remarked, “It’s going to be a bad day.” Young Jim, eager to drive his father’s new car, scoffed and replied, “Nah! It’s not so bad!”



Figure 4 Left: Roland and Amelia Dredge. Middle: Caroline and mother (Millie). Right: Jim

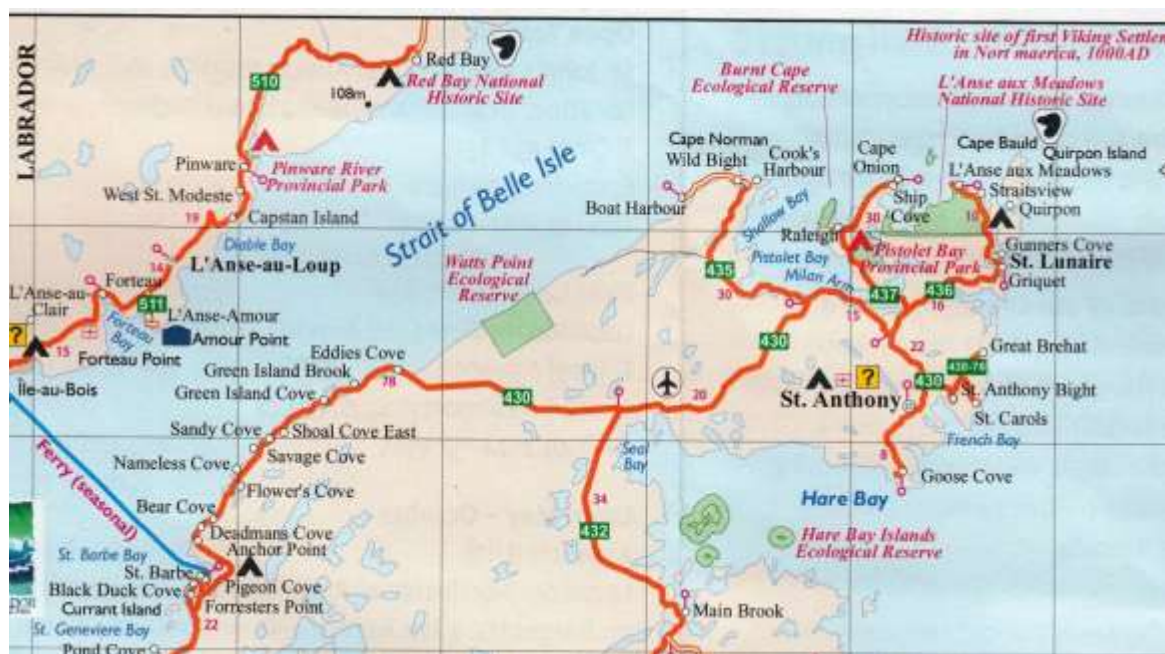
Caroline looked up at the sky. It was mostly blue, although a little flakey, meaning it was snowing a bit and there was some low drift but, in her opinion, there was nothing to be concerned about.

All the same, Millie was troubled, and the words she had spoken as she stepped into the car would prove to be a prophecy.

The old highway

A current Newfoundland map indicates that Route 430 follows the coast along the Northern Peninsula on its western edge as far as Eddie's Cove East, then cuts directly east, overland, before dipping south towards St. Anthony. In 1967 the old highway ran 'straight up the beach' towards Boat Harbour, then east to Route 435. It was along this road that the Dredges traveled. As they drove further north, fingers of snow, driven by a freshening southeast wind, began to creep across the highway. At Eddie's Cove East the weather grew menacing and just before Big Brook snow squalls blew in, fast and furious. The windshield wipers were no match for the pelting snow.

At a place called Watson's Water they met snow-plow operator Ray Diamond. Ray had come from Burnt Head camp and was on his way to Big Brook in the plow. He advised Jim to turn around and follow him to Big Brook, saying they would not be able to make it to the camp, but the Dredges decided to press on in spite of his warnings. Later, Diamond would leave Big Brook in his plow to search for the party of six, but he would be forced back by the storm.



A current road map of the Great Northern Peninsula from Black Duck Cove (just below St. Barbe ferry crossing) to St. Anthony.

Farther up the road the Meteor ran into a drift and was brought up short just inside a rock cut. After a few minutes spinning his tires, Jim and the others clambered out of the car and pushed the car on either side, while a plume of black exhaust belched from the tailpipe. The car's snow-grip tires were no match for the drift and the Meteor embedded itself more deeply in the snow.

Eventually, wet and tired, they climbed back into the car and turned on the heater to warm up. Jim, in the front seat with his mother and five year-old brother Barry between them, wasn't sure what to do next. Caroline, in the back seat with Rowena and Marion, climbed up front to sit beside her mother, offering what comfort she could. The little boy, unable to understand their predicament, complained that he was hungry and thirsty, but the only thing Caroline had to give him was a stick of gum.

Suddenly, hope loomed up from behind in the shape of an oil delivery truck. The driver stopped and asked what he could do to help. He explained that company policy prohibited him from taking passengers, but he promised that he would stop at the Highways Camp at Burnt Head and send help. Seconds later the oil truck vanished into the drift.

A short time later, the storm unleashed its full fury, winds howling and snow falling heavy and wet. Jim routinely got out and kicked the snow away from the exhaust pipe. Inside the idling car the six of them huddled together with the heater running, listening to the radio and hoping they would soon be rescued.

The Highways Camp

The Department of Highways Camp at Burnt Head—then located at the intersection of old Route 430 and Route 435—was equipped with a cookhouse and a bunkhouse so that operators could stay all night during inclement weather.

During that March blizzard there were two shifts of men at the camp waiting for the blizzard to blow over so they could get out on the roads: the foreman, a couple of mechanics, a truck driver, two tractor operators, two snow-blower operators and two grader operators.

For the men who worked at the Camp, it was generally known that from Eddie's Cove East to Burnt Head, they could always expect heavy drifting, especially on the section of road from Lower Cove to Burnt Head, and there was always heavy drifting further north around Pistolet Bay. Operators were aware that anytime there was a blizzard, it wasn't unusual to find someone stuck in a snow bank somewhere along this route.

Lights in the distance

The stranded car, located in a rock-cut between Watson's Water and the Highways Camp, idled occasionally beneath its blanket of snow. Morning had turned to afternoon and afternoon into evening. Outside, the wind howled, and snow, drifting over the lip of the rock-cut above, deepened around the stranded Meteor. Barry whimpered with hunger and thirst; then he complained that he was too hot, and then he complained he was too cold. When he fell into a fitful sleep under the dashboard at his mother's feet, Rowena looked with pity on the little boy, murmuring, "Poor little doll. You must be cold." She shrugged off her long red coat and covered him.

It was into the long hours of the night when Caroline spotted blue flashing lights in the distance, and pointed them out to the others. They were overjoyed. At last the grader was coming to get them! They watched for a long time but the lights never came any closer and no rescuers arrived to dig them out.

Only one phone in Black Duck Cove

At home, Roland Dredge was a worried man. The flakey snow that had been gently drifting across the landscape when he said goodbye to his family had begun to drift in earnest. A southeast wind sprang up and clouds moved in, and heavy, wet flakes were soon driven almost horizontal by the wind's velocity. He was sure his family was in trouble; he had a 'knowing'

deep down inside that they were in peril. Elizabeth tried to calm her father but he would not be comforted. He had no car, and he knew snowmobiles were a poor bet in such weather; the storm was fully engaged and visibility was near zero. In desperation, Rol dropped by Ches Dredge's place and asked for the loan of his car, to which Ches replied, "Uncle Rol, I can't get in over that road. I'm blocked in with snow."



Figure 5 There was only one phone in the community

Not knowing where to turn, he strode down to the only shop in Black Duck Cove and asked to use the only telephone in the community, but after numerous tries he was unable to get through to the Highways Camp to let them know his family was stranded on the road. Wilfred Dredge, Elizabeth's husband, heard him repeat, "I have to get through to Highways somehow." He was back and forth to the telephone all night, but was unable to make a connection.

Turning to Elizabeth, his face tortured with grief, he cried, "They're all gone!"

Johnny Coates

Johnny Coates had grown up in Cook's Harbour; the son of George and Catherine Coates. He worked for the Department of Transportation at Burnt Head as a snow-plow operator. He was short and stocky; a bluff, friendly man who always had a joke to tell. It's been said that he was so tough you couldn't kill him with a maul. Johnny didn't mind being out in 'dirty weather', either, often donning a pair of snowshoes to walk a distance of three to five kilometers from Burnt Head to the highway to scout out where the roads were drifted in before taking the plow out to clear his route.

Morning had broken and the storm hadn't yet blown itself out, but sometime around noon Johnny set out on snowshoes to find out if snow-plow operator Ray Diamond had become snowbound, because he hadn't returned to the Camp. At the same time, he would check the condition of his route for heavy drifts.

He didn't find Ray Diamond, who had holed up for the night in Big Brook, but he found something else. In the mounds of drift, something slender, shiny and silver poked up out of the snow and glittered in the light of a pale sun. Johnny stepped closer and bent down to take a look, and what he saw startled him.

It appeared to be the antenna of a car.

The dawn of a new day

Rowena Dredge, slumbering in the back seat of the Meteor, awoke with a start. Groggy and disoriented, she managed to rouse herself enough to look up at the car window. She wasn't sure what she had heard; she wasn't even sure where she was or why she felt so queer. Then she heard a man's voice, as if from a great distance, ask, "Is anybody there?" She saw a hand wiping snow away from the window, and Rowena maintains to this day that God gave her the impetus she needed to put her face to the window in reply. She told the man that they had been caught in a storm and had been snowbound all day and all night. He motioned for her and Marion to roll

down the car windows so he could reach in and open the door, but neither woman seemed able to comprehend his instructions. Eventually Rowena managed to open the window a little, enough so that a little fresh air and snow blew in. The man peered in at the other passengers, called out to them, got no response and, shaking his head, told her he'd be back with help. Rowena's last memory was of the man trudging away on snowshoes; then she lapsed back into a fitful slumber.

A rescue party is formed

Back at the camp Johnny was quick to tell the crew that he had found six people stranded in a car under a blanket of snow and that they appeared were unresponsive. The men decided that to go by road would take too long; they knew they had to act quickly. Curling Laing had a snow-boggan and was accustomed to driving back and forth from Boat Harbour every day. Someone else volunteered their snow-boggan, too, and so, with blankets and ropes and sleds hooked on behind the 'boggans', Curling set out with Johnny, who would show him the way. They skirted the belt of woods between the camp and the highway and traveled straight on to the barrens. By the time they arrived at the car, Rowena Dredge, sitting in the back seat, had roused herself somewhat and was able to answer some of their questions.

Curling and Johnny dug out the car as best they could and decided they'd take those in the worst condition first. The mother couldn't be roused, nor the little boy who lay at her feet beneath the dashboard, wearing only long johns. The boy wasn't wearing his coat or boots, which was perplexing, and Curling noticed a trickle of blood running from his nose. Quickly, Curling and Johnny reached in and pulled mother and son from the car, wrapped them in blankets and tied them on the sleds.

Back at the camp, some of the other men helped carry the casualties inside, covering them with blankets.

Curling left again to pick up the next two. At that point, Johnny opted to remain at the Camp and, very likely, Wilfred Woodward accompanied Curling on the next two trips.

Back at the car, Laing noticed the driver's hands were clamped firmly to the steering wheel. It took some time, but eventually the two men were able to pry the young man's hands off the wheel, wrap him in blankets, and lash him to the sled. Next they loaded Caroline, who was unconscious and clad only in a dress and tights. She, too, was wrapped in a blanket and lashed to a sled. Then back to the camp they went.

Finally, it was Rowena and Marion's turn. They seemed more conscious than the others; perhaps there had been a little more ventilation in the back of the car.

What next?

The six bodies had been brought in and put in bunks, but the men at the Camp weren't sure what to do next. Had the casualties inhaled carbon monoxide fumes? Nobody was sure. Perhaps, in such a confined space with the snow blanketing the car, they had simply run terribly low on oxygen.

What they needed was a doctor.

There were RT sets at the camp, used for calling depot-to-depot, so a man at the Burnt Head camp contacted the St. Anthony depot, explained the situation, and asked them to contact the hospital. Not long afterwards a doctor at the hospital in St. Anthony was speaking to an operator at the Burnt Head Camp.

The doctor advised the highways crew to fill empty Javex bottles with warm water to place alongside their cold bodies and then told the men that the victims would all need oxygen immediately. There were no oxygen masks and no first aid kits, so they consulted amongst themselves and Don Field, a mechanic at the camp, came up with an idea. He had an acetylene torch that he used for welding; he could use that. The doctor told him what to do, and Don turned on the torch and set to work. He didn't give the casualties acetylene, of course; and the oxygen was under pressure coming out of the torch, but he was able to regulate the pressure. Don wasn't sure at first if he had the knack of it, but he waved the torch over their faces and hoped for the best.

A doctor is dispatched

The doctor in St. Anthony immediately made arrangements for transportation to the camp to tend to the victims. However, this would be a difficult mission. The roads were impassable—level with snow—and the snow was still drifting. Driving a wheeled vehicle was out of the question, so the doctor contacted the American Base and asked for the loan of a machine called a *Weasel*—also called a Go-Track by some—a tracked vehicle made to travel over difficult terrain when wheeled vehicles were of no use. The Americans gave their permission and the doctor traveled in the *Weasel* with Max Smith driving, accompanied by two volunteers from the American Site. Two local men, Cal Diamond and Ted Patey, both of St. Anthony, were asked to escort the doctor and his team to the camp. Diamond and Patey drove a Bombardier snowmobile; a large passenger vehicle with skis on front and tracks on either side.



Figure 6 A Weasel, left, and a Bombardier Snowmobile, right.

The rescue party departed, traveling mainly over the roads, which was a long and arduous journey with no stops for food or rest. When they reached the old airport the doctor called the St. Anthony hospital for an update. The hospital then called the St. Anthony Highways Depot, and the St. Anthony depot relayed the question on the RT set to the Highways Camp at Burnt Head: were the victims dead or alive?

“I’m not having no oxygen!”

Rowena Dredge awakened to see a young man with an acetylene torch hovering nearby. When he approached her bed she protested, “I’m not having no oxygen!” Don Field, only 21 years old at the time, grinned and replied, “It’s too late; you already got it used on you!”



Figure 7 Rowena Dredge and Barry Dredge in 2013.

Don continued to blow the oxygen over the six casualties’ faces, even though he wondered if it would do any good. Marion, Rowena, and Caroline regained consciousness, and then Jim came around. It took some time, but eventually Barry awakened and the group of men breathed a collective sigh of relief; they were particularly affected by what had happened to the little boy. Finally, Millie regained consciousness, and Don relaxed perceptibly. He wasn’t a doctor, nor was he a medic; he was only a mechanic, but the welding tool he held in his hand had done its work. All six casualties had recovered.

When the doctor’s phone call was patched through from the old airport to the camp at Burnt Head, they were able to tell the doctor that the victims had all recovered. At that point the doctor and his team, along with Cal Diamond and Ted Patey, turned around and headed back to St. Anthony. Their journey from St. Anthony to the old airport and back had taken the men 16 hours.

A final gesture

At the end of his shift, Curling Laing drove his snow-boggan home to Boat Harbour. It had been an exhausting day, but it had been a huge relief when the victims had all recovered. He showered and sat down to his supper, then headed down to Gerald Woodward’s store and bought food, drinks and sundries. He put the goodies into a bag and drove back to the Highways Depot to distribute the treats to the Dredge family. The kitchen at the depot had plenty of warm food with which to feed the family, but Curling just wanted to do something extra for the six people who had so recently passed through such an ordeal.



Figure 8 Caroline Genge and Marion Dredge 2013.

Black Duck Cove and a welcome message

Roland Dredge hadn't slept all night; he was certain he'd lost his family.

But then a message was relayed from the Highways Camp to the Dredge family: Millie and the children were alive and well, tucked into bunk beds at the Burnt Head Camp.

A day or so later, when Route 430 and most secondary roads had been cleared, Uncle Anthony White from Sandy Cove arrived at the highways camp in a big, blue Bombardier snowmobile, picked up his six passengers and drove them home. The Mercury Meteor was towed to the highways depot, and in the following week Jim went back and picked it up.

Deserving of awards

Tamsey Laing of Boat Harbour, widow of the late Curling Laing, declares that had this incident happened at any other place and time, rather than on the Northern Peninsula, the crews at the Burnt Head Highways Depot, and the men who set out from St. Anthony to affect a rescue, would have received commendations for their actions. Six lives were saved that day due to their heroic actions.

Epilog

Sadly, a few key players in this story have passed on: Roland and Amelia Dredge, Johnny Coates and Curling Laing. But, happily, the little boy, Barry Dredge, is now manager of the Shears Building Supply store in St. Anthony today.

Special thanks to the following contributors

Sam Elliott, who suggested the story
 Leonard Tucker, who assisted at every interview
 Barry Dredge, who was instrumental in supplying names, dates and snapshots.
 Caroline (Dredge) Genge of Anchor Point
 Elizabeth and Wilfred Dredge of Anchor Point
 Jim Dredge of Black Duck Cove
 Rowena Dredge of Griquet
 Cal Diamond of St. Anthony
 Caleb Elliott of Cook's Harbour
 Don Field of Deer Lake
 Everton Pittman of Pasadena
 Ed Penney of Cook's Harbour
 Stan Elliott of Cook's Harbour
 Tamsey Laing of North Boat Harbour

STRANDED ON AN ICE PAN



Figure 9 Rex & Irene Saunders at home.

St. Lunaire-Griquet is a small fishing village nestled amongst the cliffs of the scenic Great Northern Peninsula in Newfoundland. As is the case in many outport communities, fish harvesters often take to the icy waters in the spring of the year to participate in the near-shore harvest of seals to supplement their

incomes and put a little extra meat on the table. Such was the case of Rex Saunders, age 66, on Monday, May 4, 2009.

The day started well. The sun was beating down on a calm sea at 10:30 a.m. as Rex made his way out into St. Lunaire Bay, motoring through the ice pans that littered the bay in his 19-foot Seabreeze speedboat. The boat was powered by a Mercury 50-HP four-stroke engine. The wind was SSW, about five or six knots.

He got to the ice at about 11:00 a.m. but seals were scarce so he motored toward the Brehat Shoals and later, he veered toward the White Islands. Just before noon he spied a boat with three men, Ralph Pilgrim, his son Ambrose, and their friend Willie Pilgrim, about three miles off White Cape. Rex stopped his boat to enjoy a cup of tea and a sandwich with the men. After tea he steamed for about an hour and came upon a goodly number of seals lying on the ice. It was now getting so warm that Rex unzipped his floater suit down to the belt buckle to cool off.

When Irene called him on his cell phone at 3:30 p.m., Rex had nine seals in his boat and was ready to call it a day. Irene said that all the other boats were back in and it was time to come home. He told her, "I'm leaving now. I'm about four or five miles off White Cape. I've got a bit of ice to get through, so give me an hour." Rex snapped the cell phone shut and slipped it into his pocket, looking forward to a hearty supper and a hot cup of tea. Then he saw two seals on an ice pan and decided he'd catch them before heading back, and that's when everything went wrong. As he swung the boat around it ran up against a clump of ice, his cargo of seals shifted and the boat tipped sideways, dumping him into the icy water before it rolled over on top of him, cutting off all chance of staying afloat.

His last thought as he sank beneath the waves was that he should never have come out alone.

MONDAY

A day of sealing on the ice

Rex Saunders, son of Fred and Olive Saunders, was the second oldest of ten children and was born in St. Lunaire-Griquet. While still a boy his family moved to Main Brook where he attended school. He began making his way as a fisherman at a young age, both on shore and off, plying his trade on the Newfoundland and Labrador coasts. Over the years he worked as a fisherman, woodsman, and sealer. He married Irene Earle and they have five children and six grandchildren.

Rex had been fishing and sealing since he was a small boy and at the age of 66 it was hard to put the boat in storage and stay off the water. Men in northern Newfoundland are well up in their 80s before they stop providing for their families. It's a way of life that has endured for generations: they fish when they are able—hunt seals, moose, and wild birds—and lay up provisions in anticipation of the long, hard winter ahead.

Only a few months previous Rex had had a stent procedure done, but even that hadn't slowed him down much. Now, as he sank beneath the waves, he involuntarily gulped a mouthful of water and hoped, foolishly, that the stents they had put in during his heart surgery were stainless steel. On the heels of that thought followed the next—if he didn't save himself, who would?

Rex's floater suit, designed to keep him buoyed up, was working against him. It had him pinned against the bottom of the capsized boat. If he hadn't unzipped it to the waist, he'd have gone down with the boat but, because his shirt was open and some water had flooded in—reducing buoyancy—he was able to pull himself down and swim up underneath the capsized boat. He accidentally sucked in another mouthful of water. He spit it out and there went his false teeth. He tried kicking his boots off because they were dragging him down but they were so snug they wouldn't come off. Rex fought to stay afloat—just his chin above water—and gave up trying to kick his boots off.

He tried pulling himself up onto an ice pan, but it was too high, and the buckle on the floater suit kept catching on it, so he swam back to his boat and hooked his fingers into the tow ring. The stern of the boat was three feet above water, so he eased himself up onto it and hung on, but it wasn't long before the boat began to sink beneath his weight. When the boat bumped against an ice pan, Rex rolled onto it, glad to have something more secure beneath him. Less than ten minutes later his boat sank beneath the waves.

Rex took out his cell phone and opened it. Dead.

He knew his wife Irene would be getting worried because, on top of everything else he was a diabetic, but he figured she'd raise the alarm if he wasn't home soon and that was all he could hope for.

Irene raises the alarm

Back at St. Lunaire-Griquet, Irene paced back and forth in the house. It was six o'clock; well past the time Rex should have been home. She'd tried calling his cell phone several times with no success. Worried, she phoned Rex's brother, Wade, who dialled the Coast Guard in St. Anthony, and they said they'd get a few boats out as soon as possible. That, combined with a group of local volunteers, made up the initial search party. A patrol went out to Rex's last

known location and a group of local fishermen searched along the shoreline in the event his boat had drifted in, but there was no sign of the missing sealer or his boat.

There was a scheduled prayer meeting at the community church that evening and it didn't take long for the word to spread that Rex was missing. Soon a number of ladies had gathered at the Saunders home to offer prayerful support to Irene and to wait for word of Rex.

Launching an all-out search

When night fell an alarm was raised at the Canadian Coast Guard Maritime Rescue Sub Centre (MRSC) in St. John's. Given the circumstances of the case and Rex's recent medical history of open heart surgery, as well as diabetes, an exhaustive search effort was immediately launched involving a Canadian Forces (CF) CC-130 Hercules aircraft, a CF CH-149 Cormorant helicopter, a Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) ship, *Ann Harvey*, and two Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary (CCGA) vessels.

Not many hours had elapsed before Rex spotted two long-liners but they were a long way off. Then he heard the chop-chop-chop of the blades of a helicopter, the drone of a plane, and the hum of boat engines on the water. He was sure someone would find him by and by. When darkness fell he saw the lights of a helicopter circling the ice pans. Unfortunately the searchers were scanning the water rather than the ice pans. Another helicopter approached, but once again Rex could see they were focusing on the water. When the second helicopter circled, Rex stood on the edge of the ice pan and the rays of their search beams shone on the toes of his boots. Had they raised the beam another few feet, the light would have shone right in his eyes.

The wind turned northeast and with it brought rain, and then snow. Then it turned to freezing rain. Waves were hitting the ice pan and washing over him; Rex began to wonder if he would even survive till morning.

Then Rex remembered he had two rifle bullets in his pocket, so he took them out and began striking them together, hoping to set them off. But no, that was a foolish idea he realized; an explosion might blow his hands off.

He wrung out his wet socks and laid them out to dry. There was no water to drink, nothing except the ice to sit on, and no blanket to keep him warm. The salt water slapped against the pan of ice and he began to think about how thirsty he was. Far away the drone of engines and intermittent beams of light were consoling reminders that people were searching and that they cared.



Figure 10 An emergency strobe light such as this one might have alerted searchers to his location.



Plenty of time to reflect

Hunched on the ice pan trying to keep warm, Rex had plenty of time to think. The boots he hadn't been able to kick off when the boat capsized, were, in fact, a lifesaver. Without them, his feet would have frozen on the ice. He chuckled as he remembered that Irene hadn't been too pleased about the price he'd paid for them; she'd just about flipped. Usually when he bought a pair of rubber boots he paid no more than \$20, but two days before he had seen a pair of big, thick-bottomed boots at the local store and said to himself, boy, I bet they're really good. So he bought them and when he got home he said to Irene, "There must be something wrong with me to pay that much for a pair of boots."

"How much did you pay?" she asked.

"One hundred and eighty dollars," he replied.

"You didn't!" she cried. Of course, she had wanted him to return the boots but he had stubbornly refused.

But, standing on the ice pan, with the ⁱⁱvamps inside the boots keeping his feet fairly warm, he reflected that a pair of cheap rubber boots would have been a poor choice. Rex was thankful now that he hadn't returned the new boots, and figured his impulsive purchase was all part of a greater plan.



Figure 11 These thick-soled boots helped save Mr. Saunders' life.

"I'm a man of faith, so I called out to God, asking Him to help me. I knew my church family back home would be praying for me, as well as churches and people in the surrounding communities, because everybody knows everybody in northern Newfoundland. As the darkness deepened, I lifted my voice and sang the hymn, 'This Mountain Shall Be Removed.' I knew there

were long-liner skippers on top of their wheelhouses, driving through the snow and rain, navigating around the sea ice—so I sang louder in hopes they'd hear me—in hopes that God would hear me."

TUESDAY

Nothing but a gas can

When the morning sunrise streaked the sky it seemed to Rex as if God hadn't heard his prayers, but a little while later two miracles of provision surfaced: the gas can from his boat floated up to the ice pan and the wind shifted a little and his small clump of ice bumped into a larger one which had pools of fresh water dimpling its surface. Now he had something to sit on and fresh water to drink!

Rex reached down and grasped the gas can, which was full of fuel, pulling it up onto the ice. He hadn't a single match to light a fire so he poured the gas out and used the plastic

container for a seat; it was much more comfortable than the ice. It had been a lifelong habit of his to carry a lighter and a pocket knife but he had been in a hurry that morning and had left them on his dresser in the bedroom. He shook his head ruefully. Of all days to forget!

Then there was his survival kit, which he kept stored in a water-tight bucket in a locker. In the kit there was a tarpaulin, flares, matches, flare gun, candles and a small propane stove with two green propane tanks, a wool cap, socks and gloves. He figured that if the boat had filled with water he'd have had time to reach into the cupboard and grab the bucket, but the boat had capsized and he'd had no time to grab anything.

He had served with the Coast Guard Auxiliary for 25 years and knew all about emergency preparedness. The orange floater suit he was wearing had been issued to him by the Coast Guard. The suit had a special pocket for a strobe light for emergencies just like this. Again Rex shook his head sadly; he'd stored the strobe light in the survival kit instead of in the special pocket where it should have been.



Figure 12 Rex's was wearing a survival suit similar to this one.

Then there was the cell phone. If he'd kept it in a watertight container it would've still been working. He held up the useless phone to the sun, hoping that it would catch some rays and attract someone's attention.

Traffic on water and in the sky

Hours passed slowly. Rex either sat on the gas can—singing and praying and watching traffic on the water and in the sky—or walking around, but he was aware that he was just a small orange dot on a vast sea of ice. He also figured they'd be looking for his boat, which had sunk, and that made their search all the harder.

“By and by I saw a little harp seal, so I said to myself, I'm going to get him, because my feet was froze and I wanted to put him under me and warm my hands by his side. I wasn't going to kill him; I just wanted to keep warm. Rather than sit on a cold gas can, I could have the seal underneath keeping me warm. I had all kinds of plans: I was going to tear the tail off my shirt and wrap it around his mouth so he couldn't bite me.” But then Rex had second thoughts because he feared that, in jumping from one ice pan to another, he might be plunged into the icy water again, and he didn't want to risk it.

The sun was high in the sky when a plane, flying low, passed right alongside of him. Rex waved his gas can, but the plane flew out of sight. When it returned, he saw two bright lights coming straight at him. All at once the plane tipped on its side and big black smoke issued from it, then levelled off and flew right over Rex's head. “I figured the smoke was a signal, but nobody ever came.” Then, as the darkness deepened, he spotted two long-liners, but they were too far away to be of much good. Discouragement settled in.

A wind sprang up and as the clumps of ice ground against each other, he turned his face to heaven and sang and prayed all the harder. With tears rolling down his cheeks, he thought of Irene and his five grown children, and of all those who were praying for him and searching for him, and he was determined to hang on. But it was getting harder, he was getting weaker, and

his flotation suit froze so that he could only move a few steps in either direction. Everything was slowing down, especially his ability to think.

The words of the hymn, *There's Power in Prayer*, came to him and, as he sang he thought about the peril he was in and of his need for a physician. He realized his thoughts might be slowing down, but at least he could still pray and sing. And that's what he did.

"Chances of survival greatly diminished"

The second day had passed and the search effort was augmented with the addition of a second Cormorant helicopter, another CCG ship, *CCGS George R. Pearkes* and a CCG helicopter.

Dan Frampton, acting supervisor of Maritime Search and Rescue, commented, "As time passed, we became more and more concerned about the welfare of Mr. Saunders. We honestly felt that if Mr. Saunders was not found on the third day, his chances of survival would be greatly diminished."

WEDNESDAY

A very trying night...

Irene hadn't really slept for two nights, worrying about Rex, entertaining visitors and family members, and speaking to people on the phone. Friends had gathered at their house, praying with Irene for a safe outcome. For the most part, people's faith had remained strong. But when the phone rang at 6 a.m. Wednesday morning, Irene hesitated to pick up the receiver, although she knew she must. Sure enough, it was the search team, and the news wasn't good. They reported that they had searched all night and found nothing.



Figure 13 Mrs Saunders' faith was sorely tested when her husband went missing.

What they didn't say to Irene at the time was that the status of the mission was about to change from a rescue to a recovery. After all, how long could a man Rex's age—with a recent heart surgery and diabetic as well—survive on the ice with no heat, no food, and no medication?

"That was a very trying moment for us when they told us they'd searched all day and night and couldn't find him," recalls Irene. "My daughter Trudy, who was attempting to get some sleep, came out of her room after that phone call and said that maybe we were going to have to start thinking differently. In saying that, she meant that maybe we were going to have to start preparing for the worst. I have to admit, the same thought crossed my mind.

"Our faith was wavering a little bit."

Hallucinations and hypothermia

By the time the sun rose Wednesday morning, Rex's spirits were at an all-time low. He hadn't slept in two nights and he was afraid that if he did, he'd never wake again. He alternated between singing and praying, swinging his arms and legs to keep warm, or sitting with his head buried inside his floater suit breathing warm air onto his limbs. He was hungry and thirsty, but he no longer had the incentive to help himself.

A vast sea of ice surrounded him. He'd seen long-liners, search planes and helicopters come and go, and nobody had spotted him. The icy cold from the ice pan had worked its way up through the bottoms of his boots, freezing his legs and traveling progressively up through his body to his arms and hands. A chill wind blew down through the collar of his floater suit. And, though he sang and prayed and shouted, the cold had worked its way into his mind and spirit as well.

He was that cold that he could think of nothing but getting warm. "When a little gull pitched nearby, I made a grab at him because by now I was freezing. I was going to shove him down inside my coat, but the bird hopped out of reach, and then disappeared. I had my collar turned up and my head down in my jacket trying to stay warm, and every now and then I'd get up and have a look around. Then I saw a seal, and crawled over to him, but he turned out to be a clump of ice."

Rex remembered hearing stories about people hallucinating just before they froze to death and thought that's what might be happening to him. Death seemed just around the corner and he whispered to God, "If it's your will that I die, then your will be done."

A short time later, Rex thought he heard a speedboat. "I got up and looked, and there she was coming right towards me; one feller up front and another at back. She slowed down and I heard the motor idling, and the fellow in front picked up a paddle and pushed her off the ice into clear water. I hauled myself up as best I could—because I really couldn't stand anymore—and began to wave my gas can. I yelled, 'C'mon! C'mon! I'm over here!' But I was hallucinating again."

But it was when he saw the polar bears that he really took fright. "It was just getting daylight and I seen this ice pan floating towards me. And I said, boy, there's a polar bear on that pan. When the pan came closer I saw two bears, a young one and an older one. As they approached I got behind a clumper of ice to hide away. I saw the big one put a paw on the back of the little one. And the little bear put its nose up to the nose of the big bear. I said I suppose I'll have to try to fight them off; when the pan hits, they're going to see me and then they'll be after me. I took the gas can in my hand and decided I'd give them a smack on the nose if I could. But then I caught myself and said, that's not bears...I'm hallucinating again. I can't believe I saw all that detail and it wasn't even real."

It's interesting that people will say, 'I won't believe such-and-such unless I see it.' But when a person hallucinates, he or she sees something—even in great detail—and it's not real at all.

Hallucinating again?

There is a story in the Bible about the prophet Elijah. He is on his knees praying for rain, and when his servant reports to Elijah that he sees a small cloud the size of a man's fist rising out

of the sea, Elijah knows his prayers have been answered. “Well,” smiles Rex, “that’s what happened to me: I saw a small cloud appear in the clear blue sky, followed by two other small clouds and I said to myself, this is a promise from the Lord; this is my third day on the ice and I’m going to go home today. But then a forth cloud appeared, but I guessed that meant I’d spend the third day at the hospital and go home on the fourth. I was certain that this time that I was not hallucinating.”



Figure 14 Canadian Coast Guard Ship *Ann Harvey*.

But when he saw the Coast Guard vessel *Ann Harvey* sailing past, he hardly dared hope. After all, the gull, the seal, the speedboat and the polar bears had all seemed very real. He shook his head. Perhaps he was hallucinating again!

“I saw her name, *Ann Harvey*, and, in spite of my doubts, strength flooded into

me. I crawled out onto the ice pan and began waving my gas can, and she sailed on, right slow. I kept trying to convince myself she was real...because that’s what she was there for...helping people lost at sea.”

As real as she appeared to be, Saunders’ hopes fell when the *Ann Harvey* didn’t slow down, and when she turned stern-on, his hopes plummeted. “She’s gone; that’s my last hope,” he said. “I just can’t stay alive.”

He was so discouraged that he took the gas can and put it on his knees; not even bothering to sit back down on it. The snow was almost knee-deep anyway, so he just thumped right back down in the snow. “I put my hands up and I cried and sobbed like a youngster.”

Three big blasts!

When he looked up again, the *Ann Harvey* had turned broadside and remained in that position. His hopes flared again but he was too weak to stand so he waved the gas can two or three more times, hardly daring to hope. After all, they hadn’t seen him before; why should they see him now?

But then he heard the horn! **THREE BIG BLASTS!** And a tower of black smoke issued from the smokestack.



A view of the rescue attempt from the CCGS *Ann Harvey*. Rex Saunders waits patiently while the SAR team makes its way through the ice for a successful rescue. CCGS PHOTO.

A report from the CCGS *Ann Harvey*

*As the sun began to rise on day three, the CCGS *Ann Harvey*'s crew grew increasingly concerned that their rescue mission might turn into a recovery effort. Fortunately, a crew member spotted Mr. Saunders in his orange floater suit sitting on*

*the ice pan where he had spent the previous two nights. The CCGS *Ann Harvey*'s FRC team quickly transported the severely hypothermic and hallucinating man to the vessel where Rescue Specialists attended to Mr. Saunders' condition and alerted MRSC to his successful rescue. CCGS *Ann Harvey* transported Mr. Saunders to St. Anthony, NL, where he made a full recovery thanks in large part to the keen eyes of the vessel's crew.*

"Sit down and don't move!"

Aboard the CCGS *Ann Harvey*, Captain Frost studied the ice conditions and decided to deploy a small rescue craft rather than risk sailing his vessel straight in, concerned that if the ship were to bump into the pan of ice on which Rex was sitting it might tip him into the sea. So he deployed a rescue craft with four men aboard.

However, when the captain saw that the small boat was having difficulty making its way through the ice, he drove the ship right into the ice and opened her up in reverse, which scattered the ice in all directions. Then the little boat was able to sail right in through the clear water.

When he saw a small red rescue craft coming around a large pan of ice with four men aboard, Saunders knew his ordeal was over. "But when I tried to get up to walk out to the edge of the ice the skipper on the boat bawled at me to sit down and not to move," recalls Saunders.

Finally the rescue craft made it to Saunders' ice pan and two men got out and helped him aboard. Once Saunders was secure in the boat they sailed back to the ship.

Once aboard the *Ann Harvey*, Rex was met by Captain Terry Frost and then was promptly dispatched to the sick bay where he was placed in the care of two medics who cut off his survival suit and wrapped him in a heated blanket. "It warmed me up right quick, and it felt some good; a lot better than on that pan," smiled Rex. When he had warmed up they gave him flannel pajamas and wool socks. He asked them if he could go to sleep, but they said not until he had seen a doctor. He badly wanted a drink, so they gave him a glass of lukewarm water. "I tipped it up to gulp it down and the medic told me I could only have a taste. Then they said they'd give me a bit of broth from the soup and brought it in a bowl, and I was going to put that

right down too, and the medic said, no, I was only allowed little sips and I wasn't getting any more until I got to the hospital, and that we were on the way. They didn't give me any medications, either."



Figure 15 Captain Terry Frost signed Mr. Saunders' gas can.

A most welcome phone call

Less than an hour after she had received the first phone call that morning, the phone rang again at the Saunders home. It was now 7 a.m., and this time the report was a good one: Rex had been found on the ice and was now aboard the CCGS *Ann Harvey* steaming towards St. Anthony, and

Irene could meet him at the hospital.

When the ship reached St. Anthony, Rex was transported by ambulance to the Charles S. Curtis Memorial Hospital where he was assessed and found to be in good condition: blood pressure, blood sugar and all other tests came back completely normal. There, he was reunited with his family.

Rex speaks with the crew

"I asked buddy on the *Ann Harvey* where he was going when he turned broadside to me. He said, at that point, they'd finished the grid pattern and seen nothing and were about to turn it over to the police for a recovery. As the *Ann Harvey* was making her turn to go back, Andy Billard, one of the crew, climbed up to the lookout and said he was going to have one last look. And that's when he spotted me.



Figure 16 Andy Billard's signature on the side of Rex Saunders' gas can.

"One of the crew told me afterwards, when Andy spotted me, it was the most noise he'd ever heard on the boat since he'd been on her. I had drifted almost 25 nautical miles (53 km) from home on that piece of ice.

Looking back

Five years have passed since that fateful day in 2009. Rex and Irene Saunders sit at their kitchen table, a cup of tea before them, reflecting with gratitude on Rex's rescue and recovery.

He still has the same pair of \$180 boots, which Irene laughing admits have stood the test of time.

The CCGS Ann Harvey crew signed the red plastic gas can and returned it to Rex shortly after the rescue. As well, they have issued him a new orange floater suit, and Rex, who has been sealing every year since, is still wearing it.

“They gave me another strobe light, and I keep everything in its proper place now: a strobe light, a compass, a whistle, and waterproof matches, right in the floater suit.”



Figure 17 The Coast Guard gave Mr. Saunders a new floater suit, a strobe light, and a whistle.

Saunders has had many visitors since his rescue. One visit that he remembers in particular involved two people researching survival techniques, who came to ask questions about his experience. They took notes on what he had gone through and the efforts he had made to survive, and they planned to use that information as part of their curriculum. Rex's main piece of advice to those in jeopardy is: don't panic, there is bound to be someone searching for you.

Saunders has published a book *Man on the Ice* detailing his life story and his rescue. The book is sold locally or can be ordered online.

ⁱ Cars or trucks

ⁱⁱ A short, thick woollen oversock, worn in boots to prevent chafing or around the house as a slipper.